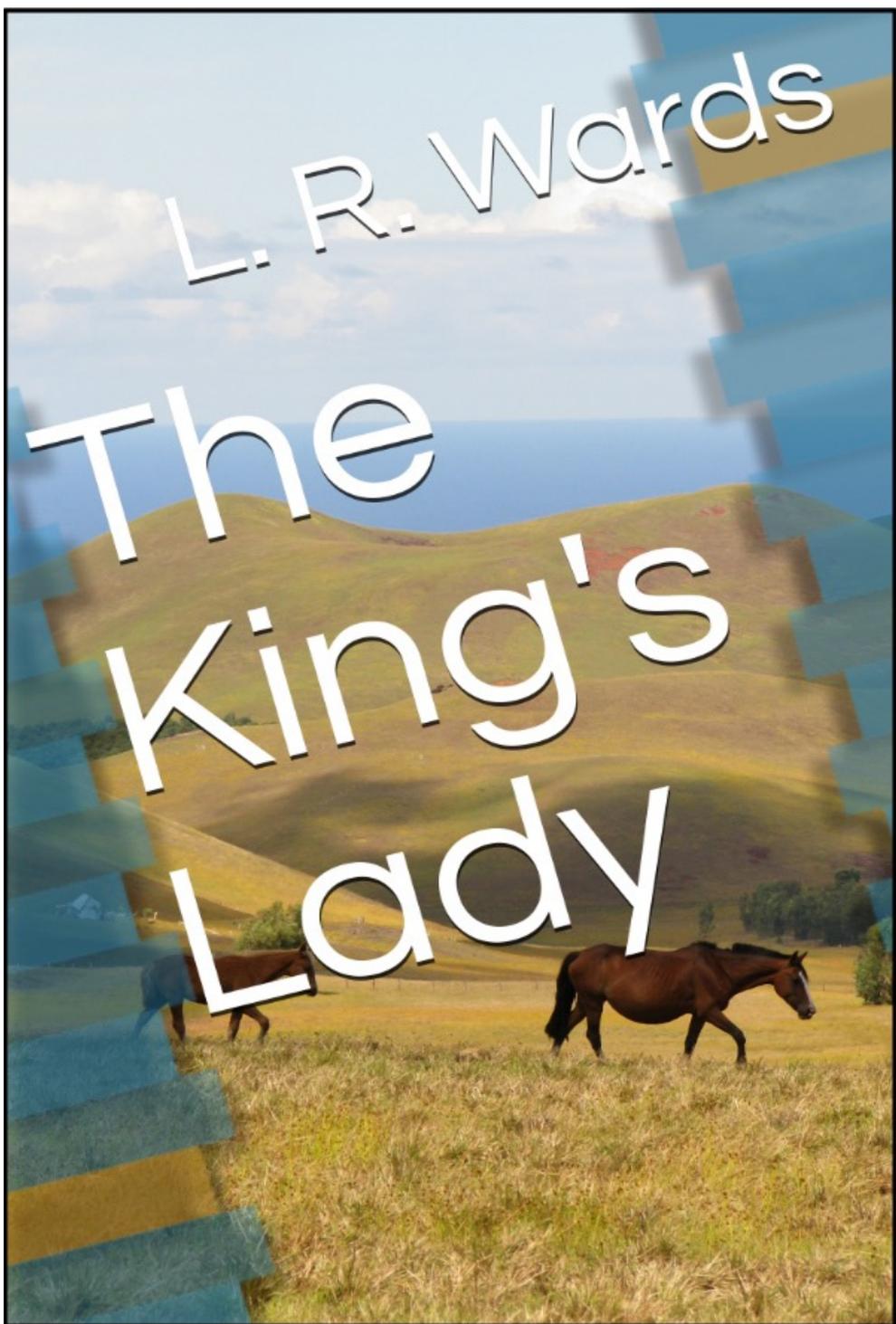


L. R. Wards

The
King's
Lady



The King's Lady

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Chapter one: California 1880

It was a damn hot day, thought Ellie not caring if she cursed to herself. The California sun was high in the sky and the ride from the ranch in the buckboard seemed twice as hot under the dust the horses kicked up while the sun gave them no mercy. Her light hazel eyes shifted over to Chance as the wagon approached the edge of town. A small smile pulled at her lips, he was chewing carelessly on a blade of straw watching the dusty road in front of them to avoid holes that might make his passenger uncomfortable. Hunkered over with his elbows on his knees and the reins in his hands gave her a nice look at his profile. *He would be a handsome man someday*, she thought to herself, *taking after his brothers in every way.*

Though he was only sixteen, he was beginning to have the makings of a true cowboy. Chance King was darkly tanned, tall and lean, with a trace of the bulk of muscles that adorned his older brothers already beginning to develop on his lanky body from the many physically challenging hardships of working a ranch. Like his older brothers, he was already displaying the handsome features including the perfectly chiselled lips and masculine square jaw, although not as hard set as theirs yet, it still had the strong angled lines adorned with stubble. The only difference she could see besides the hair color was that Chance had the most adorable dimples on either side of his mouth that practically brought any woman to their knees when he smiled. That is, everyone except her. She was immune because she always thought of Chance as a little brother, but that still didn't mean that she didn't adore him. Not only was that she in love with another King cowboy.

Jace was the second oldest and a complete womanizer, but Ellie was absolutely, totally in love with him. Everyone in Cottonwood knew it, even Jace. Yet, he acted as though her affections were invisible, always treating her with respect, but at arms length. It was disappointing, because he had no problem accepting every other

woman's affections. Ellie learned long ago not to pine over him, yet there were times that she couldn't contain her feelings and allowed herself to be jealous. Jace's gorgeous smile didn't have dimples, but truthfully, he didn't need them. Charming to the teeth and downright too handsome for his own good, women fell in love with him constantly so the man didn't need anything else that lent to his sex appeal. Ellie considered herself another victim to fall for it.

Now Everett, the oldest was a different story. Even after all these years, she still didn't think she knew him that well. Of course she was sure he cared about her, but he never let his feelings known. As for the dimples, she never knew if he had them or not, because he never smiled. Although he was always polite, he seemed to view the world with complete indifference. Yet, the man gave off an air of complete raw masculine prowess that drew the opposite sex to him like a magnet. He was the type of male that walked into a room and all eyes were on him because of the untamed aura of power that he gave off. Unfortunately other cowboys trying to make a name for themselves would spot him as a potential to fame, and ended up losing their lives because of it. As far as she knew Everett never started a gunfight, but he was always willing to finish it.

Their father was Ed King, Big Ed to some, and his sons Chance, Everett and Jace owned the biggest ranch in northern California called Red Oaks, with a spread of over fifteen thousand acres, ten thousand head of cattle, and several thousand horses, not including the wild herds of mustangs that roamed the land. It was rumoured that Ed's father followed the gold rush and struck it rich, purchasing the land. When the Gold rush died out Ed had the ranch to keep him going. However the Kings struggled at times like most ranchers and cattle prices rose and fell, but thanks to Everett they were filthy rich and the ranch was just a plus. He managed to turn things around somehow and now the ranch prospered. The man had a knack with money.

Ellie heard Ed say that his wife came from high society in Chicago, and took great pride in the arts. Apparently she was trained

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classically in piano, violin, and could even sing opera. However, from what she remembered of her, she complained that she wasn't very good at singing but had the talent for teaching it saying her tone wasn't as rich as her parents wished. So instead, the woman made sure her sons developed the talents that she felt she lacked. Although Ellie heard her play classical music on that big 'ol piano that Ed bought her and it just about made her weep. She didn't know what classical was until Bethany King played it, and then she understood why it was categorized under such a name. Ellie wished she'd asked her to teach her how to play, but by the time she built up the nerve, Bethany had died.

It was odd in these parts to have such talents and Ellie thought the boys would just waste theirs, because all of their time was spent running the ranch, but every now and then when she was over for dinner, they would use what their mother taught them. Her and Tyler's dinner visits have declined over the years because of the boys growing responsibilities besides their own, which sometimes required a wild release after a long bout of back breaking work. So of course when they weren't there they were raising a raucous somewhere else. They were womanizers and hard drinkers when the need took them. Ed didn't seem to mind as long as they did what they were told, got their work done and the ranch didn't suffer. She figured Ed wasn't too far from their behaviour when he was their age and that's why he understood them so well. They may have been rounders but, they were always gentlemen to the ladies...*even those that weren't ladies*, thought Ellie, hearing gossip surrounding their prowess.

Many times the boys would ride off to Redding. It was a day's ride away and it was much bigger than Cottonwood. Not only did boast several saloons and gambling houses, Ellie knew that it also sported one of the biggest cathouses in the north. She had heard rumours that the boys were frequent patrons and even young Chance spent time there. However her brother Tyler was no better, because he would sometimes go with them when he had the time.

Ellie sighed turning her head back to the town. Her mama

always said that all boys needed to live hard to get the play out of them so they would make good husbands and the King boys were just an extreme case. However, she didn't think the King boys would ever settle because they certainly weren't showing signs of slowing down.

Ellie Purnell and her brother were their neighbours. Although their spread wasn't even close to what the King boys had, it was sufficient enough to keep them comfortable. With a mere five hundred head and only a thousand acres it was considerably less of a hardship than the King boys had to endure. Even though the Purnells and the Kings lands bordered one another, there was no animosity in grazing land. In fact, they had always considered one another family. Ed didn't have any daughters and always treated Ellie with such kindness, that she loved him almost as much as her own father. Usually during roundup Ed would invite Ellie to stay with them, because Tyler was out on the range for days at a time and she would be all alone. However, that was before Silvia. She was a childless widow that Tyler had hired as the cook and housekeeper. Ellie knew it was because her brother didn't want to keep imposing on the Kings since they had done so much in the past. So Silvia kept her company now. Though she still missed going to Red Oaks that time of year because the boys would usually come home at night and it was an opportunity to see Jace. Unlike Tyler, they had employees that could manage roundup. Then sometimes, though rare, they would use those talents their mother taught them. Jace would play the violin, Everett the piano, and Chance would sing. It was odd to see such rough and gruff boys play classical music, but it was memorable when they got together in such a way.

Old man Ed King was friends with their parents, long since gone these past five years. Ed King may have been in his sixties but he could still break a wild mustang as well as his sons. It was no secret that he was hard on his sons during their upbringing either. Especially after Bethany died. He made them work twice as hard as the ranch hands and their rowdiness was a testament to that, for their wild reputations were unprecedented in Shasta County and no doubt most of

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California. It was unfortunate, thought Ellie, for she would surely liked to have looked at one of them for marriage. Jace was in his twenties and very very handsome. He and Everett were similar in height and build, and they had that jet black hair that glistened so nicely in the California sun. Chance had dark brown hair with streaks of blond from the same sun. All the boys possessed those deep golden brown eyes that a girl could easily lose herself in.

She sighed and turned her attention back to the town railroad station and suddenly gasped at the familiar puff of smoke from the C&I's train's smoke stack, "Oh no!"

Chance turned at her exclamation taking his attention from the pretty red-head that stood outside of the saloon. She winked and waved at him to offer him an invitation, and he might just take her up on it when he came back to town tonight with his brothers. "What is it?" He watched Ellie point her dainty little gloved hand toward the train station, "It's early. Poor Kate, she'll be waiting and no one will be there."

Chance slapped the reins on the horses' backs to urge them into a trot. Although in a few more seconds he'd be there, he didn't like to distress Ellie or any other woman for that matter. He reined up at the station and set the brakes on the wagon before he hopped out.

There were many people still coming and going on the platform as he took Ellie's hand and helped her down from the wagon. He didn't know what her cousin looked like, and she admitted that she hadn't seen her in ten years, but usually people don't change that much. Or do they? Ellie had said the woman was pretty enough for being eight at the time. She mentioned something about light brown hair and blue eyes too. Being tall allowed him to scan the crowd easier than Ellie and there were a few ladies there, but they were on the arm of some fella, except one, but he couldn't see her face because she had her back to them and was using one of them lacy umbrella like things—a parasol he thinks it's called. However, when Ellie made a beeline for a woman, it was obvious that was her. That's when he studied her more closely.

Chance paused at the sight of her as the crowd parted. He may not have been able to see all of her, but what he could see, left no doubt that she was all woman. She stood alone beside two large trunks wearing an ivory top with a forest green twill bustle skirt, drawing eyes to her narrow waist and flared hips. The parasol hid the color of her hair. But when she finally turned around at the sound of Ellie's voice, Chance's jaw dropped. The woman was exquisite, especially when her face lit up at the sight of her cousin.

Her light brown hair was now a blond. Golden wisps of hair escaped her little French bonnet, and when she saw Ellie, her smile was so lovely he could swear that she brightened more than the scorching California sun. *Sweet Jesus!* He thought. There were pretty women in Cottonwood but none as ravishing as the woman that stood before him. When she moved forward to greet her cousin, she had the grace of a swan. Looking around, Chance noticed that he wasn't the only male to notice her. Several men stopped to stare at her. Feeling like a rooster in a hen house, he stepped closer to the two women and puffed himself up to his full six foot height.

"Oh Kate, it's so wonderful to see you. Sorry it had to be under these circumstances. I hope you weren't waiting long? I'm feeling rather guilty; the train is usually late and..." Ellie stopped talking finally realizing she hadn't given her cousin a moment to answer. She locked gazes with her and realized that she thought the same thing by the look in her eyes, then they both burst into laughter. Ellie hugged her, "I'm sorry. You must be very tired."

"Oh Ellie, I'm so glad to see you. It was such a long lonely ride." She hugged her back clearly relieved to see a friendly face.

Chance cleared his throat and brushed an unruly lock off of his forehead after he removed his hat trying to smooth out his appearance a bit.

Ellie blushed feeling guilty about her rudeness and quickly introduced them. "He was so kind to help. Tyler's been busy with the

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herd, but when Chance knew I needed someone with me to help with your trunks he offered like a true gentleman.”

“Thank you Mr. King.” Kate offered with a friendly smile.

“Please call me Chance, Miss Purnell.” He smiled bashfully.

“If you wish.” She smiled up at him. “You can call me Kate then.”

Ellie saw the young man blush clear to his neck through the open collar at his throat. Who couldn't blame him? Kate had grown into a beautiful woman.

“Are these your two trunks Miss Kate?” When she nodded, he bent over and threw one easily over his shoulder doing his best to impress her with his strength.

Ellie rolled her eyes and Kate laughed while she looped her arm through Kate's and followed Chance at a short distance. “Kate, you are beautiful. Look at poor Chance, I'm thinking that poor lad will be offering marriage by the end of the week.” She said as she leaned over and whispered in her ear.

Kate blushed. “Ellie please. He's a boy.”

“More like a man trapped in a boy's body.” she admitted then saw Kate's expression, “I'm sorry, I shouldn't tease, but you did take me by surprise. You're absolutely gorgeous.”

“You're no Sow either Ellie. Why, you're lovely. I always knew you'd turn into a raving beauty. Did you manage to catch Jace's eye yet?” She grinned.

Taking Kate's hand, Ellie laughed, “Now that's the cousin I remember. I however, was raised around ranch hands and the King brothers,” She inclined her head toward Chance who was hefting one of the trunks into the back of the wagon, “so my behaviour is a little more abrupt.” “You have no excuse to tease so boldly.” Then she sighed, “And no, Jace doesn't know I exist.”

She grinned, “I was raised in New York, I have every excuse, but my father made sure that I was educated in propriety, especially after he caught us as children trying to run away and join the gold

rush.”

Ellie’s eyes widened remembering her father’s rage at his daughter and her companion, ages eight and nine at the time, heading down Fifth Avenue with their valises. He had chastised them both severely, but Ellie didn’t realize at the time, the fear in his eyes at losing his precious Kate. She remembered that Kate lifted her little chin and told her father that if he didn’t fill their heads with bedtime stories of the gold rush, they wouldn’t have had the ideas in the first place. His anger seemed to vanish at that statement and he laughed, hugging and kissing them both. Then he extracted promises from both of them that they wouldn’t attempt such a ‘fool brained’ idea again. “Ah, yes...God rest his soul Kate. He loved you so much.” She shouldn’t have brought it up because the tears began to well up in her eyes. She quickly changed the subject. Kate wasn’t one to like someone pitying her. “Come dear cousin, we’ll take you home and get you settled and I’ll tell you everything that’s happened in the last ten years with my life and you can do the same. It seems that our letters never do justice.” Ellie began to realize how much she missed Kate’s companionship. Her father inherited the ranch when his brother died and they left New York to raise cattle a decade ago. If it hadn’t been for the Kings they would have been lost, but Ed King took an instant liking to her father and helped him out when he could.

“I agree.” She said watching as Chance hoisted the other trunk on his shoulder like he had the strength of an elephant.

Ellie made sure she seated herself in between her cousin and Chance. Although he was polite and reserved, his eyes didn’t lie. He stole looks as often as he could and it was obvious that she was shy, so Ellie didn’t want to make her uncomfortable with the attention. She was thankful that Kate was too preoccupied with her surroundings to notice the looks she was getting.

“What do you think of Cottonwood?”

“Just like your letters. I’m sure I’ll like it here.” Kate admitted, “It’s very quaint.”

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"I'm sure it is compared to New York, but you'll fit right in." Ellie lifted an arm and waved to someone on the boardwalk outside the post office, "As you can see we all know each other. That's what I like about it."

"It certainly is a culture shift." Kate said smiling, but she really didn't mind it at all. Having such a change would help heal her sorrow. Any reminders of her father at this point severely depressed her. She was thankful for Ellie's cheerfulness and the new surroundings just for that reason.

"I need to stop at the general store and get supplies Ellie." Chance said as he turned the buckboard around in the middle of the street toward the store on the farther edge of town. "I promised Mrs. Soter."

"Mrs. Soter, is the King's cook." Ellie told Kate, "Although you would think she was more their mother by the way she dotes on the boys."

Chance grinned at the women, "She sure knows how to make fried chicken." He leaned forward so he could see Kate past Ellie, flashing a devilish grin, "And the best cherry cobbler in the state of California." He watched her return his smile and he turned away to hide his blush. "This won't take long." He murmured as he set the brake and got out of the buckboard to go into the store.

Ellie nudged Kate with her shoulder, "I told you. He's as red as a beet."

"He's too young. Even though he's as tall as a giraffe and has a sinful smile." Kate said eyeing the lanky form wander through the door of the store.

"Yes, but he obviously doesn't think so." Ellie giggled. Then she saw her cousin's expression of worry, "Oh, Kate I'm sorry, I'm only teasing again. Forgive me. I forget that you are use to a more delicate upbringing than I am, even if we got in so much trouble when we were kids." She nudged her shoulder with her own, "Don't worry about Chance, he has no problems with women. They practically chase him

down the middle of town. He isn't serious. He just isn't used to seeing someone like you. So don't worry about hurting him if he has a crush on you. He is young, and he's in love with a different woman every five days." Then she lowered her voice as two men walked by them and tipped their hats in the women's direction, "And if you think is smile is sinful, wait until you meet his brothers. They can melt butter. Chance hasn't finished growing yet, but they have, thank God, because if they got any better looking they'd be outlawed."

Kate laughed, thinking that Ellie was blowing things out of proportion. Cottonwood was a small town so she was sure the selection of eligible bachelors looked good to anyone. As for the comment about her own looks, she knew that Ellie was still as kind as she remembered and that her cousin was just trying to make her feel better after what she had been through. "I'm not so pretty Ellie, but thank you."

Ellie could've fallen out of her seat at that statement. Did she honestly think that? Since they had left the station, every man within eyesight hadn't been able to take their eyes off of her, and tipped their hats in her direction when they rambled by in the buckboard. Did she not notice the attention? Ellie thought maybe it was because of the grief over the recent loss of her father that she wasn't able to focus on anything else at that moment. She was about to argue with her when two familiar black mustangs came trotting down the middle of main street with the other two King brothers sitting confidently at ease in their saddles. "Oh, here's Chance's brothers." She waved at them catching their attention. "Wait until you meet them, then you'll see I'm not exaggerating." She said as the boys shifted course and headed toward the wagon.

Kate almost blushed at that statement. Although Ellie didn't know what she was thinking, it was obvious her statement might have been challenged before. As the men drew nearer, Kate realized that her cousin wasn't exaggerating in the least and the blush did come. She was ashamed of herself for not believing Ellie. Before they could notice the rising heat she felt to her cheeks she suddenly felt the urge to brush

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something off her shoe and hide her crimson cheeks with her parasol as they reined up beside the buckboard.

Chance came out of the store with a sack of flour over one shoulder and a sack of sugar over the other. Obviously he didn't need to do both of the forty pound sacks at once, but he was on a mission to impress the new neighbour. It was in vain however, when he noticed that her attentions were on the two tall muscular men riding down the middle of the street on Red Oaks' mustangs. His older brothers. Sighing and cursing them for showing up at that exact moment, he tossed the sacks in the back of the buckboard and walked around to his brothers just as they reined up beside Kate on the other side of the wagon.

Ellie gave Jace and Everett a gracious smile and introduced Kate. However, it would have been better if her parasol didn't suddenly block their view of her. She pulled it low over her head and bent down absently brushing some unseen thing off her boot. It was then and there that Ellie realized that Kate wasn't teasing her as evidenced by the crimson entering her cheeks. She honestly believed that she wasn't attractive and she was incredibly shy. How could she possibly think such a thing?

"Miss Kate," Said Everett and Jace in unison tipping their hats and waiting patiently for her to acknowledge them.

Knowing she would seem rude if she didn't return the greeting, Kate sat up and moved her parasol out of their way to respond to the brothers. Red cheeks or not, she couldn't seem rude to the two that Ellie thought dearly of despite her embarrassment. Slowly she lowered her parasol and guided her eyes to the men.

Ellie felt a stab of jealousy over the incredulous looks on both their faces. This was a woman who thought she wasn't pretty, but the *King* boys near fell out of their saddles. These were the boys that had had their share of women from one state line to the other. They were hardened over years of hard work, hard drinking, and hard womanizing, yet in all the years she known them, they'd never let their

steely expressions falter, except at the sight of Kate. That's not to say they weren't gentlemen, because they were always gracious to any women. It was the chance that either boy would give their affections with a genuine warmth that escaped them. Of course Ellie knew she was a soft spot for the boys because she had been practically raised with them, but never had she witnessed looks like this. Everett especially. The man never allowed any type of emotion to grace his handsome face. It looked like it was chiselled in stone most times except for the small glint of warmth he gave his family and sometimes her. Ellie thought he would always be so much more handsome like Jace if he actually smiled every now and then. On the other hand, Jace was a charmer, and could probably sooth the howling wind with his honeyed voice, but Everett always kept to himself.

"How do you do?" She said sweetly and shyly looking at them from under her thick lashes.

Instantly she took everything back of what she thought about the King boys.

From what she read in Ellie's letters, and her recent information of the men's looks, her descriptions didn't do the men justice and melting butter with their smiles was an understatement. They could melt cold steel. Handsome didn't quite cover it. Jaw dropping was a more suitable term. The one named Everett in particular. She didn't know exactly what drew her gaze to him, but he had a powerful silent magnetism about him. He was dressed in black pants, blue-grey shirt and a tan vest. His black hat was pulled lower over his brow than his brother's but she could see that he stared back at her with his mocha colored eyes. Suddenly, his horse shifted and swung sideways closing the gap between them, and her eyes were drawn to his gun belt and then down his hard thick thighs as they clenched the saddle at that movement causing the muscles under the fabric to bulge and define. She felt her face heat up at that observation and quickly guided her eyes along the horse. That wasn't the only gun he had, a rifle was strapped to the side of his saddle. Who needed so

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much gunfire? Was it true about the east being more uncivilized than the west? Her eyes went back up to his hard tanned features just to see he was still staring at her with those deep warm honey brown eyes.

For the first time in her life she felt a reaction toward a man's attention. It felt as if someone lit a fire in her belly under his gaze. She resisted averting her eyes from his with all the force she could muster. She liked the feeling that was stirring in her. Normally she would never meet a man's gaze so brazenly. It wasn't proper to stare so openly at someone in such a way, especially when she knew her emotions were clearly visible in her eyes. But he didn't look away either. He held her gaze unwavering, then, a slow smile tugged at his lips breaking the composure he held. As his smile drew across his strong tanned masculine face, the heat in her belly increased.

She could have sworn on the bible that his eyes darkened under those thick black lashes a fraction in that same instance. She had a pet cat years ago named Chester, who had that same look right before he pounced on a mouse. *Oh my*, she thought. The weather could have shifted, dropped below freezing, and snowed at that moment, but she wouldn't have noticed. What she did notice was the sudden pounding of her heart, the quickening of her breaths along with the burning swarming in her belly.

Chance called his name, and he broke the hold by shifting his attention to other side of the buckboard. Then her eyes guided back to Jace. This was the man that Ellie had a bit of affection for. She could see why. He too handsome for his own good with that rakish grin as leaned forward on the pommel of his saddle with a warm glint in his eyes.

"You'll be staying at Ellie's Miss *Kittie*?" He emphasized the pet name he gave her and arrogantly pleased that she gave him a ravishing grin over it.

"*Kate*." Said Ellie while scolding, "You know her name. Don't you go and start flirting with her Jace. She's too sweet for you!"

Kate saw Jace's eyes lit on Ellie and his smile widened, "Why Miss Purnell, I reckon you're jealous." There was no mistaking the rare blush that rose in Ellie's cheeks and it just gave him the ammunition he needed.

"You have no need to be, why you are still the prettiest little thing in Shasta County to me. Look at you in that dress! I swear you never looked prettier." He took off his hat and held it to his heart like he was aching with love for her.

Kate couldn't help herself and actually started to laugh at the mocking display of affection. The man was a complete Rogue! Sitting there so spectacularly handsome on his stallion, while openly flirting with the both of them in such a comical display and what made it so funny, is that he was that exact type to get away with it and not hurt any feelings. It felt so good to laugh after so many weeks of misery so she didn't try to stop and in the process she dropped her parasol on the ground.

Although Everett was talking with Chance, and before anyone else could oblige her, he was off his horse immediately retrieving it for her as if he was standing next to her at the time. As he handed it over he drawled deeply. "Miss Katie." Their fingers grazed one another when he passed it back to her and in that instant everything stopped around her. Her breath caught in her throat. In that moment, she stopped laughing and locked gazes with his and an unmistakable warmth of attraction passed between them. Then she knew, it wasn't just her that felt it. Also, it was what he said that leant to that idea.

Katie? God, how sinfully delicious could he make that sound? "Thank you." She said shyly taking her parasol and breaking the trance.

"My pleasure." He drawled, while staring at her longer than was appropriate before he turned and swung back up on his horse. He may have been talking with his little brother but his attention was on the gorgeous young lady sitting next to Ellie. Several times he caught himself not listening to Chance because of the distraction. The woman

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was exquisite. A blond blue eyed angel that could melt the hearts and make a man change religion just by looking at them. Yet, there was a hint of sadness to her that made him want to protect her, but that wasn't what caused his attraction. There was something deep and feral about her that entered her sapphire gaze when she stared at him. It was then and there he realized the deep seated passion she was capable of. On the outside she looked to be the trophy winner of propriety, but he was certain as soon as the limits were removed, *and maybe her clothes*, he smiled inwardly, that she could be everything he wanted in a woman. To his surprise he felt a stirring in his groin just at the thought of it.

It was then that Kate realized how different the two older brothers were. Ellie was right on the nose about everything she wrote to her concerning the King boys. Everett was more quiet and less expressive, unlike Jace, who was an outrageous flirt and however so, it worked magnificently for him. Although Everett had something about him that told her the quiet didn't mean he was easily pushed around. His posture, his firm set jaw, and the confidence he displayed, told her this was a man who knew himself, and knew he was a force to be reckoned with. Out of the three brothers, it was obvious that he was the alpha male of the pack. When she drew her gaze back to Everett she could feel her heart start to gallop. He still had his heated gaze on her even though he was carrying on a conversation with Chance, who seemed oblivious to the whole exchange. In fact, as she looked at everyone else with subtle glances, no one seemed obvious to the current that passed between them except Everett and her. Ellie was talking to Jace and she knew for a fact that her cousin's attention didn't waver from him in the least.

In the end it was Everett who broke the hold when he spoke to Jace, "Let's get. Pa needs those calves rounded up before night fall for branding tomorrow. Chance, you hurry back to the ranch when you're done dropping off the women," He paused before adding the last bit with a drop in tone, "No tarrying." His eyes went unmistakably to Kate who couldn't hide her blush if her life depended on it.

“Yessir!” Chance gave him a mock salute before climbing back in next to Ellie and Kate. Causing Ellie to laugh.

“Miss Katie.” Everett tipped his hat once more before nudging his horse to a trot followed closely by Jace who flashed another devilish grin at her causing Ellie to narrow her glare on him. He winked at her shamelessly before following his brother.

“See what I mean.” Ellie leaned over to Kate and practically whispered it in her ear.

“Oh yes!” Her eyes followed the proud tall back of the man dressed in black, “I do.” He called her Katie, instead of Kate and she didn’t correct him, because she liked it. Certainly he knew her name, but referred to her differently. He hand went to her belly to try and quell the fluttering there.

“I’m sorry Kate, I should have corrected Everett on your name.”

“No that’s okay. I like it.” She said almost too quickly. Not only that, from the looks he was giving her, she was sure he knew her name.

“I hate being the youngest.” Complained Chance as he climbed back in the buckboard, “Always being told what to do.”

Ellie put a gloved hand on his forearm, “Don’t take it so hard Chance, you get to keep us company.” This brought a smile to his face.

“True.”

Two hours later Chance set Kate’s trunks into the room that Ellie made up for her. Tyler was out on the ranch somewhere, but she told Kate that he’d be home for supper.

As Everett commanded Chance stayed long enough to say goodbye before he quickly drove the team back to his own home.

Kate thanked him causing him to give her an ear-splitting grin and blush before he left. She turned to Ellie, “Do they always jump when Everett says?”

“Yes. He’s the eldest. To people who don’t know him, he seems quite menacing, but his brothers respect him so they listen.”

“I didn’t think he was menacing.” Kate added absently. “He seemed very pleasant.” *And very appealing*, she wanted to say

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remembering his warm gaze on her.

Pleasant was the last word that anyone even Ellie would use to describe Everett. She studied Kate for a moment while she watched the departing buckboard wanting to ask her if she was interested in him. In a sense she was relieved if she was. That meant she wouldn't be after Jace's affections, not that she herself had a hope in hell and she'd been after him for years. Still, it somehow made her feel a little better. However, Everett was interested in marriage as much as Jace was which was not at all. Heck, Chance would marry either one of them before the older boys would. She sighed outwardly, poor Kate, she had been through so much these past weeks and Ellie was dwelling on losing a man that she never had. What kind of a friend, or relative was she? Kate was uprooted out of the city, transported to the unfamiliar lands of California after losing her father to a brief illness. Tyler and her were the only family she had left and Tyler didn't hesitate to agree to take her in after their uncle wrote them telling of his illness and his worries of Kate.

Kate brought her eyes to her cousin, "You were right about Jace Ellie, he is handsome. I think he likes you."

Ellie shook her head and waved a dismissing hand, "He likes women in general. I've been hoping that he'd settle down after a few years and start looking at me like I look at him, but I'm already nineteen and still waiting." She shrugged, "Typical King male." She added.

Kate gave her a reassuring smile, "Well I've realized just recently that you can't change our fate Ellie. If that man is meant for you it'll happen."

"Thank you for the encouragement, but I think he's interested in you." Kate gave her a look of blatant disbelief. For a moment Ellie forgot that Kate didn't think she was that pretty. "Hell, he's interested in anything with a skirt." She quickly added causing Kate to relax and smile.

"Those curse words should not come out of a pretty mouth like

yours Miss Ellie.” Came a stern older feminine voice from the doorway.

Kate swung around stifling a giggle to see a stout chubby cheeked woman in her late fifties. She was holding a silver tray with several steaming cups of tea.

“Sorry Silvia. It’s the repercussions for being raised around a ranch.” Kate tried unsuccessfully to apologize with a deceitful grin on her face.

“That’s a ridiculous excuse. Your mother, God rest her soul, didn’t pass until you were fourteen, so she was around long enough to instil some proper etiquette in you.” She walked over to a doorway, then turned and looked at the other woman “You must be Kate. My you are a pretty little thing.” She said causing her to blush but didn’t pause in talking, “We’re delighted to have you. I’m the cook, but as you can see I have more duties trying to keep this young lady, a lady. Come drink some tea to take the edge off of your long journey.” She went into the room.

Ellie smiled sideways at Kate and nodded her head in the direction of the drawing room. “She’ll come looking for us in a moment if we don’t show up.” Said Ellie as she held out her hand.

Kate laughed and took her hand following Silvia through the door.

They had spent the better part of the afternoon sharing stories, and Kate couldn’t have wished for a better friend than her cousin. She was in tears with the humorous stories they shared when they lived in New York but it was not in sadness. She’d been laughing so hard she cried.

“I see Kate, that you still manage to weep at the drop of a hat.” Came a deep drawl from the doorway.

“Tyler!” she jumped up and ran into his tight embrace.

He was always more of a big brother than a cousin to her, just as she thought of Ellie as a sister. She was glad she stayed in touch with them despite the distance because she needed family around her now.

He definitely was Ellie’s brother. Emerald green eyes and

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matching hair color, only he'd grown into a very handsome young man. Eventually she pulled back and look at him, "I am not a cry-baby." She teased remembering the name he called her when she was little.

He released her, "I'm going to get you dirty." He said looking down at his dusty clothing. "And we were kids when I called you that. You were so clumsy, that you tripped over everything." He defended with a handsome grin.

Her hands went to her hips while she gave him a mock glare, "You try and wear these shoes and walk straight. After Ellie and I tried to run away, my father told me he was going to turn me into a lady and I had to wear them. I was used to bare or stocking feet until then." She narrowed her gaze, "You know I probably wouldn't have been such a tom boy if I didn't have your influence."

He chuckled, "true. I'm glad you're here Kate." He nodded toward his sister, "She needs you. I swear she spends more time pretending to be a boy than a woman."

"I do not." Came the indignant reply from behind causing him to grin again and look past Kate to his sister.

"If you acted more like a woman Ellie, I'd have you married off—"

"You'd do no such thing Tyler Purnell!" she interrupted.

"Hell, I would, you cause me too much trouble." He threatened winking at Kate.

"If you're talking about me pulling a rifle on that damn Indian a few months back, it was his fault. He scared the heck out of me."

"He's my friend." Came Tyler's reply with a widening grin, "And after you did that, he wanted you as a wife."

"Oh God! Tell me you're joking!" she gaped.

He threw back his head and laughed, "Don't worry. I already told him you were in love with someone else."

Kate saw Ellie's cheeks flush.

"If it's any consolation, he's wealthy. In Indian."

She narrowed her gaze on him, "You're teasing me aren't you?"

‘Of course. He’s already got a wife. He wouldn’t know how to handle you anyway.’ Said Tyler with a wink in her direction, “I need to get washed up, I’ll see you at dinner.” He turned away and left with a laugh.

Ellie waited until he’d gone, “Between him and Silvia, they’re turning me mad.”

Kate giggled, “He’s as antagonistic as I remember.”

“Be thankful there’s only one of him.” Said Ellie with exasperation.

“He hasn’t changed at all.”

“Except he’s just as bad as those King boys. Tyler knows he’s handsome.” She rolled her eyes causing Kate to giggle again.

That night as Kate lay in her bed she couldn’t help but feel thankful for having both Ellie and Tyler in her life. It was though they never spent ten years apart and picked up where they left off. Then her thoughts shifted to that handsome cowboy wondering if she would see him again soon. She couldn’t shake the feelings that went through her when she met him. Was that normal or was it all women he affected that way? Also, did he notice it? Soon she drifted off to sleep with the image of the man’s warm eyes in her head.

When she awoke the next day and made her way downstairs she found Ellie wearing pants and a dark grey shirt. She stopped and stared at her.

“what?” said Ellie looking down at her clothing.

“Ellie—you’re dressed like a boy.” She said gesturing her hand toward her attire. It surprised her because just yesterday she looked like a beautiful young woman, and well, she was still beautiful, but wearing boys clothes.

“So,” she smiled, “I need to. Around here, I work alongside Tyler, and a skirt and blouse get in the way when you rope cattle.”

Kate laughed. “Now I see what he was talking about.”

“Not today.” Came Tyler’s voice as he walked through the front door. “Silvia wants to go over to Red Oaks to help Mrs. Soter prepare

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for the May celebration in the next few weeks. I thought it would be nice if you took Kate."

Ellie normally would balk at running chores like that but then she might run into Jace, "Okay." She looked at Kate, "Did you want to go?"

Kate could barely contain her jubilation at the thought of seeing Everett again, "Oh yes. I'd love to."

"Then it's settled." Tyler said casting his sister a knowing look, "Stay away from Jace Ellie." He said sternly narrowing his gaze on her.

"Hush up." She said back at him undeterred, "You don't need to worry about that anyway. The man doesn't even know I exist."

Sure, he thought. Tyler didn't miss the way his friend looked at his sister when he thought he wasn't being watched, even Jace probably didn't realize it, but Tyler did. It was a long slow lazy stare, that a man gave a woman when he was thinking about something indecent. Although Jace was his best friend, he was the last man he wanted around his sister. He should know, they both got in enough trouble together and knew what he was like. He wanted Ellie to settle down with a nice man who was committed to her. If Jace ever got his paws on her, Tyler didn't really feel like shooting him, he liked him too much.

The ride over to Red Oaks was breathtaking. Kate had never seen such scenery and Silvia chatted the whole way. The woman was a dear, thought Kate. Her affection for Ellie and Tyler was obvious by the way she spoke about them. However, Ellie would just roll her eyes whenever she did causing Kate to laugh when Silvia scolded her for doing it.

"That is not lady like behaviour."

"Yes Silvia, so you tell me."

"You are ungrateful. Just look at your cousin. You could take a lesson from her. She's stunning all done up in that pretty blue skirt and blouse."

"I—" Kate started to say but Silvia just patted her arm and kept

talking.

“Why she’ll be married within a month around here.” The older woman smiled at Kate who blushed at the statement. “And you’ll still be running around after that rounder. If you had half a brain, you’d know that wearing that getup won’t even get a flicker of interest from a man.” She said firmly.

“Maybe I don’t want a man.” Ellie said with some irritation.

“Every young lady wants a man. Don’t you lie.” Silvia said causing Ellie to stick her tongue out at her when she thought she wasn’t looking, but she saw that too and continued to scold her. Kate laughed.

“I’ll be *damned*. Will you look at *that*.”

Everett turned at Morgan’s voice, one of his ranch hands, and then followed his gaze to see the Purnell’s wagon toddle by with Kate and Ellie seated on either side of Silvia.

Morgan let out a whistle followed by several more as the men crowded the fence of the corral where they were branding cattle.

Everett stopped to light a smoke but stayed where he was and never said a word although his eyes remained on the pretty woman in the buckboard. Then her gaze shifted as if searching for someone and he swore his heart stopped as her eyes stilled on his. He took a long draw off his smoke and stared back but still didn’t move from where he was.

“Just ignore them Kate,” said Ellie, “They do this every time, anyone in a skirt comes by.”

Kate didn’t hear her because her focus was on the large cowboy with the cheroot in his hand. The only man who didn’t jump on the fence and whoop and holler as they went by the corral. The only man that stood out not only because of his height, but his intense calm as he stared back at her. She didn’t even hear the other men in that instance as their gazes locked, and despite his heated gaze she felt herself smile. To her amazement and a twinge of excitement, she saw him straighten himself, hook his thumb in his belt and nod slightly to acknowledge it.

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Then her view was obscured by a building. *My Goodness, that man was handsome*, she thought.

“Kate?”

“Oh, pardon?” she turned vaguely aware that Ellie had been speaking to her.

“It’s all right. Red Oaks can be very overwhelming in its size and beauty.”

Kate breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she didn’t notice either one of those. Before she knew it, Ellie had reined the buckboard up in front of the sprawling villa. It was beautiful to say the least. Built in a Spanish style with a terracotta roof and pale yellow stucco, it was a style she’d never really seen before, but had seen in magazines.

“This is lovely.” She exclaimed.

“Big Ed’s late wife Bethany loved the style, so he had built it for her.” Kate said as she climbed out of the wagon.

Silvia nodded while looking at the house, “Bless that woman’s soul.” She said with heartfelt emotion, “She was a rare woman indeed.” She turned to Kate and smiled, “Come dear, you must see the courtyard out back.”

“I’ll show her,” came a deep voice from behind.

“I will.” Said Ellie as they spun to see Jace standing there, “You behave yourself.” She added shaking a finger at him before she grabbed Kate’s hand and pulled her along.

Kate couldn’t help but smile. No wonder everyone knew Ellie was in love with the man, she was not secretive about her jealousy. Not only that Jace’s eyes flashed to Ellie with such a look of amusement, Kate realized right then and there that the man purposely goaded her.

“Quit smiling at me.” Ellie said to her with a sheepish look, “I can’t help myself around that man.”

Kate squeezed her hand, “It’s not that. I just think he does it to get a reaction out of you.”

Ellie stopped and stared at her, “Really?”

Kate nodded and shot an amused glance over her cousin’s

shoulder, "He's still watching you."

"Maybe it's you." Ellie reluctantly said.

Kate shook her head, "No, it's definitely you. He's got this serious-like look on his face."

"Come on Kate," she started walking again, "I can't dwell on it. The man will only break my heart and I know it. Until I get something practically in writing, I'm not putting anything into it."

That made sense to her considering what Ellie had told her about the boys, but she still couldn't shake that look that Everett gave her on the way in. Did every woman feel the same when he gave them one of those interested stares? She hoped not.

After Kate had shown her the terrace she took her inside to the kitchen to introduce her to Mrs. Soter and say goodbye to Silvia who would hitch a ride home later with one of the ranch hands.

When the wagon went by the corral again Kate felt crestfallen not seeing Everett there. Hiding it from Ellie, she began to talk about how beautiful Red Oaks was and noticed that Ellie gave her an odd look, "What is it?"

"You're distracted."

She shrugged, "It's not hard to be with such a view." She said quickly hoping her cousin didn't notice. Thankfully that seemed to satisfy her.

"You do know I've never been anywhere but New York." She added hoping that would suffice.

"That's right." Said Ellie as if finally realizing. "I guess all of this is very overwhelming."

"It's beautiful beyond my imagination." Kate added, then suddenly she saw him and her voice trailed off.

"Oh, there's the boys." Ellie said seeing them at the exact same time and waved not even noticing Kate had stopped talking.

Kate never heard her. She was watching the tall man from a distance as he sat on his horse on a stretch of hill. It was about a quarter of a mile off, but it was obvious that it was Everett, and Jace by

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the way he lifted his hand and waved back. Then both of them turned their mounts and went out of view on the other side.

“Gosh, every time I see that man, even in a distance, my heart goes a hundred times faster.” Said Ellie turning her attention back to the road.

Mine too, thought Kate.

Everett and Jace rode in silence for about an hour before Jace took up the courage to broach the subject. Everett rode slightly ahead of him, seemingly over interested in the landscape that they were accustomed riding through every day.

“Damn,” he said, “That was a fine woman.” Everett said nothing and rode as if he hadn't heard him, but Jace knew better, “She's mighty pretty.” Jace knew exactly what was on Everett's mind from the prolonged silence and the chance meeting with young Kate Purnell yesterday. Finally, his brother just nodded in agreement.

“What do you think my chances...”

“Leave her be.” Everett said quietly without turning around in the saddle.

Jace grinned at Everett's back. He knew his brother better than anyone. Everett had no problem with women, but he did with affection, and that small exchange he saw the day before brought about the most affection he'd ever seen toward a female. However, he pretended not to notice out of respect for the innocent Miss in the buckboard.

Although Jace acted like an unmannered rounder, he knew how to respect a proper lady thanks to their mother. He also knew he shouldn't goad Everett, because his brother had the temper of a hog tied mule and knew the man wouldn't hesitate to turn around and knock him off his horse if need be. However, this was too good to pass up and Jace wouldn't be Jace unless he teased Everett about it. “I say let the best man win.”

“I'll bust your goddam teeth out Jace. I said leave her be. She's mine.” Came the steeled response.

He bit his tongue to stifle a laugh. At least he knew when to keep his mouth shut. That tone was one you didn't want to cross. The last time he heard that tone, and he'd heard it many times with disastrous results, two men were lying on the saloon floor with gunshot wounds in their leg and arm.

Jenny, one of the less than respectable ladies that lived above the saloon was assaulted by two men, because she had refused their drunken advances. If there was one thing their father taught them, you always respected a woman, lady or no lady. Usually Jenny could handle hell raisers, but these two strangers couldn't get it through their thick skulls. Then, one of them made a mistake of bumping into Everett, making him spill his whiskey. Now that was strike two. Strike three was when the stupid cuss demanded an apology. The tempers and insults rose, Jenny was being manhandled, but Everett just stared at the both of them as calm as a new born calf, "Go sit down before I take offense to you spilling my liquor." He said quietly, then turned his attention to the man harassing Jenny, "And you, let her go, before I take offense to how you handle a lady." Then he turned around and leaned back against the bar resting his elbows on the surface, waiting. Everything came to a standstill wrung thick with tension. The men just gaped at him, while Jenny meagrely struggled against one man's grip on her waist. Everett's face remained unreadable yet among the indifference there was a darkening in his brown eyes making them seem almost black.

Meanwhile, the cowboys on either side of Everett suddenly spread away from him like he had the plague in fear of a stray bullet. Except for Jace, who stood with his back to the three on Everett's left, watching the scene unfold in the mirror behind the bar. Yet no one saw him push his duster back over the gun at his hip and leave his hand on the handle. Then the atmosphere became as quiet as Everett. The gamblers lifted their heads no longer interested in their cards. The saloon's piano player strummed a few incoherent keys completely losing his concentration. All eyes focused on the dispute. Every now and

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then, there was a scrape of spur or a smothered cough while the occupants waited with uneasiness for the tension between the three to rupture.

Then, the man that spilled his liquor seem to find courage at Everett's lack of response and started spouting epithets that would make the devil cringe yet Everett just stood there watching them. The second man made a comment something akin to 'the lady ain't no lady, she's a whore'

Everett said nothing.

Then when the stranger couldn't get a reaction he finally had enough of Everett's calm arrogance and was obviously brave with alcohol enough to go for his gun. Meanwhile the second man released Jenny only to follow suit and draw on Everett to back his buddy. It was a mistake.

In a blink, Everett drew and fired only two shots injuring both of the men, not killing them, though he was perfectly capable. They both dropped to the floor howling. Jace pulled his duster back over his hip as Everett bent down and removed their gun belts and set them on the bar beside him telling Jace to fetch the doctor and the sheriff before he turned around and finished his drink. Jace nodded and calmly swaggered out of the saloon.

However the tone of Everett's voice, the blatant claim he made to that pretty young cousin of Ellie's was far from Everett's character. Not that he wasn't blunt, he was, but he certainly never professed ownership or claim on a woman in every shape or form. Although there would have been plenty of candidates to take him up on his offer, Everett never seemed all that interested in them except for purely physical reasons. The man was too damn busy trying to operate the ranch and worry about him and Chance. He never let himself seek companionship of a woman outside a cathouse, or a roll in the hay with one of the town's many other women that you wouldn't even suspect were capable of behaving in such a way because of their upbringing. He and Everett knew though. They also knew they weren't the first to feast

on their offerings. Jace grinned, why little Cassie Davis, the judge's daughter, was quite wilful and a little treat to boot. To spoiled for either one of them though, and they both knew it. Now, Ellie was prettier than Cassie, and full of life, raw emotion and completely unspoiled. She was fun to be around and she could shoot like a man and...He stopped his thoughts and gave his head a shake. Ellie was not for him. He was thankful that Everett spoke taking his mind off of his current thoughts.

Everett slowed his horse so he could roll a cheroot. He struck a match, lit it and handed it to Jace while he rolled another. "She is pretty." He said quietly taking a long drag.

"Yup." Jace said after taking a drag off his own, leaned his head back and blew smoke in the air above his head. "Although I wouldn't quite call her pretty Everett, she's more along the line of beautiful." Everett just nodded in silent agreement. "She's not what you're use to." He added, but Everett already knew that.

"Yeah."

"She's not meant for a tumble. Though by the way she was looking at you, I think that she wouldn't need much convincing."

Everett nodded.

"Of course Tyler would not hesitate to shoot any of us, friends or not, if we deflowered his cousin." *And he'd probably gut me for thinking about his sister the way I did the day before when I saw her in that dress*, he thought to himself.

"Yeah." He said thoughtfully, "Without a doubt."

Everett didn't say much, but he knew him well enough to know what he was thinking. "This isn't about a tumble, is it Everett?"

"No. I reckon I've had enough of those in my life." He answered. The new Purnell girl certainly wasn't the type that you just lay and leave. She was the real deal and despite his years of bachelorhood he wasn't dumb enough to turn his nose up at something so special when it was dangling in front of him. No, Kate Purnell certainly wasn't meant for a roll in the hay, she was a long term commitment type. Since he'd met her barely twenty four hours ago, he

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knew that. He wanted her. He also knew that from the way she was looking at him, that she thought it too. There was definitely some deep attraction, and in all of his life, he couldn't remember feeling that way about another female.

"You're thinking about marrying her aren't you?"

"Like you said, she's not the tumble kind."

"Yeah—I know—but wow, Everett are you considering what you're telling me?" Jace said with awe.

"I've considered it, yes." Was all he said.

Of course he did, thought Jace. The man considered everything heavily before he made a decision and when he made a decision it was always finite. Jace grinned, "Well, hell—then congratulations."

Everett ignored Jace's statement but finally looked at him, "Why is Ellie's cousin staying with her?"

"I don't know."

"Find out." If there was another man in the picture, he would have to take care of it.

Jace flashed a smile, "All right." The whole conversation didn't even illicit a change in Everett's face. In fact he could have easily been talking about a gunfight or ranching. His brother wasn't much on expression and that's what made many people wary of him. This just proved it. If someone didn't know Everett they would have thought that this wasn't a serious issue for him, but Jace knew that Everett did not take marriage lightly. The woman captivated him. In all of their years together, Jace couldn't recall when a woman had caught his brother's attention to the discussion of marriage, or even the point of interest beyond physical gratification. One thing was certain though, once Everett got something in his head, he was determined. Kate Purnell didn't have a chance because Everett would have her.

"But find out by staying the hell away from her." Everett added before nudging his horse to a trot.

Jace expected that. If Everett had eyes for this woman, then he knew he would be possessive of her. He nudged his horse to keep up

with his brother. He'll take some time and ask Chance what he knew before he went to Ellie. He grinned, his sweet little Ellie. He was sure he could get information out of her, she had been sweet on him for years. If he was the marrying kind he might consider her, but he wasn't. Out of respect he never even tried to kiss her. She wasn't the kind of gal that you went around kissing and fooling with. She was too good for that, but that didn't say that he didn't notice her delicious womanly attributes. Especially yesterday in town. Ellie never usually wore dresses of any kind. She usually ran around the ranch dressed like a man in loose fitting breeches and a button shirt because she helped Tyler out a lot. However, that dress sure looked good on her.

Chapter

"Mrs. Soter," Said Ed when she walked in the dining room to clear the plates, "That has to be the best damn steak I had in ages" The old woman blushed and gave the men an adoring smile.

"You go on Mr. King." She waved a hand toward him bashfully.

"Pa's right Annie, we'd starve to death without you." Chance gave her a rakish grin.

Before she blushed out of her shoes, she scurried out of the dining room.

"We *would* starve without her." Chance added after she left, "At least I would."

"The way you eat, you would starve inside an hour." Jace stated jokingly. Then he flicked a glance at Everett who was rolling another cheroot before returning his gaze back to his younger brother. Everett spared him a brief glance to give him the go ahead for his next question. "Speaking of hunger, that pretty little cousin of Ellie's. What's her story?"

Chance glanced up from his second helping of apple pie looking at Jace then Everett who was interested in rolling his smoke before

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back at Jace, "Story?"

"She have a man? Engaged? What'd you find out?"

A slow grin spread across Chance's face and he sat up straight in his chair cocking an eyebrow, giving him a look that championed the knowledge that he held and not having any intention to share it much like the cat that held the canary.

Ed glanced over his three strapping sons, but his eyes settled on Everett who seemed to be the only one not interested in the conversation. One thing Ed wasn't, was stupid.

Jace was the flirt, outgoing, fun, handsome and boisterous, without a care in the world, but equally menacing as Everett if backed into a corner. Chance was the more chivalrous, always going out of his way for a woman, in all of his naïve ways to please them. Everett on the other hand had a quiet strength about him that could instil fear or loyalty in just about anyone, but his interest in women had been purely physical. Ed felt a bit guilty about that, because he raised him to mind the ranch, and someday it would be his. That was his whole purpose in sending him off to that big fancy school for four years to earn a degree in managing finances or something like that, but it also left no room for romance. In all, Everett had so much responsibility piled on his shoulders that he never took time beyond satisfying his physical needs to do any courting.

His other two sons always obeyed Everett as did the two dozen ranch hands he employed. From time to time, his brothers weren't afraid to stand up to him either, which usually led to blows and then the whiskey bottle. The three of them had gotten into more than enough trouble in the past and probably for several years to come, but at least they looked out for one another. Now, as he watched Everett who's posturing was forced disinterest he began to wonder about this 'pretty little cousin of Ellie's'. The man had been rolling a smoke for almost five minutes when it usually takes him a fraction of that time.

Jace tossed his napkin on the table and hardened his stare on Chance, "Don't make me come across the table."

“Ha! I can run faster than you—okay, okay...sit down.” Chance laughed as Jace started to rise, “I only know what Ellie told me, which wasn’t that much.

“Spill it.”

Just then Annie came back in with a glass of whiskey for Ed causing Chance to pause. Everett finally lit his smoke, and when she bustled out again, Chance spoke, “Her father died a few weeks ago and now she’s Tyler’s ward. As far as Ellie knows she’s never even been engaged. Hell, if you look at her sideways she blushes, I doubt she’s ever been kissed properly, let alone have some man toss up her skirts and....”

“Chance.” Ed warned and saw Everett glance up with a fierce look for a moment before he managed to mask it. Now he was sure. It wasn’t Jace that was interested in Ellie’s cousin.

Chance darted his eyes to his father suddenly remembering his manners, “Sorry.”

“Women deserve respect son, no matter what background they have. I’m sure this lady is just that...a lady, so mind yourself.” Ed said sternly.

“Yes sir.”

“Go on Chance.” Said Jace.

Chance nodded, “I guess her father had her in some fancy ladies school in New York up until this summer so she really hasn’t had time for a beau. “ He flicked a glance at Everett who seemed overly involved with enjoying his smoke, before continuing, “Why Jace?”

He shrugged, “She’s pretty...she’s a girl...do I need an excuse.” He grinned.

Chance narrowed his gaze, “Like Pa said, she’s a proper lady Jace, you’d better think twice. Besides you’ll hurt poor Ellie’s feelings...She’s been in love with you since...”

“Ellie’s a tough gal. I never made her any promises. What are you gonna do imp?” He flashed an amused look at his little brother’s hard stare and leaned lazily back in his chair.

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Chance flushed red with anger but before he opened his mouth Everett finally spoke.

Everett had glanced up and noticed his father's eyes on him with keen interest. While his two brothers argued over the table. His father knew there was something more going on. It was then Everett knew he'd been discovered. Couldn't pull the wool over the man's eyes and he should've known better. So he decided to speak before his siblings came to blows. *Oh well*, he thought, "It's not for Jace Chance, so lower your hackles." He stared at him while rising out of his chair.

He snapped his head toward his older brother in disbelief. *Everett ? "you?"*

"Me." He answered nonchalantly before turning and leaving the room.

"Close your mouth boy. You catchin' flies or what?" Said Jace with a bemused smirk causing him to snap his jaw shut. "Eat your pie, and take some advice. Don't let on what Everett said to Ellie or anyone. He doesn't need the hassle when he starts courting her." He got up and followed his older brother.

Chance looked at his father who remained silent throughout the whole exchange and now sat quietly sipping whiskey. His father raised his eyebrows at him.

"That was interesting."

"Holy *damn*." Exclaimed Chance.

"Watch your mouth at the dinner table son. Your mother raised you better than that."

"Yes Pa, but *Everett?*"

"She must be quite pretty." Ed said as stared at the empty doorway that his sons just went through no doubt going to enjoy a smoke and a glass of whiskey out on the back patio while Chance continued to gulp down his piece of pie.

Chance grinned with a mouthful, "Pa, you'd never even begin to imagine. When I first saw her on that train platform, I didn't think anything could be hotter than the sun this afternoon."

“Mind your manners about the lady. And swallow before you speak.” Ed quietly reminded him. It wasn’t too long ago when he remembered being like Chance, but his Bethany changed that in him, God rest her soul. There was only one woman for Ed, and she’d been gone for several years now, but there wasn’t one day that had gone by that he didn’t miss her.

Chance didn’t seem to be affected by his father’s warning this time but he did swallow the pie before he spoke again. He was on a roll, “I mean Ellie’s pretty, but she’s always been like an older sister, but Kate, Kate was perfect. She had these...” chance held up his hands in front of his chest to mimic the generous bosom.

“Son, respect...”

A huge grin of delight came over his face as he recalled the image of her not even seeming to heed his father’s words, “And it made her look...” He made a shape of an hourglass with his hands.

“Jesus boy! How old are you?” Ed could no longer contain his humour and actually chuckled at his son’s explanation.

“Pa, she had the face of an angel.” His grin widened threatening to split his face in half.

Ed finished his glass, “Well, you’d better do yourself a favour and listen to Everett. If he catches you describing a woman he’s interested in like you just did to me, he’ll knock you clear into next Sunday. We both know Everett’s temper.”

Chance just laughed, “sure thing Pa.”

“Still, it’s surprising.” He paused for a moment before he thought again, “Now, let’s have a dinner party next Saturday and invite the Purnells and their pretty little cousin. I need to meet this lady that caught Everett’s eye. For I never thought I’d see the day.”

Chance finally regained his composure and grinned, “I’ll ride over tomorrow and tell them.” He said with excitement.

“No you won’t. Everett will.” He levelled his indisputable blue eyes on him.

Chance was crestfallen, “They always have all the fun.”

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“Don't worry son, you have plenty of years left for some of your own.” His father grinned. After that display, he certainly didn't doubt it.

Kate was helping Ellie out in the garden at the back of the house when Silvia came out and announced that Mr. King was here.

“For gosh sakes Silvia there's four of them!” Ellie said standing up and dusting the dirt off her apron, knowing it wasn't Jace unless he needed Tyler for something. It could have been Chance because she did consider him a friend and she didn't miss the way he kept stealing glances at Kate. She was wrong on both counts.

“The oldest boy...Everett.” Like a shot, this brought Kate to her feet behind Ellie like a gopher popping out of a hole.

Ellie turned and looked at her, sharing her expression of surprise before looking back at Silvia. “Everett? Oh my, is something wrong? Is Jace hurt?”

“He doesn't look upset or worried.” Said Silvia.

“He could be facing a stampede and he wouldn't look upset or worried Silvia...heavens, it's Everett!” this made the older woman scowl.

“I know that boy since he was born. When I say he doesn't seem worried about anything, he's not.” Silvia shot an interested gaze to Kate, who remained silent, before continuing, “Maybe Ed's worried about you during roundup. Tyler's usually gone long hours, and he usually extends an invitation to stay with him during those times.”

“That's true, but he usually sends Chance. Not only that I have Kate and you here. I won't be lonely.”

Kate never said a word but reached behind her and began to quickly untie the apron she wore to protect her gown with nervous fingers.

Ellie saw the gesture and remembered that she had one on too. “Why would Everett come?” She said as she untied her apron.

“Now, Eleanor Purnell,” Silvia added with a stern tone, “I didn't

ask him. If you want to be rude and stand here speaking to no one in particular while that handsome man waits on the front porch, you go ahead. I'm getting him some lemonade." She turned and walked back in the house.

"Heaven *help* me." Ellie said in such a way that caused Kate to laugh. "That woman is more exasperating than my own mother was."

"And she loves you Ellie." Kate added almost bittersweet, wishing she had that.

She grinned and blinked purposefully, "Of course she does...I'm a real sweetie." Kate laughed again.

She was sure that Ellie told her it was always Chance that came to Tyler and Ellie's home with invitations. In the back of her mind she was hoping that it was because of her that Everett came. Maybe he felt the attraction that she did the day before when they first met. "We shouldn't keep him waiting." She said, successfully keeping the eagerness out of her voice. Inside she was trembling with anticipation.

"No we shouldn't." Mimicked Ellie, loaded with curiosity. Everett of all the Kings to show up certainly peaked her interest. Maybe this was about the May celebration they usually had at the ranch and Mrs Soter sent him over for help to prepare for it.

Everett leaned his back against one of the posts on the front porch next to the swing with his hat in his hand. One of his legs was bent at the knee as the heel of his boot rested against the same post. He flipped his Stetson around in his fingers while thinking. He knew his father was doing this for him after his confession last night, but it wasn't easy. He'd never chased a woman in his life. He didn't need to. Even as a man who kept his emotions held deep down, women always seemed to sense the strength in him and sought him out. However, little Kate Purnell was different. He was bewitched from the first instant he saw her. He knew women enough to know that what they shared wasn't a natural attraction. It was something more. Compelling and unnatural....and it made him instantly hungry for her. Maybe it was

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the vulnerable sadness in her large sapphire gaze that drew him to her. Or, hell, it was the fact that the young lady was too damn pretty for her own good. He could tell she was kind and most women who have looks like hers aren't. Not only that he had felt the heat exchanged in their gazes yesterday and no amount of feminine façade could create that chemistry. He'd wanted her from that very moment. He made sure he warned Jace off right away besides he had a sneaky suspicion that Jace had interests in Ellie but just haven't wised up and discovered them yet. It was plain to see that she was interested in him and he didn't want Ellie hurt.

He brought his head up as the voices caught his attention and Kate and Ellie came around the side of the house. He stood straight at the sight. In a word she was ravishing. It was obvious that they were in the garden from the smudge of dirt on her left cheek and the escaping wisps of blond hair from a tight coil on her head making him wonder what her hair would look like down around her body.

"Everett," said Ellie, "What an unusual pleasant surprise."

"Good day Ellie, Katie." He nodded letting his eyes linger on the second woman.

Kate was sure her breath caught in her throat at the pet name he'd given her, but she managed a pleasant smile, "Good day."

"Does Annie need help for the party?"

At first he looked puzzled, then he finally shook his head, "No, she has it under control as always."

"Then is something wrong...Is Jace okay?"

Everett almost smiled at the worry in Ellie's expression, "No honey, he's fine."

"Well then, what brings you here?"

His eyes darted past Ellie to Kate who happened to be silently staring back at him from behind her cousin, "Pa sent me."

Silvia came out at that time with three glasses of lemonade and handed them out.

Everett thanked her before turning his attention back to the

women, “Pa wanted to know if you wanted to join us for dinner Saturday night.”

“Of course we’d be happy to. Wouldn’t we Kate? You will love the house. I know we didn’t get to see much of it yesterday except the courtyard, but Ed prides himself it and he’ll be more than happy to show you the rest of it. And the land is the best around. What you saw is just a small sample. The Sacramento River runs right through the middle.” She said excitedly.

Kate averted her gaze after his prolonged scrutiny and he managed a bit of a smile, knowing he affected her, “I’d be happy to escort you earlier so you can see the land before Tyler joins us.” He suddenly heard himself saying. Usually if he were spending several hours with a woman it was between the sheets not escorting them for a country ride, but for some reason this didn’t bother him like he thought it should. When he spared a glance at Kate again, no it didn’t bother him in the least.

The front door opened and Silvia appeared again, “Ellie, I...ah...need you for a few minutes.”

“Of course.” Ellie answered, “I’ll be right back.” She followed Silvia through the door.

Bless that old woman’s heart, thought Everett as he turned his gaze back to Kate, who was looking out over the land while sipping her lemonade. “Katie?” He said and swallowed when she turned her sapphire gaze on him. Even though he’d readied himself for seeing her again, she still was able to stun him with her beauty whenever she settled her eyes on his. “How are you settling?” She was no less than heart-stopping as she tilted her head at him inquiringly. The sun played off her loose hair and it almost seemed as her golden locks glowed. Combined with the vulnerable sorrow in her large blue eyes, she was simply magnificent.

She gave him an unsure smile, “As best as I can I suppose. Everyone has been very nice.”

“I heard about your Pa. Sorry.” There was that sadness again.

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But then it was followed by the unconscious flutter of her long lashes and he thought she was the most astonishing female he had ever set eyes on in that moment. It was obvious that she was trying to blink back tears, but he only saw the beauty in her expression.

“Thank you.”

“Is it much of a change from living in New York?” he asked. Never in his life had he elicited conversation with a woman besides his mother, Ellie and Mrs. Soter, but he was *actually* interested in what she had to say.

“Very.” She guided her eyes shyly to his, “But in a good way. I like the quiet of the country.” Being alone with him, even for a moment, seemed to be warming her body up. He was emanating strength from his physique just from standing there and the way he held himself. Kate knew that she was in danger of falling for this man and was afraid that she’d just be another statistic. Now she knew how Ellie felt with Jace.

“I agree.” He nodded slightly. “Did you want me to come a few hours early tomorrow afternoon?” He asked quietly trying to change the subject. It was obvious that reminding her of her home and her father upset her. He was pleased that she nodded.

“I would like that very much.”

He swallowed the last of his lemonade and she graciously took his empty glass. “I’ll see you then.” He started to leave when she said his name causing him to pause on the steps and turn around to face her bringing his gaze level with hers.

“Why did you come really?” Ellie said it wasn’t usual, that Chance or Jace were always sent on their father’s errands to deliver messages, but Everett never came. It took every bit of bravery in her to be so forward, but she knew she would go crazy if she didn’t ask.

He stared at her a moment, considering not being bold enough to tell her, but then again how would she know that it was her he came to see and it was her he wanted? He let a slow smile play on his face, “I reckon came to see you Miss Kate.” He drawled in a deep steady voice.

“*Oh.*” Oh my.

To his elation, after her initial surprise, she gave him a stunning smile and he aptly returned it with a vengeance. Then his eyes dropped heatedly to her lips, her perfectly kissable mouth. Much like two soft petals of a rose. “Do you have a beau?” he said softly.

She flushed and shook her head too speechless to talk. He had come to see her and when his eyes went to her mouth she thought her stomach flipped over. It was an odd sensation that she never experienced before, but she knew there and then, she liked it. In fact she liked everything about this man and everything that she felt when he was around.

“That’s good to hear. Until later.” He put his hat on and tipped it in her direction before he mounted his horse and trotted away.

Kate was still speechless several minutes later when Ellie come back out on the porch, “Silvia wanted to show me that we had mice in the flour....well I didn’t see any damn mice or mice droppings. I swear that woman’s gone mad sometimes.....Kate? Did Everett leave?”

“Y—“ she cleared her throat which seemed suddenly constricted, “—sorry—I meant yes.” She finally found her voice.

“I’m surprised Ed sent him. He’s not very talkative.” Ellie said not noticing her cousins stutter.

“No?” Kate said, surprised.

Ellie stared at her a moment, “What did he say?”

She didn’t tell her all of it. She knew the King boys’ reputation, but something about Everett caused a softness within her toward him. Not only was he very handsome, especially when he smiled causing those rigid features of his to soften, but he looked at her different and it made her feel good...no, it made her feel pretty. No man had ever done that to her before. Not that she had any experience in such ways, but she still liked it and him. She liked him. “—That he’d be happy to take us around before dinner and show us his land.” She finally said.

“And....?” Ellie knew there was more to this.

“He was sorry to hear about my father.” She added, hoping that

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satisfied her. She wasn't sure if Everett was serious about her and she was worried that Ellie would be overprotective and try and warn her off him. Especially after all of the stories she'd written her about the King boys.

"Oh. That's sweet of him, isn't it Kate? He's not usually very chatty like Jace and Chance. I always figured he had a lot of responsibility on his shoulders and spent more time thinking about ranching than socializing."

"I would guess so with fifteen thousand acres and the livestock on it."

"Yes. He's well educated too. Ed King sent him off to some University down south for four years. He got a degree in commerce I think it was. After that the ranch seemed to start making steady profits. Of course I already told you how filthy rich they all were. Most of that was due to Everett. I always thought the man ate, slept and drank cattle."

"I remember you writing me about the men being womanizers more than once. Could it really be that bad?" She didn't want to single out Everett, but she was curious more than ever about his habits.

"Oh they certainly are. All of them. Even that young one Chance. He's following in his brother's footsteps." She said with resentment. "They are a terrible influence on him."

"So are there any girls in Cottonwood that they are sweet on?" she tried to sound uninterested.

"Not that I know of. But there are a lot that are sweet on them. They usually don't stay with one girl if you know what I mean, and their reputations are...less than reputable." She gave her a mischievous grin. One she had seen many times when they had gotten in trouble together as children, "If Jace was sweet on anyone, I'd do my best to sabotage it."

Kate laughed. "No doubt."

"I've got it all worked out. I'd put snakes in her room, spiders in her shoes..."

"Enough, I don't want to be an accomplice." She giggled

holding up her hands.

“Suit yourself.” She grinned.

It was Chance that came later that day for the women and not Everett. He quickly explained that one of the ranch hands was badly injured breaking a horse and it was Everett who took him into town to Doc Halverson.

“He’s mighty sorry.” Chance directed his gaze on Kate who actually looked a little disappointed. *Well, well, Everett didn’t seem to be the only one with fondness.* “He takes it upon himself to be responsible for the men.”

“We understand,” Said Ellie cheerfully and completely oblivious of Kate’s disappointment, “Everett’s got a lot of responsibility.”

By the time they reached Red Oaks Chance had both women laughing at his jokes. Although Kate didn’t get to see much of the land like Everett wanted, just what she’d already seen from the other day. Still, she couldn’t help but be impressed again as they approached the house, surrounded by massive red oak trees that she didn’t notice so much several days ago because her mind was elsewhere. Now she realized that it was obvious where the ranch got its name and this time she really looked at the place. Kate thought she had never seen anything so impressive as that. She had seen the large mansions in New York, but they didn’t hold a candle to the King’s house. It was a bustling hub of activity too. There was a man being bucked around on a bronco in one corral while half a dozen men were branding cattle in another next to it. The house was set back a ways from the corrals and barns but the wagon still had to travel by them. She was glad because the activity was impressive. She leaned forward in her seat to get a look at the man on the horse. Never in her life had she seen anything so exciting. It was hard to believe that she was so preoccupied that she’d missed it all before. Now she knew for sure that Everett was more than

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distracting. Just seeing him in the corral that they just passed that first day blinded her to everything else.

Jace was up on one of the corrals hollering at the man riding a bronco, cheering him on when he saw them and leaped down to the ground with an unusual grace for a man his size. He quickly jumped into the wagon as it sauntered past, squeezing next to Ellie while giving her a devilish grin and placing his hand behind her on the seat. "Hello sweetheart." He stated bluntly causing Ellie to openly glare at him, "Couldn't stand to be without me huh?"

"There's enough room in this wagon for us or your ego." She shot back causing him to howl with laughter.

. All the ranch hands paused when the boys rode by with the two beauties seated between them. Of course they had seen Ellie before, but not Kate. *Who could blame them*, thought Jace flicking her a glance. She seemed captivated by the surroundings.

"Did Chance tell you about Everett?" he said to Ellie.

"Yes. Is there any word on your man?" She said with genuine concern.

He absently rubbed the sleeve of her gown with his fingers and she smacked his hand while telling him that she wasn't one of his hussies, causing him to chuckle and stop. "Not yet. I suspect he'll be back in time for supper." He glanced at Kate who was watching him with interest. *Pretty girl*, he thought, *really pretty*. Then Ellie nudged him with her elbow causing him to laugh. He knew she was jealous, but he actually enjoyed teasing her when she was like this. She didn't want him to touch her, but she also didn't want him to give his affections to another woman. That same petty feeling of jealousy from other women usually annoyed him.

"There's Pa." Said Jace as the wagon pulled up in front of the house. He hopped down and helped Ellie and Kate out.

Pa happened to be the reason why his sons were so large and handsome Kate realized. He wasn't around when they visited the day before yesterday because there was no way she could forget the man's

build. He looked like he was in his late fifties but he had aged very well. From his build, he still looked as if he could wrestle a steer with his bare hands. His hair was now streaked with grey, but she was sure he was just as much as a rake in his youth as his sons were. Ellie leaned up and kissed him on the cheek in greeting and Kate could see from the look of those familiar mocha eyes that he had genuine affection for her.

“You must be Kate Purnell. I’m pleased to finally meet you.” Now everything made sense to him. The girl was beautiful. It was no wonder Everett had staked his claim on her. Her big blue eyes and golden hair would have knocked the socks off of any cowboy for miles around with just a mere glance. He had always thought Ellie to be the prettiest, but now the girl met her match. Ellie was undeniably beautiful but her looks were darker than this one, and the brightness of Kate wasn’t common in Cottonwood. Everything about her rang sophistication, just like his Bethany. He sighed. Leave it to Everett to have his tastes in women.

Kate was surprised when she held out her hand the man ignored it, gripped her shoulders and gave her a fatherly hug near knocking the wind out of her lungs.

“Pa, you’re gonna kill her,” Said Chance not missing the mystified look on her face.

Ed released her, “She’s not fragile Chance. She’ll toughen up now that she’s in our country.” He placed his burly hand around her shoulders giving her another affectionate squeeze, “Come dear, I’ll show you our house.” He said placing her hand on the crook of his elbow and covering it with his other one endearingly and led her inside.

Kate threw a worried glance over her shoulder at Ellie who gave her a reassuring smile and a nod to tell her it was okay. She wasn’t used to such forwardness. However over the next half an hour she realized the man was just a big gentle bear and found herself quite fond of him. Know wonder they call him Big Ed. It wasn’t just because of the man’s size. In many ways he reminded her of her father, but her father had the social graces to live up to and open displays of affection were never

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given. Although she knew he loved her unconditionally because he'd told her many times.

Tyler arrived about an hour later. He had put on his Sunday's best for a dinner at the Kings. He was feeling guilty that Kate had arrived and he hadn't much time to spend visiting with her, but unlike the King's he couldn't afford all of the extra help that they could and most of the ranching was left to him. Although Everett made sure the brothers stayed involved, they could walk away and do errands in town easily replacing themselves. He shook the two brother's hands and nodded a greeting to Ed. "Where's Everett?"

"He shouldn't be much longer." Said Jace, explaining his absence over the Ranch hand's injury. Then as almost on cue he came into the room.

Kate took a deep breath at the sight of him and almost forgot to release it. *Could it be possible that he'd grown more handsome in his absence?* His hair was wet, he was clean shaven, and he wore all black except for the dark blue shirt under his vest. *He'd taken time to carefully clean up* she thought with elation hoping that it was because of her and when he searched the occupants of the room and sought her out, settling his liquid brown gaze on her, she began to think he did. As if to confirm her unspoken thoughts a boyish smile lit up his rugged face when he nodded his greeting. Tyler pulled his attention away asking about the ranch hand.

"He'll live, broken arm and several dozen stitches. He's out of commission for six weeks." Said Everett.

"And out of a job." Added Tyler, "Shame."

"No. We'll find use for him. After all, it was here he got all busted up. He can oil the leather for the next six weeks for all I care, but he won't be out of a job." His eyes rested back on Kate. She smiled up at him and he thought his heart rate picked up a pace. The woman could definitely affect a man even from a small gesture like that smile.

"Mighty generous of you Everett." Tyler added, "I couldn't afford to do that."

“There was one time we couldn’t either.”

“Dinner’s ready.” Called Mrs. Soter.

Dinner topic turned to cattle and Kate mostly played with the food on her plate. Knowing Everett was sitting not too far away seemed to affect her and her nervousness shot skyward. Ed King sat at one end of the long lacquered mahogany dining table and Everett sat at the other. She was on Ed’s right, wishing she was sitting next to Everett. However, every time she braved a glance in his direction he had his eyes on hers and every time she felt his eyes on her, her stomach did that little somersault she was becoming accustomed to in his presence. She wondered how he could sit there looking so relaxed when she felt so unsettled. Then, just to add to a wonderful evening, Mrs Soter brought out possibly the most delicious cherry cobbler she’d ever tasted and she found herself eating it down to the last crumb

Chance chuckled seeing her empty plate, “I told you she could cook. Didn’t I Kate?”

She raised her eyes to his and nodded with her cheeks pinking up. There wasn’t another time she could remember that she’d cleaned her plate. Flicking a gaze to Everett to see him still engaged in conversation with Tyler she quickly dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “It is.”

“We should go into the drawing room for a drink.” Said Ed as he pushed his chair back and stood up.

This brought Everett’s gaze to his father and he nodded in agreement as he stood up and made his way over to Kate while the rest of them began to rise. Like a gentleman Chance went to help Kate out of her chair but caught Everett’s look and stopped. He nodded and stepped aside. Everett quietly reached down, cupped her elbow, and helped out her chair as she stood and a wave of warmth went through him when she glanced up at him. Never in his life could he remember seeing such deep blue eyes.

Kate lost the ability to speak as her eyes remained captivated on

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his warm gaze.

"I apologize for today." He said sincerely.

"It's understandable." She murmured still keeping her eyes on him. "Is he in much pain?"

Not as much as I am at this moment, he thought, "No, cowboys are a thick skinned bunch." he said with humour. Just looking at her made his body rage with desire. She was put together perfectly not to mention how beautiful she was. He couldn't possibly fathom what he would be dealing with when he'd gotten her clothes off, but if this was any indication, he certainly wouldn't be disappointed.

Everett had been with many women in his life that were beautiful and shaped nicely like Kate, but never have they had that affect on him. He knew she was a rare beauty in many ways and that sweet composure she possessed made her exceedingly so.

She smiled, "I'm learning that—about cowboys, I mean."

He offered his elbow and she hesitated momentarily before she took it. The man may have been raised in the wilds of California, but he certainly had the manners of a gentleman.

"I did have a mother." He offered with a bemused smile at her surprise.

Laughing she looped her hand over his forearm and allowed him to lead her out of the now empty dining room, "I'm so sorry. Sometimes you just don't seem to fit in this place."

"No?"

She shook her head, "You are always so courteous towards me." She spared him a short glance, "But I've heard things about you and I have yet to see the truth in them."

"All lies." He teased causing her to laugh again. Even though she hardly knew him, she was sure his behaviour toward her was different than what others saw in him and it made her feel special. Ellie's letters did not come anywhere near the man she was getting to know. Although her cousin always spoke highly of Everett, and all of the King boys for that matter, she always made him seem so serious

and closed up. However, here he was friendly, joking and talking to her as if it was as normal as green grass. Now if she could just control the thudding of her heart, things would be perfect. "I doubt it, but I couldn't care less if they were." She bravely confessed. Now he should have some indication that she was interested.

She didn't know how much that statement meant to him. It meant that she was willing to get to know him despite his rowdy past. How many women would? He had a renowned reputation with women and until now it never bothered him that they knew about it. Kate was innocent, that was very obvious to him and she was genuinely as sweet as Mrs. Soter's pies. Now he was certain.

He wanted her.

Looking down at the top of her light golden topped head, he nearly told her when her sharp intake of breath stopped him.

"Oh what a lovely baby grand!" Kate exclaimed after they retired to the drawing room after dinner and she saw the magnificent instrument.

Everett watched her walk over and caress the glossy surface, wishing it was him she devoted that to. Lucky piano, he thought as he followed her over to it.

"Do you play?" asked Ed with his brows raised as Jace handed him a glass of whiskey and a cigar.

"Yes. My father insisted." She said solemnly trying to crush the sadness that crept through her.

Everett didn't miss the tone and took a step toward her intending to gather her in his arms when his father spoke reminding him that he wasn't alone with her. How could he possibly think that? There were half a dozen people in the same room as them. The woman was utterly hypnotic.

Ed shot a knowing grin to Everett over the discussion of the piano. Everett played also. "Would you mind?" He bent over and lifted the lid off the keys. He was pleased when she hesitated only for a split second. Then she gave him an enchanting grin.

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“No, I would love to.” She said, “What would you like to hear?” She loved playing the piano for people and knew her skill was exceptional. It was one of the very few things she was confident about. So she didn't hesitate, smoothed her skirts and sat at the bench. It was the least she could do for the hospitality they have all shown her over the past few days.

“There was a girl from Kentucky—ow!” Called Chance, which earned him a punch in the arm from Jace over requesting such a bawdy song along with a muttered threat that only he could hear.

Everett watched her carefully. The look on her face at the sight of his mother's piano practically lit up the room and it took everything in him not to slide next to her on the bench. He knew he had to take it slow with her even though he already knew it was her he wanted. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten her with his assertiveness. Everett leaned on the lacquered black top of the piano looking down at her, “Are you classically trained?” he asked, having a suspicion that she was.

“Yes.” She admitted bashfully.

“Play what you like then. We will enjoy it.”

“Beethoven's Fur Elise?”

He eyed her intently. “Perfect.” *Like you.*

It was almost as if there was a hidden meaning in his words. She gave him a shy smile and began to play.

The rest of the occupants of the room sat and listened in awe. She was good, in fact, she was faultless.

“Looks like I'm in need of a piano.” Tyler said to Ed while listening to the graceful succession of notes.

“Nonsense, she can come here and play. Besides, Everett hardly plays anymore. So it's just gathering dust.” Of course his reasons had nothing to do with the dusty piano.

When she finished there was a round of applause.

“Play another Kate.” Everett asked quietly while rolling a smoke in his fingers. If there were other people in the room, he

completely forgot about them again.

She watched his hands. He had long lean fingers and images of them on her body suddenly flashed in her mind. Oh God, where did that come from? She thought. Never in her life had she ever thought like that about a man. She took a deep breath and averted her gaze trying to hide the rising blush. However, she couldn't hide the warm feeling stirring in the pit of her stomach, "Do you play?" She said trying to divert her thoughts.

"Years ago."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Bach?" He wasn't prepared for the ravishing smile she gave him causing him to still his fingers completely forgetting about his smoke.

"I love Bach." Her sapphire eyes glistened with pleasure, "Your wish is my command." Her hands hovered over the keys, "Anything in particular?"

"Surprise me." He added softly while he lit his smoke. She did surprise him, for she was exceptionally good. He didn't think he could play that well. He watched her fixedly throughout the piece. When she was done another round of applause followed, "Concerto no. 7 in G minor." He offered.

"Very good." She beamed, "I'm impressed." Honestly she was totally set back at his knowledge of classical music.

"Good." He answered with a grin, "so am I."

She blushed. He was looking directly at her when he said that and she began to think that he wasn't talking about her playing. "Are all of you musically talented?" she turned around and looked at the others trying not to show him how she affected her. Regardless it was Everett's deep voice that answered her.

"Yes. I play piano, Jace plays the violin...and Chance has a voice that can sooth a storm." He offered causing both of his brothers to seem slightly embarrassed, "But they won't admit it, it destroys their tough guy images."

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Unknown to Kate, everyone was watching her with a sense of stunned wonderment after her playing. None of them could find the words to answer her

She laughed while taking in the impossible height and size of the men, "I don't think there's a chance of that even if you all took up sewing." She said, causing a look of mock shock on Jace's face before he roared with laughter finally bringing them out of the trance they were in.

"I would love to hear you play the violin Jace. It seems forever since I've heard one."

"Who could resist a lovely request from a beautiful woman?" Jace said causing her to blush and Everett to scowl at him. Jace winked at his brother and went to a large walnut cabinet to remove the case his violin was preciously preserved in.

Before long Everett was sitting next to Kate each playing one hand of the next piece while Jace played on the violin.

Two hours later the four King men were bidding Tyler and the women goodbye and as the wagon trundled away Ed turned to Everett.

"Well son, I must admit, you chose well."

"I thought so." He added absently while rolling another smoke.

"You going to marry that girl?"

"I reckon. If she'll have me." He added, lighting cheroot and taking a long drag, "She's really sophisticated."

"No more than you." This got him a sideways glance. Ed laid an affectionate hand on his eldest son's shoulder briefly before he went back in the house and left him with his words.

Several days went by and Kate began to feel gloomy. She hadn't heard from Everett and from the way he paid attention to her at Red Oaks, she really expected him to come calling. It had been a long time since she felt part of a family and an equally long time since she had actually enjoyed herself. The Kings managed to keep her mind off of the death of her father for the first time since his passing. Even though

Ellie and Tyler had welcomed her with open arms, she still had the overwhelming sorrow lingering over everything.

Chapter

Over the next few days, there were no more visitors and Kate was going crazy with anticipation. Did Everett not seem interested? Did she imagine it all?

Keeping herself busy with needlepoint and gardening to take her mind unsuccessfully off of him didn't help either. She stabbed herself half a dozen times with the needle and ended up pulling half a row of undeveloped carrots because her mind kept wandering.

"That's enough young lady." Silvia clucked looking at the destroyed row and the sheepish young woman kneeling in the dirt, "I think I'll put you on a simpler chore like dusting, but stay away from the china." She quickly added as an afterthought.

"I'm so sorry Silvia, I don't know what got into me." Only she did, and was completely embarrassed over her behaviour.

"No?" she gave her a curious look, "Well honey, I'm sure you'll figure it out. You're a smart girl."

Sure she was. If she was so smart she would be able to at least figure out what had occurred between her and Everett when they were together. Was he really interested in her? She seemed so certain when they shared a touch or a look, but when she was away from him, doubt started entering her mind. What if he was only interested in her as he was with other women? Already she knew it would break her heart. There was no cure for the way he made her feel when he was around. Looking at her fingers and the stab holes in them from her needle, she knew she'd probably end up killing herself if she didn't figure this out.

The next day Ellie took Kate into town with the wagon to introduce her to some of the townsfolk. She couldn't be more thankful for the distraction thanks to her cousin. Although she did have a

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sneaky suspicion that Silvia had put her up to it. The day before, she was helping her make candles and one of the curtains in the kitchen caught fire and it was her fault. She was grateful that Silvia moved quickly enough and threw a nearby vase of water on the flames dousing them. She felt terrible, but Silvia only gave her a pat on the shoulder and told her not to mind. However, there was something odd in her eyes when she said that. Something akin to amusement.

Ellie's voice cut through her thoughts.

"You'll meet more of the townsfolk at the King's celebration, but I thought you could use a day out."

"You're always so considerate."

Ellie gave her a smile, "No more than you." She pulled the wagon up in front of the general store and introduced her to Mr and Mrs Coulter.

"Jeb!" called Mrs Coulter almost eagerly sparing her husband a glance, "Come meet Ellie's cousin."

Kate watched a tall lanky man come through the back door and approached them. A pleasant smile lit his face at the sight of the women. By the look of him, he might have been several years older than her. He had brown hair and blue eyes like hers and if she didn't meet the King boys earlier, she would have thought he was the most handsome man in Cottonwood, but now he didn't hold a candle to them.

"Pleased." He nodded settling his eyes unmistakably on Kate. "You staying long?"

Ellie started telling the Coulters of Kate's recent loss, but Kate could feel Jeb's eyes on her the whole time and couldn't bring herself to look back. Ellie told them of Kate staying with them and she felt relieved that she didn't have to answer his question. When he was momentarily distracted by Ellie's story, she excused her self, turned and began to wander through the store pretending to be looking at knickknacks while waiting for her cousin. He was a handsome man, but she was uncomfortable with the way he looked at her because she still had

hopes for Everett. Normally, his interested stare wouldn't have made her feel such a way. Unknown to her, Jeb followed her down one of the far aisles.

“Miss Kate.”

Startled at the sound of his voice, she turned to see Jeb standing behind her. “Yes.”

“Would you mind if I called on you.”

She flushed. Obviously he didn't have a problem being so forward. Something she noticed that was common with the people in Cottonwood. It might have put her off him, if she didn't see the kindness in his eyes.

He took a couple of steps in her direction, and softened his voice not wanting to seem to aggressive, “I know Ellie said you had a recent loss, but if your feeling up to it. I could take you on a picnic.” Jeb swore he'd never seen a woman so beautiful and he normally wasn't so assertive, but he knew that a woman that looks like her wouldn't remain available for very long.

“I don't know.” She glanced through the shelves looking for Ellie who was still in conversation with Jeb's parents.

“I never thought...” he said bringing her gaze back to him, “Are you already involved?”

“Well...” she looked away. Was she? That was the big question. Was she just another conquest to Everett? Why hadn't he come to see her, when she was sure he seemed interested? Reflecting on those thoughts made her slightly angry, and with the silly way she had been acting, it just added to her self-pity. She lifted her chin slightly. Why shouldn't she go on a picnic with Jeb? Everett hadn't been around for several days, and she was pining over him when she wasn't even sure if he felt the same way as she did. For all she knew, she'd be an old maid before she figured out that he didn't feel the same way. According to Ellie, that's the effect the King boys had on woman. “I suppose it would be fine.” The grin he gave her could have been heart stopping to any other female if she hadn't seen Everett's. Oh, why did she keep

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comparing him?

“Much obliged, then tomorrow afternoon?”

“All right,” she managed a smile. Jeb was a pleasant man and any woman would probably find him attractive. Also, Ellie had told her that he was a gentleman and she knew that if she stayed home pining for Everett every day that she would end up burning the house down at some point.

Just then Ellie came up, “Let’s go, there’s a few more people I want to introduce you to.”

Jeb said goodbye and gave Kate an extra wide smile as they left. Out on the walk Kate asked what Jeb was like.

“He ask to come call on you?” Kate raised a delicate brow in question.

“He did.” She stared at her cousin, “Is that all right?”

“Of course. He’s really nice Kate. He’s a God fearing man. Goes to church regularly. Something I need to do more of, but the ranch seems to take all of my time.” Ellie eyed her cousin, “He’s considered quite a catch.”

Kate shrugged, “I felt a little awkward when he asked, I felt bad saying yes.”

“why?”

“I just really don’t think I’m attracted to him.”

“Really?” Kate was surprised. Jeb didn’t show interest in women often and he was really handsome. For him to even ask Kate’s permission to come calling must’ve been a landslide act, because he was usually quite shy himself.

“I mean, he’s nice to look at, but...” she wasn’t sure how to describe it. Thank goodness Ellie did.

“He doesn’t give you that flippy feeling in your belly?” Ellie finished with a smile.

Kate laughed, “That’s it!”

“Like Jace does to me.”

And Everett to me. But Everett was off limits. Looking at her

cousin right then made her want to confess her feelings to her about the oldest King brother. After all, she always relied on Ellie, even though they lived far apart. However, would she jinx it if she did? Then again what if there was nothing to jinx?

Ellie suddenly groaned.

“What is it?”

“Cassie Davis.” She whispered grabbing Kate’s arm and pulling her to look in through a store window, “She’s the judge’s daughter and she’s been chasing Jace.” She added with unhidden anger.

Kate snuck a peek at the pretty blonde as she bee lined her way to Ellie. “She’s pretty Ellie.” However, she certainly wasn’t prettier than her cousin.

“She’s a tramp.” Ellie said in a harsh whisper causing Kate to stifle a giggle behind her hand.

“You shouldn’t say those things.” But before Ellie could respond, Cassie was behind them.

“Hi Ellie.” Said Cassie shooting a suspicious gaze at Kate and lifting her chin arrogantly to brush her gaze over the woman.

“Cassie.” Ellie spun around to look at her.

“Are you going to the May celebration at Red Oaks?” She said casting a scrutinizing look at Kate.

“That’s kind of a given Cassie, seeing I was practically raised on that ranch.” Ellie answered sounding bored.

Kate turned her head to hide her smile.

“Of course. That’s why those strapping King boys think of you as a sister...isn’t it?” Cassie smirked.

Kate saw Ellie’s fist clench and knew that her cousin wanted to lay Cassie Davis flat on her pretty little bustle skirt.

“Is this your cousin I’ve been hearing so much about?” Cassie guided her eyes to Kate and couldn’t keep the Jealousy out of her voice. What she did hear, she realized weren’t lies. She was beautiful.

“Yes.” Said Ellie not missing the opportunity to rub her gorgeous cousin in Cassie’s face, “She’s all the way from New York. She

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was brought up really sophisticated.”

Cassie cocked a pretty little brunette brow, “Really? Well that doesn't help much around these parts.”

Ellie saw this as a chance to get in a dig. “The King's seem to really enjoy her upbringing. Why the other night when we were invited for dinner Kate played the piano and made them all practically swoon at her feet.” She said with a false smile ignoring the astonished look her cousin gave her.

“I'm sure it wasn't the piano that made them swoon.” She said lowering her gaze over Kate's body again.

Kate's mouth fell. The nerve! Kate had always prided herself on her intellect, and Cassie's outrageous insinuation insulted her. She made it seem that the Kings wouldn't be interested in any of her talents if she was shaped the way she was. Before she could say anything, Ellie stepped in to defend her.

“Of course it was, some women don't need to flaunt their assets to get attention when they're as intelligent as my cousin.” She said pointedly while lifting a single delicate brow to get her meaning across, “Of course when someone doesn't have any brains...”

“Well!” Cassie blurted clearly insulted and turned to leave, but then stopped and turned toward Ellie, “Jace certainly doesn't seem to mind my assets.” She said nonchalantly while lifting a single shoulder before marching off.

“Why that little trollop!” Ellie made to go after her when Kate stopped her by grabbing her arm.

“That's what she wants Ellie.” Kate didn't expect the look of hurt on her cousin's face, “Don't give her the satisfaction.” She said and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“I can't believe he was with her! She doesn't have a decent thing about her.”

“Ellie, you and I both know that's probably not why Jace paid her any attention at all.”

“I hate him.” She sniffed wiping one of her eyes roughly as a

tear escaped.

“No you don’t. You know exactly what he’s like too.”

“Look at me. This is pathetic. I’m in love with a man, who won’t spare me the time of day, but he’ll sleep with that whore.” She waved a hand toward the receding back of Cassie.

Kate took Ellie’s hand, “Let’s go home.”

Ellie nodded, “I still hate him.”

Everett felt like he’d been run over by a rabid bull by the time he made his way into the house that night. The whole week was hell. He would speak to his father about hiring a couple of more men or he’ll never get a decent night’s rest. He was too damn tired to even hit the bathhouse, and just stripped off his chaps and boots at the door before Mrs Soter tore the flesh from his hide getting her floors dirty. Hell, he hadn’t any time whatsoever to court Kate either. That is what had bothered him the most. He actually missed her. The woman had him completely bewitched.

Hanging his hat on a hook he heard voices in the dining room and knew they were still eating supper. When he entered the voices stopped and three pairs of eyes were drawn to him.

“Someone die?” he said taking a seat and pulling food from the platters to fill his plate thankful that it was till warm.

“Not exactly.” Said Jace who had gone in the house barely five minutes before him.

Everett stopped and looked around the table, “Looks like someone died.”

“Someone might.” Said Chance eyeing his brother warily.

Everett leaned back in his chair lazily and cocked a single dark brow, “Out with it.”

Chance had no problem with that. The words rushed out, “I was in town today getting supplies and found out that Jeb Coulter has been out to see Kate every day this week.”

“The hell you say.” Everett said quietly darting his eyes to the

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others noticing that their gazes just confirmed his brother's words.

Chance shrugged, "It was straight from his mama's mouth. Apparently he's thinking of proposing."

Everett's expression didn't change, but inside he was raging, "Jeb's a good man."

"He's a wimp." Offered Chance. "Kate needs a real man Everett."

Folding his arms across his chest he surveyed the three men, "Jeb's no wimp Chance. He's a God fearing man, a good man. As for a husband, that's Kate's decision." What he didn't say, is that he would definitely do something about this. As far as he was concerned Kate was his.

Ed leaned forward in his seat and put his fork down, "Everett, did you make your intentions clear?"

"I thought I did." Or did he?

"No, I don't think you did." He tilted his head knowingly, "Not every woman is going to swoon at your feet and wait around for you. Everyone here knows that Kate is a different breed of female. I'm surprised there's *just* one man courting her."

"Pa, I've been busy..." He started to explain, but Big Ed wasn't done with him yet.

"Tomorrow, you and Jace ride over to the Purnell's and you call on Kate. That girl will be snatched up before you have proper time to set your intentions. Don't argue." He added sternly when Everett moved to protest, "The ranch can hold it's own. Chance can take up where you left off. I'll hire a couple of extra hands until you get a ring on that gal's finger, but if you expect to sit back and hope she comes running to you like every other female miles around, you'll be in for a surprise. Your mother was no different. She had pride thicker than a man's and it took me almost a year to get her to marry me. Kate's the same way. Now, first thing tomorrow, you get your ass over there and let her know how you feel."

Everett stared back at his father wondering if what he said was

true. Didn't he make himself clear? He outright told her it was her he'd come to see that day at the Purnells. Anyone who knew him, knew he didn't chase women, but then again, Kate didn't know him. He let out a frustrated breath of air. His father was right, he'd been a fool. Why the hell did he think a gorgeous creature like that would wait around for him? Because any other woman would have. "All right Pa." He flicked a glance at Jace who nodded in agreement. This time he would make his intentions completely clear even if he had to spell it out for her.

"And—" added Ed with a warning, "You'd better let Tyler know what's going on. He's going to be quite protective of her, especially with your reputation. Furthermore, the girl just lost her father so she's very vulnerable. He won't hesitate to shoot you if he feels you're just after her for other reasons besides marriage. That boy is as scary as hell when he's pissed off. Living with Indians for part of his life had a lot to do with that."

Everett nodded. "Sure thing." When his father spoke they all listened and respected him. Not only that, he was a wise man who didn't give advice readily and Everett had no intention of letting Kate slip through his fingers, so if his Father knew a way to help, he sure as hell was going to listen.

Unfortunately, the next day didn't go as planned and the boys never made it to the Purnell's in the morning. Fencing got knocked down and they ended up rounding up over five hundred escaped cattle which took most of the day. By mid-afternoon, Everett made his way to the bathhouse while Chance was hitching up the wagon to go to town and get more fencing supplies. By the time the brothers made it to the Purnell's, Silvia met them on the porch and informed them that Miss Kate and Ellie went for supplies in town.

Everett nodded his thanks and they took off at a steady trot.

"I guess nothing's meant to be easy." Jace said as they rode side by side.

"Hell." Was all Everett said.

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They caught up with Chance outside of town with the wagon and slowed their pace to match his.

"You're supposed to be at the ranch," Everett said, "Wally could've come and got the supplies."

"I'm going back. Wally's in the hills looking for strays." He defended, "Not only that Everett, Pa had hired two men after you left."

Everett nodded feeling relieved that the ranch wouldn't suffer, "all right."

However, Everett didn't remain calm for long.

The first thing they spotted while riding into town was Kate being manhandled by three men he hadn't seen before. One of them had her by the wrist and she was trying to get away from him. Cursing, he spurred his horse to a gallop with Jace right behind him and dismounted before the mustang came to a halt. He didn't know the circumstances, and frankly he didn't care, for all he saw was one thing. Someone was touching Kate and she didn't welcome it. Rage flooded through him.

"Leave the lady be." His voice sounded calm, but anyone who knew him knew the slight edge in that tone. Apparently these men weren't from around here, because they would have been halfway out of town by now. He stepped up on to the boardwalk behind her.

"Everett," she breathed a sigh of relief while still trying to dislodge her wrist from the strong grip.

The men standing behind the one holding on to Kate paid him attention but the other didn't, he was too involved with the pretty thing in front of him.

Jace who was still astride his horse, cocked his rifle.

Finally at the familiar sound, the man noticed the two threatening men and released Kate's wrist. "She your girl mister?" His eyes darted back and forth between the large threatening men.

"She is." Said Everett without hesitation, "and I don't appreciate you *touching* her." He held out his hand without taking his

eyes off of the other men, "Kate."

Kate probably would have leapt for joy over that statement if she wasn't so frightened. All she could do was gape at him in disbelief. However, she took advantage of freedom and quickly stepped to Everett who, grabbed her arm, and pulled her behind him.

"We're not looking for trouble. We've just rode in and was just lookin' for a little fun. My apologies miss. I meant no harm." He explained looking from one to the other. The possessive deadly look in the man's eyes that stood not five feet away from him told him that he'd might have chose the wrong woman to fun with.

"I don't appreciate you *looking* at her either." Everett offered with a rein of threat in his voice ignoring the apology.

The three men looked at one another then back at Jace and Everett.

"I wouldn't." Said Everett knowing they were considering taking them. He'd seen that look many times, "It would be a waste of your lives." He slid his hand to his hip hovering it above his six shooter. Behind him he could hear a movement from Jace which made him know that he just levelled the shotgun towards the three.

"We may be out numbered boys," Jace said in a steely voice, "But I'll put a hole in whoever goes for his gun first. So the question is; who's willing to die first?"

"He's right," The Sherriff suddenly appeared beside them, "You heard the man, ride out or I'll arrest the lot of you for being drunk and disorderly in public plus assault."

That seemed to work, ending the standoff. The men got on their horses and with a final look at the group, rode out.

"Thanks Brodie."

"Don't thank me. I'm just getting' tired of cleanin' up shot up bodies from you boys. They should thank me for saving their lives." He tried to look stern but the smile was still on his face, "You all right young miss?" Brodie redirected his attention to the pretty lady peeking out from behind Everett.

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She nodded and thanked him and he left after he told them he'd be seeing them on Saturday for the party.

"I'll be down in the saloon Everett." Said Jace, "Fun's over for me too, and I want a drink. Join me if you like." He flicked a nod to Kate and with his rifle slung over his shoulder he nudged his horse in the direction of the saloon.

Everett turned and looked down at her, "Did he hurt you?" He brought his hand up and brushed the soft flesh of her cheek in obvious worry while his eyes searched hers for any indication.

His touch was the most remarkable caress she would ever remember. It was gentle and full of much more than just a simple stroke to calm her. Not only did it cause that warmth to stir in the pit of her stomach, it made her completely forget about the men who manhandled her. It was as if he was telling her exactly how much she meant to him in that brief moment without speaking. Everything that Ellie had told her of Everett seemed a total lie. Not once had he portrayed what she had told her or wrote her. He seemed so expressive. His emotions were clearly stated in his warm ochre gaze, his posture and even his touch. Maybe no one ever took notice of this before, but she certainly didn't miss it. Maybe people thought of him in a different way because of his large size and hard set looks. Kate, however, wasn't used to such appearances, so Everett only seemed like an overlarge handsome man who clearly had interest in her. Or did he? Then she remembered that he had told her from the second day that she'd arrived at the Purnells, that he had come to see her. Yet Ellie's words gave her an edge of doubt. Not only that it had been several days since she'd heard or seen anything of him and she let all of those doubts seep in. Now, with him touching her again, they were gone.

"No, not really." She finally said as she absently rubbed her wrist while trying to keep the frightful tremor out of her voice.

Everett took her hand and saw the faint beginnings of a bruise, "Why that son-of-..."

"I'm fine." She interrupted, "Thank you for your help." She saw

his face cloud over in anger.

“He had no right to touch you Kate.” He gritted angrily swinging his head at the cloud of dust of the departing men. A brief thought of him hunting them down flew through his mind until she spoke. The softness in her voice distracted him.

“No, but you saved me.” The menacing look in his eyes was surprising. *This must be what people see*, she thought. It would definitely give him the reputation she had heard about. Although when she spoke to him it softened as his eyes met hers again. It was then that she realized that he really did care about her. “You were really worried?” His face softened completely. More than anything she wanted to ask him if what he said to the men about her being his girl, was true.

“Of course.” He saw the pink enter her cheeks at his confession. Then he looked over her head and felt his anger return, “Who the hell you come to town with? And where are they?” He said glancing around.

“Ike and Ellie had to go into the General store. I saw the dress shop and decided to look in the window, please don’t blame them.”

She was so innocent. He softened his hard stare when he returned his gaze to her, “Kate, this isn’t New York. Cottonwood isn’t full of gentlemen. You need to be more careful.”

“I know that now. Everett you can let go of my hand now.” She flushed looking around them. Several people that had gathered to see the confrontation were still watching the couple.

He reluctantly released her, forgetting that he still held it. Staring down at her he took a deep breath and released it. “I’m going to take you home.” He didn’t feel confident in anyone looking out for her. How long was she wandering before those three accosted her? What if he and Jace hadn’t come along? He glanced down the walk toward their buckboard behind the Purnell’s wagon in front of the store. He realized that she’d barely gone fifty yards and she was approached. She was too damn pretty for her own good. The sooner people knew that she belonged to him, the better.

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She stared up at him, "But..." She wasn't sure if her words stopped because he'd interrupted her or if it was that striking warm stare that shut her up.

"Don't argue." He said sternly but gently while placing one of his long lean fingers on her luscious lips to silence her. "I'll tell Ike and Ellie."

Kate held her breath at the tender touch, and didn't miss the glint in his eyes that went with it. "Everett, they can..." she spoke more softly but was interrupted again.

"Those boys may not be gone Kate. Ike's a good cowboy, but he's an old man, and I doubt very much he can shoot like he used to. I'm taking you home." He said with a tone of finality.

"Oh. I see." She never considered that the three men would try to harm her again. Everett was right, she really was naïve.

"I'll leave Chance my horse and take the Buckboard." He took her elbow and walked her across the street where Chance was loading the wagon with supplies. He left her with Chance when he went in the store to speak to Ike. He didn't want her to hear what he was going to say.

In the Saloon, Jace was ordering a shot of whiskey when Chance came sauntering in. A few of the other men that saw the altercation were asking about Everett's girl.

Jace ordered Chance a shot of whiskey and handed it to him, "It seems everyone seems to know that Kate is Everett's except Kate." Chance said to his brother.

"Well, after that," Jace nodded toward one of the two windows facing the street, "I think she will know."

"Hey, Jace." Called the Blacksmith, Barton Wells, "When's the wedding?"

Jace laughed, "As soon as I know, I'll tell you." That started people gossiping.

"Never seen Everett so protective...."

“Look’s like he was going to shoot them all...”

“His look could’ve splintered wood.”

“She’s mighty pretty...”

“She have a sister...?”

“Lucky girl,” Said Jenny who had just come from upstairs. She witnessed everything from her room. She knew Everett wasn’t a man of many words and she always had a soft spot for him since he helped her out. He always treated her like a lady, in fact, all of the King boys did, but Everett was special. She had seen the look on his face when those men handled the young lady and she realized she had only seen a fraction of what he was capable of that night he protected her. His affection for the attractive blond was genuine. With her it was just chivalry, but she’d take it anyway, because it wasn’t often a man treated her that way. “Who’s the pretty lady?”

“Tyler and Ellie Purnell’s cousin from New York.” Chance said, just walking in the saloon, “She is real pretty ain’t she Jenny?”

“She sweet on Everett?” Jenny said not responding to his question. She knew she didn’t have a hope and hell with the large cowboy, but she couldn’t deny that she had a soft spot for him. Nor could she change her past and present state. She was a whore and Everett was the only one that ever gave her a measure of respect and protected her.

Chance gave her a considerate look before he leaned down and gave her a lofty kiss on her over made up mouth, “Yeah, but don’t you worry darlin’ I’m still sweet on you.” He as well as Jace knew that Jenny had harboured some affection for Everett since he had saved her a while back. Although Chance knew she probably had no choice at her profession, Everett would never settle for a girl like her regardless of how he treated her.

It was one of the very few times Jenny blushed, “Go away you. You’re just a lad.” There was only humour in her voice. The *lad* was almost as tall as his brothers and acted twice his age. Not only that, she knew what he was like in bed, and with his physical masculine

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attributes, he was definitely not a lad.

“I can show you how much of a man I am.” Chance growled giving her a hug.

Jace roared with laughter.

For the first hour Kate and Everett rode in silence. Kate was wondering if Everett was coming to terms with the same feelings that she herself was beginning to discover. In less than twenty-four hours after meeting him, she had thought of nothing else. Then again, from Ellie's letters, this seemed to be common for women around the King boys. She stared up at him and saw that his jaw was set tight and every now and then a muscle bulged and pulsed there, letting her know that he was still unhappy with what happened. Maybe she was wrong, and he was just being a gentlemen like Ellie had constantly accused the King boys of being around women. She sighed wishing that she would quit flip-flopping her emotions and doubt over him. Then as if feeling her eyes on him he glanced down at her. She was sure she stopped breathing because what she saw in his warm brown stare was not indifference, he really did care and almost as if he read her thoughts his hand sought out hers as he guided her closer to him without saying a word. She found herself leaning into his muscular arm and he didn't protest, but just squeezed her hand in reassurance while returning his gaze to the landscape. No, he wasn't much of a talker, but then again, neither was she, and what they didn't say left a lot of understanding between them.

“I didn't mean to take you away from whatever you were doing in town.” She knew he came with Jace, and they probably had plans.

Everett looked down at the top of her head. “I got what I went to town for.”

Her head snapped up bringing her gaze to his, “What—what did you say?” Her heart thumped in her chest like a stampeding bull. Did she hear him right? He came to town for her?

“You heard me Katie.” He said deeply while staring into her

eyes.

“You really mean that.” She said with complete astonishment.

“I do.” She knew now about his affections toward her. If there was any doubt before, it was gone just from the way she leaned into him. He could swear he felt his heart tighten in his chest. He didn’t trust himself to speak again. Part of him was still raging from finding her alone and manhandled by the three men in town. In fact, after he’d left her with Chance, he’d gone into the store and tore the hide from poor Ike making the old man practically shake in his boots. Then for the first time in his life he chastised a woman. Ellie however wasn’t as easily swayed and defended herself and Ike telling him that they had asked Kate if she wanted to accompany them and she said she wished to remain in the buckboard. She didn’t expect her to get out and wander around town alone.

“Did you not tell her what to expect Ellie? This isn’t New York. The men here have never seen a lady like Kate. In many ways this country is still wild and untamed. She’s not like you. You can handle a gun, hell, you probably would have tongue lashed those three bastards and have them let you go to shut you up. You should have taken better precaution with her.” Although he never raised his voice she acted like he did and respond in kind.

“If you haven’t noticed Everett, and I can tell by your demeanour that you have, Kate is a young woman, not a child. I have written her many times and told her of the goings on in Cottonwood. Don’t you blame poor Ike.” She scolded.

“Ah Hell.” He said and walked out of the store.

Ellie watched his tall broad back as he left the store, “Of all of the...”

“Ellie!” Said Ike before she had a chance to start cussing.

She took a deep breath.

“He’s as cross as a trod on rattlesnake.” Ike grabbed the parcels

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off the counter thanking Mr. and Mrs. Coulter, who were still gaping at the scene, "I'd say he's smitten."

Ellie turned to Ike with a look of astonishment, "Of course. Gosh, I never noticed any of the signs...well, because, that's just Everett. He's protective but he's not affectionate with women. You know something Else Ike? I think he paid me a compliment in his own way."

"About you handling yourself? I guess he did." The old man chuckled. "Now we gotta get home cause I think that man made me wet my drawers."

Ellie burst into laughter, "He's all bark, not bite."

"You're wrong about that Ellie, I've seen that man practically tear down a house with his so called bark, knock out a man's teeth for mistreatin' a horse, shoot several men for mistreatin' a woman who is less than reputable. And that has been this last week alone. So Miss Ellie don't think that his bite isn't deadly."

She waved a hand, "Everett always had good cause Ike." She said as if she perfectly understood his reasons for why he did the things he did.

"You're just safe because you are a woman, but we men do not like to cross him." Ike added while going through the store door with the parcels in hand. "I'm sure if you weren't standing there he wouldn't have hesitated to knock a few of what's left of my teeth out for not protectin' Miss Kate. He was angry and it didn't matter how old I am, he was pretty close to it."

Everett pulled the wagon up to the Purnell's house, got down and helped Kate by putting his hands on her tiny waist and easing her down to the ground. He stared down at her for a full minute not releasing his hold on her. He cleared his throat, "I think I'll take you riding tomorrow Kate."

He didn't voice it as a question and she wasn't the least bit concerned that he didn't either. She already admitted to herself that she liked the way he was so self assured around her. "I don't have a

horse.” She found her breath and realized that she was holding onto him to. Her hands rested on his strong forearms. She felt him tense at her touch causing sinewy ripples beneath his shirt.

“Let me worry about that.” He said deeply.

“I’m not a very good rider.”

“You will be safe with me.”

She smiled up at him, “I know I will.”

The pleasure he felt at her trust was indescribable. “Around noon?”

“I’ll be waiting.” She said softly.

Although he knew it was bold of him, one of his hands released her waist to cup her chin and tilt her face up toward him so he could bend down and place a light kiss on her cheek. Her lovely alabaster skin was as soft as he thought it would be. He wasn’t sure how she would react, but when he saw her close her lovely eyes at the display of affection and not protest his forwardness, he felt triumphant. *So long Jeb*, He thought to himself. Everything in his body screamed to give the lady a real kiss, a kiss that was worthy of a woman like her, but he knew she was inexperienced and didn’t want to frighten her. He lifted his head and saw a slow smile spread across her lovely lips.

“I liked that Everett.” She said with a hint of desire in her eyes.

He chuckled and kissed her other cheek, this time it was placed a little closer to the corner of her mouth. Then he found himself doing it again to the other side of her lips. She had begun to slide her hands up his arms and around his neck and it gave him the invitation he needed. He brought his mouth to hers, “Open your mouth honey. Let me kiss you like you’re meant to be.” He whispered against her lips to which she complied simply because he’d asked her to.

She didn’t expect the shock of pleasure when he covered her mouth with his, or the warm sensation that burst in her stomach and spread low in her pelvis. His tongue traced the contour of her lips and she melded into him releasing a moan. His hands were no longer on her waist. One circled around her back and pulled her against him

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slowly as not to shock her, while the other tangled in her tightly bound hair to help guide her head while his lips slanted passionately over hers. When he finally lifted his head away from hers she wanted to protest. The glint in his eyes seemed to tell her that he knew it.

“Honey, you were meant to be kissed.” He said huskily while staring down at her dazed look.

She blushed clear to the roots of her hair. “Only by you Everett.” She heard herself saying.

He groaned and kissed her again with more force than before pulling her body tightly against his hard form nearly making her small frame practically invisible in his. Not once did she hesitate or protest. In fact she circled her arms about this neck and tried to pull herself closer to him.

“Everett!” Boomed Silvia’s voice, “That can wait until after the wedding, get your hands off of her.” She was standing on the porch with her hands on her hips and a look of disapproval aimed solely at Everett.

“Sure thing.” He grinned, while reluctantly releasing her not seeming the least bit uncomfortable being caught in such a display.

Kate thought she blushed before. She had completely forgotten about the cook. To her surprise Everett chuckled and boldly placed a light kiss on her forehead in front of the woman, before bidding her farewell, seemingly totally unaffected by Silvia’s words, “Tomorrow at noon Sweetheart.” He whispered. Then he climbed into the wagon and took up the reins slapping them across the horses’ backs to urge them forward.

“That’s not your fault child. “ Silvia patted her hand when she came up the steps to go into the house, “That man is a rogue and you mind your virtue around him until you have that gold band on your finger.”

Kate could have crawled in a hole about then if there was one available. She was too embarrassed to inquire how Silvia thought a wedding would come out of one kiss.

Ellie couldn't be in any more shock than she was the next day when Everett rode up to the house with a pretty little grey mare in tow, or when Kate practically burst from the house to greet him, or even more when the tall bulky cowboy dismounted, bent over and placed an adoring kiss on the cheek her lovely upturned face. He then easily lifted her into the saddle, gave her the reins and mounted his own horse. From yesterday she knew he had some sort of affection for her, but he didn't know it was returned—in spades.

“He's captivated, poor sot didn't have a chance.” Said Silvia behind her.

Ellie jumped and turned, not hearing the woman approach. “You knew?”

“Everett doesn't run errands like he did the first day Kate was here. It was really surprising to see him. I figured something caught his attention and it wasn't you. Especially with you being all ga-ga over Jace since you were fourteen.”

Ellie's mouth dropped, “Is there anything else you know?”

“That man is gonna marry that girl.” Silvia said with a cocky grin and a nod in the direction of the two riders leaving the front of the house.

“Everett doesn't marry.” Ellie said with concern. “I don't want Kate to be hurt and Silvia...he should have a chaperone.”

“You look at him Ellie and the way he is around her. That man would rather die than hurt that precious little thing. Now, don't you meddle. No one's going to gossip about those two and what they've been doing alone or Everett and the Kings will have something to say about it. Everett needs a little love in his life and after what Kate's been through, she could use it too.”

Ellie sighed, “You're right. I just can't believe that Everett is taken with her. He was always so distant and withdrawn.”

“He wasn't so much yesterday.”

“What does that mean?”

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“Nothing....come, and help me shell some peas.” Silvia said, “And we’ll talk about snaring young Jace for you.”

Ellie’s beaming smile showed no protest at shelling peas after Silvia’s statement.

Chapter

“Oh, Everett she’s so lovely.” Kate patted the mare’s neck as they rode side by side.

“I thought you would like her. You can keep her.” The overjoyed look on her face made his insides practically turn to mash.

“I couldn’t possibly accept such a gift.” She gave him a look of uncertainty.

“Yes you can.” He added with a quiet tone that said she was going to accept it weather she wanted to or not. To his surprise she smiled.

“You don’t like to be told no.” she raised her brows at him in recognition of the timbre in his tone.

“I don’t.” he cast her a wary glance. Maybe he shouldn’t have sounded so forceful. He wasn’t used to opening up to a woman in any way. After a moment he could see that she wasn’t the least bit affected and this pleased him. The more he got to know her the more he thought of how perfect she was for him. He hardly had to say anything and she seemed to know how he felt or what he was going to say. She was completely unspoiled when she had every right to be.

“Hmmm.” She said with a teasing twinkle in her eyes, “I guess if were are going to be friends I should learn some compromise.”

“We’re not friends.” He added, shooting her a direct stare, “What I have in mind is a little more...intimate.”

A thrill shot through her which she couldn’t keep out of her expression, “Everett...”

“Hell...” he interrupted seeing her expression, while reaching over and pulling her off her horse onto his lap.

She would have squealed if his mouth didn't capture the sound. After he'd kissed her practically senseless she rested her forehead against his chin trying to catch her breath.

"What's the use on giving me a mare if you don't let me ride her?" She whispered.

"Honey, what's the use of having such a kissable mouth, if I can't take advantage of it?" He asked huskily.

"Touché." She said causing him to laugh.

Everett held her like that while her little mare obediently followed behind them for the next hour as they reached the bank of the Sacramento river. He dismounted and helped her down.

"Oh Everett this is very pretty, is this Tyler's land?"

"No. it's ours. Cottonwood creek is about another mile west and it drains into the Sacramento. It boasts a healthy Salmon run." His eyes grew warm, "You're pretty too, Katie."

"I like it when you call me Katie." She admitted shyly.

He brushed his knuckles along her soft silken cheek. "Have you ever accepted intentions from another man honey?"

She closed her eyes against the light caress, "What intentions?" she said mindlessly.

"Intentions like mine."

Her eyes shot open and she pulled away from him, "I have no idea what intentions you mean." It was the tone of his voice that began to make her wary. The only way she could describe it was he sounded hungry. It wasn't the sort of hunger that someone feels when they need a meal, it was primal and it frightened her. She wasn't used to be alone with a man to begin with, not to mention the feelings he'd been stirring in her and now, when he looked at her like that it made her cautious.

"Yes you do." He took a step toward her and she backed up again.

"Everett, you are frightening me." The look in his eyes was new to her. It was smouldering like some forbidden heat. Her words caused him to pause.

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His eyes settled on hers, and he softened his voice, "I forget how innocent you are. Especially when you fire my blood so easily." He said heatedly. "I don't mean to frighten you honey. It's the last thing I want to do."

She began to relax when he stopped moving toward her, not knowing what firing blood was, but it sounded dangerous. "And what exactly are your intentions?" she asked with a smile.

He began to roll a cheroot to distract him from images of throwing her to the ground, tossing up her skirts and having his way with her, "Depends." He said striking a match on a nearby tree to light his smoke.

"On?" she watched him take a long drag. God he was handsome, she thought as he assumed a relaxed stance and hooked a thumb in his gun belt.

"What you think of me." He eyed her intently.

All her apprehension vanished at his soft tone. She took a step toward him, "I think you know what I think of you Everett."

"Do I?" he glanced at her sideways with a bit of a smirk.

"I hear that you are quite a rounder. So I'm sure you can read a woman's feelings, can you not?" she arched her delicate brows in question.

"I reckon. But you aren't like most women." He added looking down into her eyes as she took several more steps toward him. Christ, he could drown in their depths. He lifted his smoke and took another drag resisting the urge to reach out and grab her. He knew now that he needed to let her come to him and curb his desire for her somewhat because it frightened her. Normally he would show her how much she stirred his blood, but at the risk of pushing her away, he would hold back. Until he finally made her his, he was willing to make the sacrifice. And it worked. She started to approach him.

"I will take that as a compliment." She said bravely reaching for his other hand. He didn't deny being a playboy, "And about being a womanizer?" She said tilting her head alluringly at him.

“Honey, I haven’t thought of another woman since I met you.” He squeezed her hand, “I think about you all of the time. Hell, my dreams have even been invaded lately.” He didn’t tell her of the images he had, but it was true, he couldn’t think of anything else since he saw her in town that first day with Ellie and Chance several weeks ago.

From Everett, and what Ellie had told her about the man, he never confessed anything like that to anyone much less a woman. She practically felt her heart soar. “I feel funny around you Everett.” She confessed, dipping her eyes to the vee in his suede black vest, “I don’t like leaving you after I’ve spent time with you and I’m anxious for our next meeting. I also think about you all of the time, and I’ve never done that before. That night at your house with your family was wonderful.” He gave her one of his rare smiles. “In fact, I can’t concentrate on anything, why the other day I nearly burned the house down making candles with Sylvia.” This got her a deep chuckle, “It’s not that funny.” She frowned, “I feel like an imbecile.”

“Honey you are as much of an imbecile as I am.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles, “I certainly like your honesty.” He smiled.

She flushed, “Honest or not, I feel silly.”

“How serious are you about Jeb then?”

“Jeb?” God she’d almost forgotten about him. “I’m not.”

“I heard he’d been courting you.”

She shook her head. “He’s been to see me a few times, but he never mentioned anything along those lines...why?”

“I don’t want another man courting you honey.”

“Another?” her delicate brows lifted in surprise.

His expression grew dark, “Has he kissed you?”

“What—no—“ she said in astonishment that he’d even asked the question. “Of course— not. He hasn’t even tried. Not that I’d let him. I was pining over you.” That seemed to lift the dark look on his face.

“I don’t want another man kissing you either.” He said letting his expression darken.

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“It’s about time you said something.” She said exasperated despite his menacing look. All of those days she was distracted worrying that he didn’t want her and nearly burnt down the Purnell’s house.

“I thought I made myself clear that day I came to invite you to dinner.” He explained.

“Is that what that was?” her eyes widened, “Everett, I haven’t seen you in over a week. You don’t even send me notes or come see me, yet I’m supposed to know what you meant from that?”

“I suppose it was subtle for anyone who doesn’t really know me.”

“Subtle? It was invisible.” She said with some irritation. How was she supposed to know what that meant? If a man wanted a woman, he should make his intentions much more clear than Everett did. She didn’t know him, or know what he meant that day. Yet, she managed to dwell on it for days wondering if she imagined his interest or not. Yes, she was a little annoyed that she pined over him worrying if he was interested in her or if he was like that with all women.

Really he couldn’t fault her. His father was right; he didn’t make himself clear and actually expected her to understand his motives. If anything, he was a fool to expect that from her. She was gorgeous, intelligent and a man should have been clearer around a woman like her. She deserved no less, yet he treated her as if she should know what he was intending, not the other way around. “I’m not a man of many words.” He said feeling her aggravation.

“You don’t need to be.” She explained, “However a couple of words would have made a world of difference. Like, ‘I like you Kate’” she offered causing him to grin again. That alone completely squashed her frustration and caused those butterflies to cut loose inside her again.

“I like you Kate.” He said in a deep drawl.

She smiled and took a step closer, “How about ‘I’m crazy about you Kate?’”

“I’m crazy about you Kate.” He mimicked deeply dropping his grin as his gaze darkened.

She tilted her face up to him and softened her voice to a whisper, “How about ‘You’re mine’.” She added with hopefulness.

“You’re mine and I’ll kill another man who touches you.” He returned staring down at her.

“that’s not how I said it.” She murmured tilting her head up to his and stepping closer until her chest was practically touching his.

“Close enough.” He lowered his head and took her mouth under his. Then he lifted his head and searched her sapphire gaze, “So, Kate, does that mean you don’t mind becoming Mrs. Everett Allen King?” He saw her eyes widen with pure joy before she launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him all over the face. He tossed down his smoke and embraced her. It was the second time he had her in his arms and there was no denying how amazing she felt so close to him. He knew he made the right choice. To have another man feel this way about her was not an option. He would speak to Jeb.

“You’re sure...are you really really sure? I mean, we’ve just met.”

“If you can stand to be married to a mutt like me, I am. Not only that, I know what I want when I see it.”

“Oh Everett, you aren’t a mutt, you are the most handsome, tall, strong....why the very sight of you makes my breath....” She pulled back and saw that forbidden look in his eyes again causing her words to catch in her throat. He instinctively tightened his hold on her.

“Do not fear me. I would never hurt you.” He lowered his head brushing his mouth across hers, “God, Kate, I want to kiss you...open your mouth like I taught you.”

She shouldn’t have done that because when she did a fire raged through her. He didn’t hold back this time and plundered her mouth with his tongue. Now she knew what he meant by his blood firing and God it was delicious! She whimpered against his mouth when he did

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those amazing things with his tongue and at that point she neglected to notice what his hands were doing to the rest of her.

Everett managed to undo the buttons on her blouse, reach in and caress one of her full breasts causing her to gasp while the other held her tight against him. She was full of untried passion and he only wanted a taste. Only a taste to him was a hungry man's dinner.

She pulled back at the unfamiliar touch, but didn't step away from him. "Everett...I..."

"Shh, honey, I only want a taste, I won't hurt you. Your virtue is safe..." he murmured against her mouth as his hand brushed over her nipple causing her to unknowingly arch toward him. Then he trailed his mouth down her neck and felt her give over completely again, "God Kate, you're so beautiful. So help me, I'm not letting you go for anything." He murmured against her soft skin.

The whispers against her bare skin were enough to drive a nun wild. She arched toward him as he worked the cloth of her blouse out of her skirt and gently pushed it off her shoulders. Her thin chemise was no match for him. He managed to skilfully slide the straps off her shoulders exposing her upper half so quickly that she hardly noticed. He kissed the mounds of her perfect breasts and slowly lowered her to the ground.

Heat pulsed within her erasing every protest she had and when his warm mouth closed over one of her breasts she cried out. Tangling her hands in his hair she arched toward him. His hands were everywhere on her body trailing heat in their wake. She instinctively pressed her hips into his when he came down on top of her. In an instant his mouth was on hers in a fever pitch, claiming all of the sexy feminine noises she was making. Their tongues fought and mated until with a groan he lifted his head and shifted his weight. "Honey, we've got to stop. God, you're so sweet, I could devour every inch of you, but this isn't fair to you." He said raggedly. He wanted her. He wanted her badly, but she deserved something more than to be taken on the ground by some lusty cowboy. He was so hard it was painful and he knew it

wouldn't take much more to take her innocence. Reluctantly, he rolled to the side and pulled her into his embrace while quickly sliding her chemise up to cover her. She never said anything but he could feel her rapid breaths on his neck. "Damn." He added softly. Then, unexpectedly he heard a breathless 'touché'.

On the ride back to the Purnell's they rode side by side holding hands until the house came into view. He dismounted and helped Kate down letting his hands linger on her waist. "You won't change your mind?"

"I haven't been sure about many things Everett, but I am about you." She confessed softly lifting her eyes shyly to his, "And you?"

He reached up and brushed a lock of blond hair off of her cheek in a tender display. "More than I am about breathing." He said deeply while his fingers lingered in her gold spun hair. It had come loose when he'd put his hands on her and she had let it down for the ride home. Like he thought, the sun kissed locks hung to her waist like a shimmering golden waterfall. "I like your hair down. Don't wear it up again."

She tilted her head and smile, "All right."

He shook his head and returned her smile, "You aren't going to argue at all?"

"Why should I? Besides, when you use that tone with me, I know it would be pointless." Her eyes twinkled.

He chuckled, "You're probably right. We'll announce our engagement this Saturday at the Red Oaks May celebration. Is that all right with you?" He grasped both of her hands and kissed them while his eyes watched her expression for any kind of apprehension. There wasn't any.

"You could ask me anything and I would agree at this point." She said breathlessly as his heated gaze made her remember what they had done earlier. She wasn't the only one.

He chuckled softly, and her words got him thinking. "So, if I

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didn't stop...by the river, would you have let me?" She didn't answer him for a long time seeming to contemplate his words while staring down at his boots. He said her name again which brought her head up and he saw complete trust and adoration in their depths. He knew the answer before she said it.

"Yes."

"Really?" He grinned at her while the blush hit her cheeks again. Intimacy wasn't talked about in such a way, and less in the society that she was raised in. Being completely innocent of men and agree to let him have such liberties was not a normal occurrence with a woman like her. There was nothing shameful in what they had done and he was beginning to think that she thought there was until she spoke. Her blush was from something completely different.

"I would have let you do anything to me Everett. In fact, it felt as natural as breathing." She stepped against him, wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head on his hard chest, "I have never felt such things before. It's like a hunger."

He groaned, embraced her and lowered his cheek to the top of her head, "Honey, you have no idea the feast I could serve you." He stepped back and took her face in his large hands, "But it hasn't escaped me that you are innocent. I will be patient and take you to my bed when we are wed. You deserve no less. I've done some wickedly sinful things in my life, but I'll do right by you sweetheart."

"Does that mean you won't touch me like that again?" she gazed up at him with an expression of disappointment.

For the first time he can remember, he was set back. The look on his face was incredulous. She actually sounded disheartened. What did he do to deserve such a woman? She wasn't the least bit ashamed at what they had done earlier despite her innocence. There was no doubt she was innocent. She may have been loaded with passion, but her responses, though eager, were those of an untried woman. He would know. Images flashed in his mind of her responses to his touch and he near groaned. He shouldn't have taken it so far because now he knew

how she felt and tasted It was going to be a long wait; painfully long before the wedding even if it they got married the next day.

He was also apprehensive about frightening her. Maybe if she started thinking about the things he'd let him do to her, she would have some reservations. Then almost as if she knew what he was thinking, his worries were washed away with her statement coupled with a look of disappointment of him not touching her until the wedding. She was curious about her desire and he was willing to oblige her curiosity. He bent his head and brushed his lips across hers and whispered to her, "Honey, I'll touch you like that again in a second if you ask me. Hell, I'll touch you so much you'll think you're a part of me." He felt her smile beneath his mouth. "I could do plenty of things to you and not take your virginity. I intend to give you lessons every chance I get until the wedding. Is that clear enough?"

"Oh yes." She said huskily causing him to laugh.

"Look what I've created." He brushed his mouth over hers again, "You'd better get inside before that woman bares her teeth at me again."

She laughed, "Silvia's a softy."

"Not when it comes to her two girls." He released her, took the mare's reins and hopped up into his saddle, "I'll take your little mare to the barn." He started to turn away but her voice stopped him.

"Will I see you tomorrow?"

"I can't honey. I have branding to do at the ranch. I probably won't see you until Saturday for the party. Don't look so sad." He added taking in her crestfallen expression, "Now come here and give me a proper goodbye." When she stepped up to him he bent low in the saddle, scooped a large hand around the back of her head and gave her another thoroughly devastating kiss. He touched his forehead to hers, "Don't pine so much, I'll make it up to you this Saturday." He chucked her under the chin before he sat erect and stared down at her while his eyes grazed over her form hungrily, "Wear something pretty for me. I want to show you off and make all the young bucks jealous." Flashing

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her a heart melting grin, he turned his stallion and headed down the hill leaving her standing there blushing.

Kate watched him until he'd disappeared down the hill and into the barn before she went into the house. Saturday seemed like such a long way off and it was only several days. What was wrong with her? He'd barely gotten out of sight and she missed him already. The memory of his strong arms and hard body against hers kept resurfacing. Smiling, she instinctively hugged herself as if doing so would leave his imprint on her. She didn't feel the least bit ashamed that she'd let him touch her like that. In fact, she ached for him to do it again. The feelings he'd instilled in her were new, erotic, and she wanted more. A warm flushing appeared in her belly at the memory.

She had barely gotten in the front door when Ellie seized her arm and practically dragged her into Tyler's study, "Tell me absolutely everything, or I'm going to burst!" she said with raw excitement in her expression. "Everett Kate! Oh my God!"

"You make it sound so impossible." She said finding her voice after the scare the woman gave her by jumping on her when she walked in the door.

"I've told you about him." Ellie said in disbelief, "He's not like that."

"Yes, but I don't see anything in him like that." She said with a shy smile.

"That's because that man is crazy about you! Of course he isn't like that around you. My God, you thought you weren't pretty and in less than two weeks, he's practically kneeling at your feet. He's actually smiling....and laughing. Everett doesn't do those things. From what I saw at the window he was not the same man I know and I've known him since I was seven."

Kate couldn't believe what she was hearing.

Then Ellie gave her a crushing hug, "I'm so happy for him....and you, of course. I never thought I'd see the woman to tame him. My goodness, it's no wonder Jeb didn't appeal to you when there's a man

like Everett chasing you.”

“Oh no, poor Jeb.” Said Kate.

“Don’t you worry one bit about Jeb.” Ellie said sternly, “He’ll have no problem finding a wife.”

“It doesn’t make me feel any better Ellie. He’s a nice man.”

“And you can’t help where your affections lie. So don’t feel guilty.” She scolded.

“But what if he comes calling, I—“ Ellie’s grin stopped her, “—what?”

“Does Everett know about Jeb.”

“Well, yes.”

“Then I wouldn’t worry about him coming to call anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because Everett will speak to him.”

“He will?” her brows rose. “How do you know?”

“Because my dear cousin. Everett doesn’t play nice when he wants something.” She winked, “And he certainly doesn’t share.”

An hour and a half later Everett was doing exactly what Ellie said he would and found Jeb loading freight into the back of the store.

“Hi Everett.” Jeb said standing straight and wiping his brow with his sleeve.

“Jeb, I need to speak with you.”

“That sounds serious.” He said looking at the taller man dismounting his horse in a creak of leather.

Everett slapped the reins on a nearby rail and nodded to Jeb, “It’s about Kate Purnell.”

“Oh?” that name certainly got his attention.

“What are your intentions?”

Jeb shrugged, “I hadn’t had any yet.”

“Rumour has it that you were thinking about proposing.”

“I can’t say it hasn’t crossed my mind. Ma keeps insisting, but

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I'm not sure if I'm ready to settle down." He said with a look of puzzlement.

"We've been friends for a long time haven't we?" Everett removed his hat and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. Regardless of his self-assuredness he still didn't like thinking he stole a good friend's girl.

"What's this about Everett?" Jeb took in the man's discomfort. Knowing that Everett was confident in just about everything, his posturing surprised him, but then his next words made perfect sense.

"I proposed to Kate today." Everett couldn't help but feel guilty at the man's expression.

"What did she say?" even though he asked he already knew. He knew Everett well enough to know that he valued friendship and if he felt he wronged him, he would feel guilty. Not only that, if Everett proposed, any woman would jump at the chance to marry him. He was rich, handsome, and had that air about him that attracted women without even trying.

"Yes."

"Well, I guess that about says it all." Jeb said with a defeated tone.

"She didn't realize that you felt that way about her, if that helps." He said apologetically.

"I wasn't clear Everett. I was going slowly with her, but apparently that was the wrong choice. You shouldn't feel guilty over this. She made the choice, not you."

"I thought I'd come tell you first before you heard it from someone else. You're a good man." He explained.

"I appreciate that." He said wiping his dusty hand on his pants before he held it out to Everett, "No hard feelings."

Everett shook the man's hand, "Just so you know. I was hooked the first moment I laid eyes on her."

"Is that so?" Jeb managed a bit of a smile.

Everett nodded, "I didn't have a chance." He added with a grin.

“Yeah, I guess she has that affect on men. I figured there was someone else. Even when I went to see her, her mind seemed to be elsewhere. Maybe that’s what makes this a little easier. Letting her be, I mean.”

“She didn’t mean to hurt you at all Jeb.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty sweet Everett. I’m sure you’re right about that and like I said her mind was always elsewhere that’s probably why I didn’t propose myself. I’ll be all right. There are other women in Cottonwood and I’m not quite sure I want to settle down right yet despite what ma has been telling people. Although not many women are as pretty as Kate, except for Ellie, but I’m not willing to place second to Jace either.” He added with another smile.

“No hard feelings then?”

“None. We’re still friends.” Said Jeb. “Just know that the next pretty gal to move to cottonwood better be mine. I’m getting tired of coming in second to you King boys.”

Everett chuckled.

The next few days dragged by and Kate was bursting with jubilation when Saturday finally came. She had tried her best to stay busy and not think about how much she missed him, but Ellie wasn’t any help. She couldn’t stop talking about how happy she was that Everett found someone he cared about. Finally she had to ask her to stop reminding her or she’ll end up riding over there by herself. Ellie laughed and promised that she would keep her mouth shut, but how difficult it would be.

They had spent their days in the garden, needle pointing, and had gone riding together several times. Unlike Ellie who had been practically born on a horse, Kate only had ridden a couple of times before. She was doing her best to learn on the little gentle mare that Everett gave her so she could go riding with him more and was thankful for Ellie’s expertise.

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Even though she knew she would see him today, she still felt horribly empty being away from him. Everett was right, she was pining. She missed him so much that when Ellie talked non-stop, which was unusual for her, she was thankful because it helped her take her mind off of thinking. Regardless, her stomach had been churning all day with eagerness to see him again.

“I hope this rain lets up before the May celebration,” Ellie told her that Saturday afternoon while they drank tea. It was raining outside. They couldn't go riding or work in the garden. Not only that, but Kate's stomach was in a knot and Ellie, bless her, did her best to distract her by talking about herself. Unlike most women, Ellie never prattled on, then again neither did Kate, but for some reason she did today and it took Kate a minute to realize that Ellie was nervous too. “Silvia says I have to show Jace that I'm a woman.” She added getting up and looking out the window.

Kate hid her smile as she assessed her cousin's attire. Ellie was dressed in a man's riding pants and shirt. She was out roping cattle with Tyler earlier in the day before the rain came.

“She said I have to make an extra effort to make myself look pretty.” She said turning to face her cousin.

“You *are* pretty Ellie.” Kate said with disbelief.

“I know.” Ellie said with laughter in her eyes, “Unlike you, I know that I'm pretty, I just don't know what Jace wants. I may be a bit rough around the edges, but all in all, I'm a lady underneath.” She said gesturing at her clothing with her hands.

Kate stared at her for a minute as the gears in her head began to turn.

Ellie saw her expression and knew she was scheming, “What?”

“I think I know what Silvia was talking about. I have just the thing.”

Kate dragged Ellie up to her room and opened her closet, “Everett told me to wear something pretty. I have several Paris gowns that are the entire rave in New York right now.”

“Everett told you to wear something pretty?” she said with awe.

Kate paused and looked at her cousin unsuccessfully stopping the blush that rose to her cheeks, “Stop it Ellie.”

“Sorry,” she laughed, “But the way he’s gone all ga-ga over you is just hard to take.”

“He’s not ga-ga.” She denied with a further flush of her cheeks.

“Yes he is.” She added with a grin, “Now show me these gowns before I continue to embarrass you further.”

Kate shook her head and pulled out a pale green silk ball gown with a cream underskirt and laid it across her bed. “The cuirass bodice goes over the hips so it’s quite tight but shows the women’s figure marvellously. This is one of two of a kind. He won’t be able to resist you.”

Ellie stared at it in awe and ran her fingers over the cloth. Never in her life had she felt something so fine. “There has to be yards and yards of material.” She said in awe, “It’s so beautiful.”

Then she pulled out a pale pink, “I’m wearing this one. You can wear the other, it’ll suit your eyes.”

“I couldn’t...” she stammered still touching the fine material.

“Nonsense. You have the same build as me...”

Ellie scoffed, “You have a fuller bosom Kate. I couldn’t fill this out.”

Kate tried not to blush at Ellie’s bluntness, “You’re wrong. You just need the right gown and this is it.”

After the initial surprise of Kate giving her the stunning gown to wear, she hugged her furiously. “Oh Kate we’ll be the belles of the ball!”

Later that evening, Jace waited beside his brother who had looked at his pocket watch a dozen times in the last ten minutes. Impatience was not common with Everett and from the way he was acting, he was making up for all of the times in his life when he should’ve been. He had been waiting out front of the gate to the

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expansive villa for the last hour. The rain ended several hours ago and things remained damp, but tolerable. People were still arriving and they politely greeted them as they walked by. The celebration was in the back of the house in the large courtyard their father had built about twelve years ago. Colored candle lanterns hung from the trees surrounding the yard casting it a soft enchanting glow. There were endless tables of food and beverages and Ed hired a bartender and extra servants to delve out drinks steadily.

“I swear this thing has stopped.” Tapping it a few times and holding it to his ear. He looked at Jace, “Are you hiding from Cassie?” Cassie was the local judges daughter and as pleasant as an angry cobra on a good day. However, she was also an easy woman if a man had to satisfy his needs. She was eager for marriage to someone of stature and thought the King boys were her ticket to freedom out from under her father’s strict rules. Everett wasn’t dumb enough to fall for her advances but he knew damn well that Jace was.

He feigned a look of innocence, “Me? No, do I need an excuse to keep you company?”

Everett gave him a wry smile, “That’s what I thought.”

Jace sighed heavily, “The woman clings like clay dust. She’s not even pleasant to be around, even if she’s a piece.”

Everett laughed. “Has her sights set on you now, does she?”

Jace shrugged

“Serves you right for screwing her.” Everett said, “You knew what she was like.”

“I didn’t exactly screw her Everett.” Jace admitted casting him a sideways glance. She’d gone down on him a few times, but that was it.

“Oh.” Everett shot him a side glance understanding what he meant, “Careful Jace, she has her sights set on marriage.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“It’s safer messing with a hell bent bull than Cassie, you’ll come out less damaged.”

“It was a moment of weakness. It won’t happen again.” He

admitted.

“You’d better watch yourself, if Ellie finds out, there’ll be hell to pay. You shouldn’t have your dalliances so close to home.”

“Yeah, poor Ellie. Sweet kid.” He sighed and stared at his brother for a moment who was watching the lane to their house, “speaking of marriage. Did you manage to snag that pretty cousin of Ellie’s.”

This time Everett allowed himself to smile, “Just wait and find out.”

Jace grinned, “I guess I’ll wait to congratulate both of you. Did you speak to Jeb?”

Everett nodded, “He took it well. Don’t know if I would have.” He said glancing back down the lane.

Jace just smiled. Any man would have backed down knowing that Everett was going after what he wanted. He was distracted by his brother tapping his watch again.

“Hell, I swear my watch has stopped. Do you have the time?” Everett said with growing impatience.

Jace saw Everett look at the time again and laughed, “No, but...” He nodded toward the long lane to their house, “I see Tyler’s carriage.”

Everett finally saw them, “Christ, I was beginning to wonder...”

“Women take a long time to get ready Everett.” Jace said with a humorous tone seeing his brother’s eagerness.

“Half the town’s here already, and our women aren’t.” he said watching the slow approach of the wagon.

“Pa’s playing a good host...the music’s playing, people are dancing. No one would even notice your not there until you walk in with that...*sweet Jesus* is that Ellie?” Jace stood railroad straight catching sight of her in a stunning pale green gown.

Everett walked by him, tossing his smoke on the ground and crushing it beneath his boot, “I reckon that is.” He murmured with a sly smile as he approached the carriage to help the women down while his

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eyes were drinking up Kate in a pale pink silk gown. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, "I said wear something pretty, not breathtaking. I'll have to fight them off with a stick." She blushed at his compliment.

"Everett please, my cousin..." she cast a glance past his shoulder to see Tyler still at Everett's words, turn around and set his hard gaze on Everett's back.

He glanced over at Ellie. Jace had already taken her arm and started leading her through the gate. "Is lovesick on my brother and didn't hear a word."

"I did." Said Tyler standing behind him.

Everett didn't even turn around, "ah hell." Kate had him so dazzled he'd completely forgotten about Tyler. He never did get around to speaking to him like his father said.

"Everett, I think you and I need to talk." The seriousness in his voice was strained. He wanted to reach around and remove Everett's hand from Kate's.

Everett didn't miss it when he tucked Kate's arm in the crook of his elbow, turned and gave Tyler his attention. "Yeah, first I want to show Kate off. We'll talk later if that's okay."

Tyler looked from one to the other. He knew Everett and he knew his reputation. In fact, his own reputation wasn't far from the King brothers, for he'd been with them when they gained such notoriety, but this was his cousin, his *only* cousin and she was his ward. Against Everett she would have no defences.

"Tyler..." Kate began, but Tyler held his hand up to stop her. His pale green eyes were set on Everett's.

"It's not what you think." Everett said.

He narrowed his gaze, and his voice was almost accusing, "You don't know what I'm thinking."

Everett remained unmoved, but his voice gave a tone that was almost apologetic, "I reckon I do. Despite what you think, my intentions are honourable. I was going to talk to you about it tonight before I announced our engagement." Tyler could be menacing when he wanted

to. He was a good friend, and meant as much to him as his brothers. Like Jace, he seemed easy going until you crossed him, “I should have spoken to you sooner.” He saw Tyler’s features soften at the mention of an engagement. “I meant to.” He removed his hat and scratched his head, “I’ve just been a little—distracted.”

Kate nearly burst into laughter over that confession. Distracted? Is that how he put it? Lately it seemed as though she was in a different reality. However, she couldn’t ignore the fact that she was greatly relieved to hear him say that knowing she wasn’t the only one.

Tyler stared at him a moment to see if he was telling the truth. As far as he could tell, he was. The only reason he was worried in the first place was because he knew his reputation with women and Kate was beautiful. When Everett said he was distracted, he knew it was Kate that distracted him and a confession like that from the man was pretty much unheard of. He couldn’t help but let a bit of a smile touch his expression at that. In truth, he was sure Everett never had a chance when Kate walked into his life. Obviously the man was spellbound after that confession and Tyler had to admit it was a good match.

After a brief moment he conceded. If Everett said he was serious about Kate, he was, “All right Everett, you just mind yourself with my little cousin. We’ll talk later this evening about your intentions.” Everett nodded, and Tyler stepped aside allowing the couple to pass. He didn’t miss the warmth in Everett’s eyes whenever he looked at Kate, or the adoring way she smiled at him. Although women adoring Everett was common, it just wasn’t reciprocated. Regardless of Everett’s past, Tyler was certain the affection was genuine. Everett was filthy rich, and his land joined theirs. He also wouldn’t take advantage of Kate, who seemed to have no problem trusting anyone. Not to mention the large sum of money that her father left her for a dowry. Everett would never steal from her and would make sure the money was invested wisely.

Yes, thought Tyler, he couldn’t ask for a better husband for his cousin.

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Chapter

Jace didn't leave Ellie's side all evening. She was beautiful. Hell, he always knew she was, but all done up in that fancy dress gave him a complete eyeful of her figure. In fact, every other man there that night that wasn't attached to a woman tried their best to entice her away from him, but he would have none of that. Not for an instant would he allow Ellie to leave his side. It wasn't long after he'd enticed her around the side of the house so they could be alone and pinned her up against the stucco to kiss her.

For the first time since he known about her affections toward him he'd used it. What he didn't expect, was for her to taste so damn sweet and respond to him with such passion. Soon he had his hand up her skirts and was playing with her more than he intended while probing her sweet mouth with his tongue. All the moaning and writhing she was doing against him, caused him to find some privacy in the barn where he took her virginity. He'd whispered endearments in her ear the entire time he moved within her and he'd meant every single one of them at the moment.

She was the sweetest thing he'd ever had on a mound of straw. Hell, she was the sweetest thing he'd ever had, he'd admitted. Her whole body seemed to be built specifically for him and he couldn't find fault with anything about her; the way she reacted to his touch, the way she felt, and the way she moved beneath him. He couldn't help himself and groaned continuously at the way her moist heat wrapped around him and the way she moaned and mewled every time he rocked on top of her made him find his release sooner than he meant to but thankfully not before hers. If he was aware of the gala happening around the other side of the house he might have been more aware of their rising voices, but he was only aware of the gorgeous woman writhing beneath him. He growled when his seed spilled into her, gripping her thighs and thrusting as deep as he could before he collapsed on top of her soft

body. He couldn't move, or talk for that matter, he was completely speechless. Then Ellie did, breaking the spell he was in.

"I always thought it would be wonderful." Ellie whispered, "with you I mean."

He lifted his head and stared down into her trusting green eyes. Guilt flooded through him like a torrential downpour, "Hell." He said, and lifted himself off of her turning away to get dressed.

She sat up, "What is it?"

"Christ Ellie, I'm not the marrying type." He started to roughly pull on his clothes, "I thought you knew that. How could you let me get so far?" He accused.

Her mouth fell open, "Jace..."

"Don't get me wrong. It was good. I mean you're really soft and beautiful, but I can't marry you."

"That's fine." She said with more hurt than she meant, "I didn't expect you to marry me." She reached for her gown to cover herself suddenly feeling very ashamed.

He hadn't meant to sound so cold, but his own anger had spilled over and was unfairly aimed at her. "Ellie..."

"Don't bother." She began to get dressed, and pushed him away when he tried to touch her. "You knew how I felt Jace. I have no regrets over what we just did."

"None?"

"No...not until you opened your big mouth and made it sound cheap!" She burst forth angrily trying to cover up the hurt she felt.

"It wasn't..."

"Just shut up." She tried doing up the intricate buttons of the bodice fighting the tears, "Dammit." She swore unable to do the task and her voice cracked.

"Here, let me." He said tenderly trying his best to amend the damage he'd just done.

"Go away." she resisted by shoving his hands away but he ignored her and through his persistence and her lack of fight she finally

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let him do up her gown.

Actually he probably did it up quicker than Kate did, just to show her what kind of experience he had with woman's clothes. She let out a frustrated sigh and turned to him, "Can you do something with this?" she pointed at her dishevelled hair causing him to give her a grin that was totally his character and he nodded.

"It wasn't a cheap lay Ellie." He told her softly as he brushed the straw out of her soft strands while his eyes locked on hers. It was far from it. Jace had to admit to himself that making love to her just basically blew his mind. Since she showed up in that dress, he no longer saw her as the little girl with puppy love in her eyes, she was a woman. Pure woman. A woman who'd just given herself to him completely. For the first time in his life, he was set back on his heels over her.

"Then don't dwell on it." She said trying to sound stern when inside her heart was breaking.

Now touching her all over again started the heat rising in his groin again. Images flashed in his mind at her writhing beneath him and he felt himself get hard again. *Damn, this just won't do.* His hands dropped to her breasts and she stilled locking her emerald eyes on his. Regardless of everything that just happened, he wanted her again.

"Jace."

"shut up Ellie, I'm not done with you yet." He captured her mouth and began to pull up her skirts. Surprisingly she didn't protest.

He shouldn't have kissed her again and he most certainly shouldn't have pushed her against the side of the stall, lifted skirts, pulled down her underwear, lifted her legs over his hips, undid his trousers, and entered her again with the force of a rutting bull, but Christ she was so damn hot. None of the other women in his entire life could touch what this woman just did to him. He'd never gotten so aroused so quickly after having sex already. Ellie obviously could do this to him and keep up with him. She was strong willed and stubborn to the bone except, he thought with complete arrogance as her head

tilted back against the wall moaning with every thrust. She melted in his hands like butter, and *thank you God*, he thought while lifting one of her shapely thighs high over his hip, *pliable as a feline* and ready to do his every bidding, but she was passionate too. The woman had more passion than any other woman he had. Their voices rose together as he gripped the edge of the stable wall with one hand and increased the force of his thrusts burying his face in her neck as she shuddered with him. Then he took her mouth under his not releasing her right away. "I'm going to want more of this." He said huskily lifting his head a few inches from hers.

"Put me down Jace." She said in complete defeat. He was right; she couldn't deny him anything, least of all this. Having him so close to her was emotionally overwhelming and if she thought she was in love with him before, it was nothing compared to what she felt for him now. She may have put on a good act, but she was so vulnerable that if he asked her to jump off a cliff, she wouldn't hesitate.

"I'll have it." He said with complete self-assurance as he eased her down to the ground with surprising tenderness and then spent a few moments straightening her skirts and pulling bits of straw out of her clothing and hair that he'd missed earlier.

"This can't happen again." She said weakly. She knew she lost the fight and so did he.

"Yes it will, Ellie." He eyed her intently bracing a hand on the wall beside her as he bent down to kiss her. *What the hell was wrong with him?* He just couldn't stop himself from touching her. It didn't help that her skin was so soft that it felt like warm velvet.

It was pointless to protest, she loved him and kissed him back. She couldn't say anything, she was speechless that he was able to so easily take it from her again. When he lifted his head and stared down at her with complete triumph in his liquid brown gaze she felt the sting of tears because he knew it. Lifting her chin she turned and walked out of the stall not wanting him to see how helpless he'd made her feel. He'd caught up to her and forced her arm in his, to lead her back to the

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celebration despite her constant tugging. The rest of the night went by and she managed to ignore him completely but he acted as if nothing happened and continued to be his charming self. A torrent of emotions were coursing through her. Ones she never felt before. She was so much in love with the man it hurt, and she knew he would never take what they did as seriously as she did. It broke her heart and she did her best not to burst into tears. How could she ever forgive herself for giving herself so freely? She was no different than Cassie. Now she was in the category of all those other women he'd been with.

The only thing that stopped her from her own self-pity was when Ed King announced Kate and Everett's engagement causing a raucous of cheers among the crowd. It was her excuse to get way from Jace to hug her cousin. "I don't know how you did it."

"Me either." Kate said clearly elated. She nodded towards Jace who stood not too far away looking at Ellie, "Are you having any luck?"

"More than you know."

"What?"

"Nothing." She forced a smile, "I'm so happy for you Kate." She flicked a glance toward Everett, "I don't know if he looks happy, because he always looks angry." She teased.

Kate glanced over her shoulder, "Oh, he is."

"How do you read him so well?"

"I don't know. It seems easy." She shrugged with a smile. She looked at Jace again, "He hasn't taken his eyes off of you yet."

"That's because he's a bull in heat." She said before she could stop herself.

Kate burst into laughter. "Be thankful Silvia didn't hear that." She said casting her eyes at the woman not too far away.

Ellie finally laughed herself. Kate's happiness was no less than contagious. Everett came over then and urged his future wife on to the dance floor. Then Ellie's eyes met Jace's and the rogue gave her a sinful smile, but it was quickly redirected when Cassie Davis latched onto his arm and dragged him out for a dance. Furious, she turned and went

into the house thinking to help Mrs Soter and that's where she'd spent the rest of the evening.

"I'd like to get you alone." Everett whispered into Kate's ear. "It seems like I haven't seen you forever."

"hmm." She answered, "We can't. We're now the center of attention."

"I want my hands on you." He said huskily.

Kate felt a thrill go through her, "Everett stop it." She whispered glancing around hoping no one heard him.

"I can't stop thinking about how soft your skin is."

"shh." She smiled into his neck.

"You have the most beautiful mouth..."

"I'm going to faint if you don't stop." She said breathlessly.

He chuckled and kissed her temple and turned her around on the floor, "Maybe we should meet at our spot tomorrow."

"I'd like that." She answered.

"I think you broke Jeb's heart." He saw the man give the couple a solemn look while talking to another woman that Everett recognized as the postmaster's daughter...Emily, or something.

She lifted her hand to look at the beautiful engagement ring that he'd given her earlier. He said it was his mother's. She had cried when he slid it on her finger. "My heart was already won."

He never said anything but pulled her tighter into his embrace as they continued to dance.

Over the next two weeks Everett would take off at eleven and promptly return three hours later. He'd met Kate every day at the spot where he'd proposed. After the ride it gave him an hour to spend with her, and every minute was worth it. He'd kept his promise and touched her in every possible way without taking her virginity, but they also talked. Kate was a lot like him and not much for words, but when they were with each other conversation flowed like the Sacramento.

His father was true to his word and hired two extra men to help

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out so he could court Kate properly and he took complete advantage of it. He was completely involved with her that other things started slipping. It wasn't until he discovered Ellie Purnell's choker in one of the stalls one day that he figured it out.

Jace's behaviour started to make sense then. He'd refused to go whoring with Chance and Tyler the last few times he was invited and he'd remembered their absenteeism from the party several weeks ago, but never thought in a million years Jace would take advantage of Ellie's affections.

He was angry when he stormed into the house looking for him. Actually, it was an understatement, he was raging. He was fully intent on beating the stuffing out of him when his father just happened to notice his expression and called him in his study. Everett wasn't one to let people in on his problems, because he usually handled them. This time he did. He showed his father the necklace and told him what he suspected. Big Ed just stared at him a moment before he spoke.

"Leave him alone Everett." Ed stated.

Everett was incredulous, "Pa, it's Ellie, not some..."

"I know. I love Ellie like a daughter, but Jace needs to figure this out on his own. A shotgun wedding won't do any of them good."

"Jesus Pa, he could've got her pregnant." Everett clutched the choker tightly in anger. "She has no idea on how to prevent such a thing, and you and I both know that she's vulnerable where he's concerned."

"Then I'll be a grandfather and you'll be an uncle, but you won't go messing in Jace's and Ellie's business. Is that clear?" Big Ed tilted his head forward to enforce his words with a warning stare.

Everett began pacing and swearing a blue streak while his father just sat and calmly watched.

"If I can bloody well abstain from my urges until I'm married, he can to!"

Ed managed a bit of a smirk, "Don't lie to me that you didn't touch Kate Everett, a man would have to be dead not to. Especially a

man with your reputation.”

Everett stopped and stared at his father, “It’s not the same thing and we are engaged.”

“Like hell.” He sat back in his seat and interlaced his fingers together, “your mother was pregnant with you before we were married. She was the only woman for me. I knew that, and she knew that, but she was beautiful and I couldn’t help myself.”

Everett ran a hand through his hair, and finally sat down, “Still, this is Ellie.”

“Yeah, and if you haven’t noticed, she’s a woman. A beautiful woman. Jace finally noticed that the night of the party. The only difference between Kate and Ellie is that Ellie’s all hell bent and leather bound, perfect for a man like Jace. Like you, it’ll take someone special to tame him, and Ellie’s got that in her. You have got to give those two time to understand that.”

Finally something dawned on Everett, “You knew, didn’t you?” He said quietly.

He shrugged a shoulder, “I had my suspicions. Jace has been running around in a cloud these past few weeks.”

“Did you know it was Ellie?”

“I may be old Everett, but I know a beautiful woman when I see one, and that night, a dead man couldn’t resist her. It didn’t take me long to figure it out. If you could’ve seen the way he looked at her, it was like a light went on in that conceited brain of his. Not only that he wouldn’t let any other man near her.”

“Pa, Ellie’s not like other women.” He said feeling his anger beginning to rise.

“I know that, but like I said, you need to give Jace time.”

Everett clenched his fist around Ellie’s choker thinking about what his father said. The old man would know, he’d probably been around more than he had before he met their mother. Yet, Ellie deserved better than to be taken in a stable. She was a respectable woman, regardless of the way she dressed and acted sometimes. Giving

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her virtue away was not something she'd take lightly and in view of her feelings for his younger brother, it wasn't a fair situation. Jace could take and not think twice about it. Inside he felt the heat of rage light up again regardless of what his father said.

Ed stood up at Everett's fierce expression, "Now don't you go and beat your brother stupid for something he probably had absolutely no control over. Look at how that pretty little Kate whipped you with a single look from those gorgeous blue eyes of hers and you'll understand. You wanted her the first day you spotted her. Jace moves a little slower because he's not like you Everett. Sometimes things take a little long to see into that conceited skull of his." That brought a smile to his oldest son's face.

"I can see you understand."

"Yeah, I'll try Pa, but it's not going to be easy." His father always had words of wisdom and Everett could see some truth in them, but that didn't mean that he wasn't going to keep an eye on either one of them from now on. He'll be damned that Jace is going to get poor Ellie alone again.

Everett was waiting for Kate when she came riding through the trees. He couldn't help but smile when he saw her. Every day she seemed to grow more beautiful. He grabbed her before her horse even came to a full stop and had her off her horse and in his arms quicker than she could blink. In the next few seconds she was flat on her back with him on top of her peeling off her blouse as her fingers were working the buttons on his shirt. Not once did their mouths separate.

Kate loved the feel of his body. Over the past few weeks he allowed her more and more freedom to see him and she wasn't the least disappointed. Thick muscle covered his upper torso and she loved to feel the sinewy threads vibrate beneath her fingers when he moved over her. Although she allowed him to touch her intimately, he would stop her hands at his trousers. She had decided earlier that she wouldn't let him do that today. She wanted to see all of him. As her hand slid over

his rippled abdomen to the fine trail of hair below his belly button he closed his hand over hers.

“No Kate.” He said hoarsely against her mouth

“Please.”

“We can’t.”

“Let me see, let me touch. I want to see the rest of you.” She pleaded softly.

That aching plea could have brought an elephant to its knees. Then he remembered what his father said about Jace not being able to control himself around Ellie. “If I take my pants off, I’m going to have to have you Kate. Don’t you understand that? It’s the only thing that stands in my way.”

“I don’t care...I ache everywhere.” She arched toward him thrusting her breasts and rosy tipped nipples against his chest.

He released a groan, “Honey you certainly don’t play fair.” she was so excruciatingly desirable that before he could stop himself he was reaching for the button on his trousers while looking down the length of her. Her hair had come loose and cascaded over the ground like a golden spray, her alabaster complexion was flushed with passion and her deep sea blue eyes were dark with desire. It only took him a moment to shed the rest of his clothes and come down on top of her. His tan body was a stark contrast to her pale smooth flesh and his large frame almost completely swallowed hers. One of her long elegant thighs rose up to his hip as he settled between them. His mouth took possession of hers and she groaned of the feeling of his flesh on her. “My beautiful Katie...” he murmured against her mouth. Then he trailed a bath of hot kisses down her body, pausing long enough to flick his tongue over the rosy buds of her breasts before he settled between her thighs.

“oh God Everett I ache!” she released a feminine moan.

He groaned and pleased her until she clamped her thighs against the side of his head. He’d done this to her before, but she’d never been as moist as she was now. It would have been so simple to

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lift up and slide into her, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He had to wait. When she shuddered and whimpered her release he lifted up and brought her with him. It was then she saw his erection and gasped. He took his time explaining more of the act of love to her and she blushed all over asking him more questions.

"When you do that to me with your mouth, is that the same as it is with you?"

He could feel his groin tighten at her words, "Yes." He managed to choke out.

"You won't make love to me until we're married, but I can please you to?"

"I won't force you to do anything you don't want to." what she was suggesting made him as hard as granite.

"I can try." She offered as she lowered herself over him.

He hissed through his teeth at the first brush of her lips over the tip of his erection.

"Wait." He said in a cracked voice as he stretched out completely and adjusted her on her knees between his powerful legs.

Her wide eyes roamed down the length of him, "Everett you are big everywhere."

He was so turned on for her and what she suggested that he could barely think straight. Then she circled her hand around him making him release a deep throaty groan.

"Oh, I like this." She said at his reaction over a simple gesture. Then without hesitation she slid her full pouty mouth over him.

He nearly came off the ground and dug his hands in her hair guiding her movements with considerable restraint all the while telling her what he liked. It had been weeks since he'd had a woman, since he met her, he'd had no one. No one appealed to him, but her, now he knew why. The woman was able to catapult him on another planet when she touched him the way she was doing right now. He couldn't stop his groaning even if he tried, but the more noise he made the braver and more experimental she got. Soon his groans turned into

shouts of pleasure and he exploded with a guttural yell. He was still in a spasm of his release when she lifted herself up and slid up the length of him tucking her face into his neck now drenched with perspiration. His heart pounded like thunder in his chest as he tried to calm his ragged breathing. "Christ woman...I think you killed me." He rasped out.

She released a feminine chuckle, "I have to admit. I was apprehensive, but when I found out how powerful it made me feel over you, I rather like it."

He released a satiated sigh, "My innocent little Katie, isn't so innocent anymore."

"Just curious at what else I can do to get you to behave that way." She lifted her head and fluttered her unbelievably long lashes at him.

"Later honey...I can't move right now." He smiled as his eyes closed and he drifted off to sleep with her neatly tucked on top of him.

He awoke sometime later and the sun was going down, "Oh-oh...Kate honey wake up. They're going to send out a search party if we don't get home."

"Oh." Came the groggy reply as she stretched her limbs and rolled off of him causing him to groan. "God is punishing me."

She shot him a saucy grin, "why would you say that?"

"You're just too damn beautiful honey. Look at me."

She trailed her eyes down to his solid erection and blushed. Everything came flooding back at once and what she'd done to him. She'd taken it in her mouth, and drove him crazy.

"you keep looking at me like that and you won't be going home tonight." He stated huskily.

She gasped and then laughed at how bold she was while pulling on her clothing.

He got dressed and he gave her a long passionate kiss before he released her and helped her mount.

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Meanwhile, Jace had tried to avoid Cassie when he went to town but she'd ended up latching onto his arm when he came out of the saloon and began to talk to him completely indecently. If it was several weeks ago, he done what he did before and hauled her into one of the back alleys fondled her pert little breasts and let her suck him off, but that was before Ellie. He hadn't seen her since the night of the party, but had every intention of going over to the ranch house to see her. Hopefully catching her alone.

"Jace let me show you how much I've missed you." Cassie cooed.

"Not today." He answered in an uninterested voice as he made his way back to his horse.

Then she went on to tell him how well endowed she thought he was and he had to refrain from rolling his eyes. None of this even appealed to him a little. It might have if he didn't have Ellie, but it seemed completely superficial now that he did. He mounted up while she slid her hands up his thigh.

"Cassie, your Pa could be watching." Jace scolded looking down at her with an expression of disapproval.

"so." She smiled seductively.

"don't you care what people think?" he stared down at her.

"My Pa's the judge. He'll look after me." She slid her hand toward his crotch and he nudged his horse to step away, "I thought you liked me touching you." She pouted.

"I did then."

She placed her hands on her hips angrily at his dismissal, "It's that Ellie Purnell isn't it? She finally got her hooks in you."

"no one has hooks in me Cassie, least of all you. And I'll thank you to mind your manners over Ellie." He turned his horse and nudged it to a trot leaving her narrowing her eyes in anger at his back.

He didn't want to admit that after having Ellie, no one seemed to measure up. In fact he'd been obsessing about her, wondering what she was doing, and if she was still mad at him. Surprisingly, it bothered

him that she might be. His problem was, that he cared about Ellie entirely too much, and that was why he stayed away from her since the night of the Gala. He didn't want to see her hurt because he couldn't commit anything to her. However that night they had together haunted him, his days, and his nights. Part of him was blatantly ashamed at his behaviour, and the other part wanted to go over to her house and make love to her again. Regardless, the part about being away from her was absolutely killing him inside.

Hell, he thought, *Everett is going to shoot me when he finds out*. Jace knew he crossed that invisible barrier of propriety when it came to Ellie. It shouldn't have happened, but it did and he was suffering because of it. Sooner or later she would confide in Kate who would tell Everett because women did that, didn't they? However, Ellie was different. She wasn't a gossip or a tease and quite likely would keep their night to herself, because she would be embarrassed at what had happened. That brought images back into his mind of that night, and Ellie's body flushed with passion causing him to become suddenly aroused. *Hell*, he thought again, *I'm totally fucked*.

Cassie watched Jace disappear out of sight and was entirely sexually frustrated. Just then Jeb Coulter walked out of his parents store and she smiled. *God fearing man my ass*, she thought as she headed toward him calling his name. Jace's rejection left her feeling insecure and if she couldn't turn a God fearing man into a sinner, she was useless.

An hour later she left the Coulter's back shed with a grin on her face and barely able to walk, apparently she wasn't useless. She had pretended to hurt her leg by feigning a fall in front of him. She grinned as she remembered.

"I'll get the doctor." Jeb helped her to sit on a crate beside the store in the alley.

She gave him the most adoring pout she could muster, "No, I don't like doctors...could you just maybe see if it's broken." She had

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managed to follow him partway down the alley out of sight of the townsfolk before she pretended to trip.

He stared at her expression with those beautiful blue eyes of his for a moment before he finally nodded and knelt in front of her.

She stuck out her leg as he removed her shoe and placed his palm on her calf and the other on her foot testing it for any pain.

“Does it hurt.”

“I hurt.” She said bringing his head up to hers.

“Where?”

“All over.”

“Not your leg?” he gave her an odd look not understanding what the woman was trying to tell him.

God he was dense. She would have to get aggressive and inched her skirt up higher, “It’s a little higher.”

He swallowed and inched his hand up to the back of her knee, “Here?” It wasn’t like him to take such liberties with a woman, but her skin felt so soft and warm under his hand.

“Higher.” She inched her skirt up higher.

“Cassie?” he froze and looked at her.

Impatient, she reached down and took his hand shoving it all the way up her skirts between her legs and she wasn’t wearing any undergarments, “Haven’t you ever been with a woman before?” The man’s face showed an expression of utter awe.

He groaned, “No.”

She grinned as he eagerly felt her, exploring her with long fingers. Then she grabbed his other hand and put it on her breast. A clean slate. Maybe that was the way to go. She was going to have fun with him. When she noticed the bulge in his pants she pulled away and looked down both sides of the alley, “Not here, someone will see us.” She spotted the shed down the alley behind his parents store, “In there.”

This time he didn’t hesitate. He stood and grabbed her hand practically hauling her into the small building.

Jeb wasn't sure what to expect, he was just hoping she knew how to get rid of the pain he was in, but when Cassie undid his trousers grabbed his erection he tried to stop her. She ignored him and started sucking on the tip causing his whole body to suddenly stiffen with shards of pleasure every time her mouth moved. After a few seconds her hot mouth slid down his shaft and he thought he died and gone to heaven. He watched resisting the urge for his knees to buckle, unable to take his eyes her. He shoved his hands into her hair and before he knew it, he was forcing himself to the back of her throat groaning. God forgive him! It felt so good!

She liked doing that, it made men butter in her hands, and Jeb was no exception. Not only that, the man was gifted. He could match Jace inch for inch and she didn't think she'd see another. That's why she chased the man so much, hell that's why all the women he screwed chased him. With Jeb there'd be some healthy competition, but she was his first and she would make sure that he was hers until she tired of him. He started moaning towards a climax but she lifted her mouth off him and made him lay down on the floor so she could mount him. Then she poised herself and slid down on him causing him to growl, grab her hips and start slamming harshly into her. She found out quickly that Jeb was very very strong and when he was finished with her several hours later, she could barely walk. After he screamed his release she worked him into another erection and made her take him from behind. By the time she had him again he was a rutting bull. Christ the man had endurance too.

She knew she had a problem. She'd known since she was sixteen when she'd seduced a stranger coming out of the bar and had her first time in the ally with a man twice her age. He wasn't bad looking, but he was quite drunk. It took her a bit to get him worked up to take her, but once he did, he rode her hard. It should have turned her off of sex, but it didn't. It had the opposite affect.

Now, with Jeb, she'd thought she'd discovered a gold mine. He'd had her bent over several crates and was slamming into her hard

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enough to move one of them across the other and they felt solid. His guttural grunts were turning her on and she was telling him so, among other things that seemed to drive him over the edge. That was when he grabbed the closest two corners of the crates using it as leverage and she began to plead with him to not stop. He obliged her. When they climaxed he fell across her back and groaned. A few minutes later he started shifting himself within her, "Again."

"I can't." she breathed completely exhausted and satiated.

"yeah you can. Hold still." He said as he erected himself and started moving causing her to moan sweetly. What power this was! If he'd only known, he would have had Kate long ago. He spilled his seed into her growling his release. He was spent. The woman had introduced him to a whole new world and he couldn't help but be an instant addict. Then he withdrew and pulled up his pants. She fell off the crate and landed on the floor with satiated smile.

"I expect you here tomorrow at the same time." Jeb said doing up his zipper.

"Hell yeah." She moaned.

He gazed at her one final time letting a grin spread across his handsome face before he left her there and returned to work. He may have a lot of forgiveness to pray for, but after that discovery, he was willing to do it. He knew of Cassie's reputation, but it didn't bother him at all now. Normally he would have avoided her, but after what they'd just done, he'd make a point of paying more attention to her. She was pretty, not as much as Kate or Ellie, but it was enough to turn heads.

Ellie had barely made it to the bucket when she began to vomit. This had been going on for several days now and it began to worry her. She was late too and normally she was as regular as clockwork. Wiping her forehead with her sleeve, she sat down against the side of the house and sighed while swallowing back tears. There was only so long she could keep this secret. Silvia was too damn cunning for her own good and would begin to figure things out first. Then Kate and Tyler, who'd

demand to know who the father was. She brought her hand to her forehead wondering what the hell possessed her to let Jace take her like that. Besides the fact that she was desperately in love with him, she should have learned from the first go round not to let him touch her again, but the things he did to her....God...she was in trouble and she didn't know what to do. Then to top things off, a ranchman from Red Oaks came with a message for a dinner invitation an hour ago. She would have to face Jace again. Releasing a long breath of air she wondered how strong she was to resist his advances.

That evening, it was just her luck that Jace made sure he'd seated beside her. More than once she shoved his hand off her thigh under the table. Glaring at him once, so no one else could catch the exchange, but she met a sinful grin. She mouthed the word 'stop' but it only came with a subtle shake of his head followed by a glint of dark desire in those gorgeous brown eyes of his. Suddenly as if he finally listened he stopped and she returned her attention to her food.

If Ellie didn't look down at her plate she would know why.

At that moment, Jace had glanced up and met Everett's eyes and for a moment they just looked at one another.

Damn, did Everett know?

He removed his hand from Kate's thigh. He wasn't sure how long Everett had been watching the exchange, but he was certain the man had an idea about something, just not to the extent that he'd had with Ellie. Whatever punishment his older brother was going to dish out was going to be brutal. Any other woman but Ellie and of course Kate, would have been fine, but he had crossed that forbidden barrier. Although to anyone else, his brother's stare looked entirely indifferent, he could see the clouded anger in the man's eyes.

When everyone went into the room to listen to Kate play Ellie excused herself and stepped out onto the front patio for some fresh air. It was a warm night and the sun was just beginning to set causing a red and orange glow against the sky. The view from there was breathtaking,

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but not enough for her to get her mind off of Jace.

Normally she would have went and listened to her cousin play because she enjoyed it so much, but she couldn't stand it anymore and had to get away from Jace for a few moments. All through dinner she couldn't meet his gaze, and she could feel the heat of his eyes on her. Also, she made sure that she wasn't alone so he couldn't approach her. There was no way in hell Jace would let the rest of the family know what had happened between them or Big Ed would have them married, and Everett would most likely beat the living snot out of Jace. She rubbed her forehead with her hand. What was she going to do about the baby? God, she had to tell Tyler and he'd be furious. The man already had a temper like a caged cougar and now she was pregnant and unwed. To top it all off, it was Tyler's best friend who'd gotten her this way. She thought about leaving, but where would she go. They had no living relatives except for Kate. Absently she reached up and wiped a tear away angrily. She wouldn't cry, she was tougher than this.

She heard the door open and her heart started pounding in her chest thinking it was Jace, but it wasn't, it was Everett. Instantly she felt relieved, knowing that she couldn't resist the man regardless of how she acted around him.

"You okay honey."

She was startled by the endearment and the softness of his voice. He really sounded concerned, "Fine." She steeled herself and put on her best false smile as she turned to face him, "Why do you ask?"

"You look a little pale, that's all." He said nonchalantly.

"Thanks for your concern Everett, but I'm fine. I'm just not feeling to well."

"Not too talkative at dinner either. It's not like you." He added in the same tone.

And being talkative isn't like you, she thought as she looked at him, but he wasn't looking at her he was just leaning against one of the archways rolling a smoke. "Kate plays beautifully." She heard the music flowing out of the house and loved it. She watched a smile tug at

Everett's lips while he still concentrated on his task. *Wow*, she thought, *he really does care about her.*

"That she does." He said with pride bringing his gaze to hers.

"You love her a lot, don't you Everett?" She couldn't help but ask. He must though, because Everett was not the marrying kind and for a woman to elicit a proposal from him would have to have captured the man's heart.

"I do." He admitted somewhat sheepishly flicking her a glance before lighting his cheroot. He would never admit that except to Kate herself, but Ellie was different. She was like a sister to him and despite how indifferent he'd always been around her, he genuinely cared for her.

"I'm glad you found each other. She really needed you." She said watching him take a long draw off his smoke while looking out to the sunset.

"I'm glad you think so." He said. Then he turned and looked at her for a moment.

"What?" Kate may have been able to see his moods as clear as day, but all Ellie saw was that same steeled expression as did everyone else. When he spoke the concern in his voice surprised her.

"If you need to talk about anything. You know you can come to me right?"

No she didn't, but she nodded. She always thought Everett was as approachable as a cactus.

Walking up to her he held out his hand, "Just so you know that." He pushed something into her palm.

She looked down at her mother's choker and released a sob.

He *knew*.

He knew and he didn't say anything to anyone, or Kate would have asked her out of concern. Her admiration for the man just swelled. Knowing how close he and Kate were, the secrecy must've been very hard on him. If he didn't say anything to Kate, then he certainly didn't to Jace. Why was that?

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Holding the locket to her breast she suddenly felt a little better. It wasn't much compared to the anguish she was dealing with, but at least it was something. Having the knowledge that someone else who cared about her knew and supported her brought her some relief. His indication of her being pale made her think that he knew about the baby too. The only thing she couldn't figure out was why he hadn't said anything. She was sure she knew him enough to know that Jace wouldn't be all in one piece unless something or someone stopped him. Then it dawned on her.

Big Ed knew too.

He was the only one that had enough influence to stop Everett from beating the stuffing out of Jace. Yet, after Jace's amorous display at the dinner table, it was obvious that he was completely unaware that his brother and father knew what they had been doing.

Overall, Everett's overwhelming concern for her eliminated the shame she felt from them discovering how she had behaved. Besides Tyler and Kate, the Kings meant everything to her. Although she didn't care what anyone else thought, she certainly had been worrying about their opinion of her. Everett had no idea the relief she just gave him. Actually if Everett were to beat the stuffing out of Jace, it would serve him right. He knew she had no resistance toward him and he used that. Her eyes guided back up to him, "How long have you known?"

He shrugged, "About two weeks after the May celebration." He looked over her head and took a drag off his smoke. "Don't feel embarrassed Ellie." He said as his eyes sought out hers again, "It's not your fault."

She released a deep breath, "Yes, it is to some degree."

"No, Jace knows better." He paused studying her expression, "I'll keep him away from you if that's what you want."

She gave him a partial smile, "I don't know what I want. I appreciate your offer, but I have to learn to deal with him. Everyone knows I love him, but right now I can't help but hate him too."

"I understand." Everett felt the same way about Jace too. Part

of him wanted to pound the shit out of him, which his father wouldn't let him do, but regardless he was still his brother.

"You didn't tell Kate?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it would upset her and not only that Ellie, it's no one's business. I know you well enough and I know Kate well enough. She'd be trying her best to make you feel better because that's the type of person she is," His eyes searched hers, "And you'd be some pissed that someone pitied you, if even a little."

That was true. She tried not to smile.

"Now, me on the other hand, am not the pitying type. I just know you don't have many close friends Ellie, so if you need to talk, just know I can listen."

"That means a lot to me."

"Have you decided what to do about the baby?"

Oh God, he *did* know. It must've been her expression that caused him to explain.

"Ma looked pale and thin like you do when she was pregnant with Chance. Does Jace know?"

She shook her head.

"Well, Ellie, you gotta tell him. This isn't something you can do on your own, even as tough as you are. Jace needs to know he's going to be a father."

"I know, I'm just so mad at him." She ran a hand along the back of her neck and turned away, "He told me it was my fault."

Everett tried not to laugh, "Well, Ellie, you certainly were pretty that night. Jace is a man. I'm not defending him in the least, but he cares about you and when you showed up with Kate looking like a proper lady, he had absolutely no defences."

"Really?" she spun to face him with a little hope in her tone.

"Yeah." He finished his smoke and flicked it over the rail, "You feeling better?"

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She smiled, "A little." Although she really wished he would elaborate but she knew that if he wanted to, he would have.

Inclining his head toward the door, he said, "Come on then. They're going to start wondering where we've been." He held out his hand.

Looking at his outstretched hand, Ellie realized that Kate had done wonders on this man. Never had he been so talkative or openly concerned for her well being and now he was offering her his hand. She reached out and clasped it as he pulled her gently back into the house. For the first time since she discovered that she was pregnant, the fear and loneliness left her.

Unfortunately Jace made sure he sat beside her while Kate played. She did her best to ignore him, but he put his arm across the back of her chair, leaned down, to whisper in her ear.

"Ellie, honey, did you mention our night to Kate?" The astonished look she gave him just told him no.

"If we weren't in here, in front of your family, I'd hit you." She whispered harshly.

He grinned, "Foreplay."

"Oh God, you are intolerable." Her eyes searched the occupants of the room thankfully they were too engrossed in Kate's piano playing. Then she felt tugging of the hair at her nape as he teased it with his fingers, "Quit it." she shot a glare at him.

"You're beautiful." He said quietly so no one else could hear completely ignoring her request and fingering the sleeve of her blouse with his other hand. "I want you to wear more dresses." He knew he was being brave, but having her even in the same room was a temptation he couldn't resist.

She flushed and after another glance around the room before she elbowed him hard in the ribs causing him to cough to cover the groan and remove his arm. Then she clasped her hands on her lap and smiled at him innocently. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Ed catch Jace's gaze and gave him a dark look for distracting from Kate's

playing.

Jace nodded giving his father an apologetic look. In his defence, he just couldn't help himself. Whenever she was around he couldn't help but take every opportunity to put his hands on her. Not only that, her defensiveness coupled with a look from her angry deep sea green eyes was completely irresistible. Why didn't he notice all of this with her before? There wasn't one thing about Ellie that annoyed him.

When Kate finished playing Everett took her hand to guide up off the bench, "I want a few minutes with you before you leave." He looked over at Tyler and grinned, "In the back on the lit terrace." He reassured. However, no one knew what they were doing when they met each day and he sure as hell wasn't going to tell anyone. Tyler would most certainly shoot him regardless of him marrying her or not.

Tyler nodded his approval and watched Everett lead Kate out the door while focusing on her and only her. *The man had it bad*, he thought with an internal smile. It was good for both of them.

"Tyler, you need to see that new stallion we brought in from the range while you got some time." Said Ed, "Chance will show you to him." He stood and nodded to his youngest boy who quickly stood to do his father's bidding.

"Yeah Tyler, Pa says that he'll bring a healthy crop of foals come the spring." He put his hand on Tyler's shoulder, "Come, I'll show you what we're talking about."

Then much to Ellie's surprise Ed excused himself suddenly remembering something he forgot to talk to Tyler about leaving her with Jace.

"Thank God." He groaned grabbing her about the waist when his father left.

"Jace!" she pushed against his chest.

"Ellie, I've missed you." He confessed huskily.

"Let me go."

"Not on your life." He lowered his head to trace his mouth

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along the curve of her neck.

"We can't." she said breathlessly, feeling her resistance crumble.

"No, maybe not," he murmured against her skin, "But let me touch you, I'm dying inside."

Suddenly she came to her senses and shoved herself away from him, "No, this isn't happening." She shook her head and took a step back. "This is completely unfair and you know it."

"Ellie—" he took a step toward her and she held up her hand to stop him.

"I'm not falling for this again. I have enough to worry about."

He raised his brows, "Worry?"

"Never mind." She cut in quickly. Only her quick response made his features darken as he completely misunderstood her reaction. She'd known Jace practically her whole life and not once had she seen him angry.

"Is there someone else? I'll kill him Ellie!" He towered over her clenching his fists at his sides.

Her face fell, "What—are you insane!"

"I mean it! I'll so much as kill a man who even looks at you."

"Oooh—I could just scream." She glared at him

"You are mine, do you understand?" He took a possessive step toward her.

"What!" her mouth fell open. Then she slapped him, square on the cheek, "You arrogant—self conceited—" her words were cut off because he'd grabbed her and covered her mouth with his. Then she completely forgot what she was going to say. But she did hear him whisper the word 'mine' against her lips. Soon after she wouldn't have even remembered wrapping her arms around his neck.

Unknown to both of them, Big Ed was standing outside the doors. He smiled to himself and walked off giving them privacy.

Everett had Kate's hands in his and he lifted to them to his

mouth to kiss them both while staring down at her. “Waiting to marry you is killing me.” She beamed up at him.

“Don’t start this now. I’m going just as crazy as you are.” She said sincerely.

“I want to move the wedding up.”

“Everett, it’s only a month away.” She said widening her eyes in surprise.

“Not close enough.” He leaned down and kissed her. when he finally lifted his head she was smiling.

“You always know how to make a girl feel important.”

“When you smile like that, I feel damn lucky to have gotten you first.” He reached up and caressed her jaw with the back of his hand.

Laying her head against his chest she sighed, “There wasn’t anyone else.”

Everett didn’t know what he did to deserve her, but he certainly wasn’t going to question it.

Everett may have felt on top of the world that night when he bade his fiancé goodnight before he helped her into Tyler’s buckboard, but the next day his world fell apart.

Chapter

“I want to come to!” Chance shouted as Jace and Everett were loading their horses. Everett slid his rifle into the leather sheath beside his saddle in an action that expressed his anger before he turned to his brother.

“I’m taking five of the boys with us. I don’t have time to worry about you too.” Everett gritted without turning around.

“Jesus Everett I’m not a kid!” Chance protested.

“Someone needs to stay and help with the ranch. I’m going because she’s my girl. Jace is coming because he’s fucking good with a rifle and Tyler’s coming because Kate’s his ward and he’s equally good with a gun and he can track as good as an Indian. I need you here!” He

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turned and started loading more gear into his saddlebags.

"I'm good with a gun." He protested to Everett's back. He knew that look and he knew that stance. There would be no argument. From his silence, Everett wasn't going to budge. Jace came around his horse then and placed his hand on his brother's shoulder and led him some distance away.

"There's no doubt Chance how good you are with a gun. What Everett won't tell you is that one or more of us may die and he can't have you on his conscience. You've been in a few fistfights, but you've never been in a gunfight. Our mother would roll in her grave if we took you. Stay and mind the Ranch. There's plenty to be done. Let Everett know that you can run it properly without him. The man can barely think straight right now. He's hell bent on murder. Just do as he says. We'll get her back."

To an outsider Everett could've split a solid oak in half with the look of rage and revenge on his face as they rode away from Red Oaks. They took his girl. Possibly the only girl he would ever love in his whole damn life. She accepted him without demand or the simple insecurities other women had. She understood him and he'd never had that before. Already his mind was calculating on how to kill them all. He had an idea where she was abducted. It was the same spot along the river that they had shared themselves with one another. She had gone back there by herself. Although he'd only known her a short time, for some reason he knew she'd do that. Those precious moments together had meant as much to her as him. If it hadn't been for her little mare returning back to its birthplace with a bullet hole in its flank, no one would have known for days that his girl was missing. Then she'd been long gone. He was raging that they dared touch her for he knew they would. It mixed with the sickening anguish he was feeling over her fate and made for a great soup of revenge and murder.

Jace watched Everett carefully not able to imagine what the man was going through. He loved Kate, he was sure of it and someone had the stupidity to take her from him.

Jace never said a word when he saw the mare limp into the open corral. He didn't need to. Shouts of the men brought Everett to the horse in an instant where they all clearly saw the blood soaked coat and bullet wound in its hide. He saw his brother's expression go through a series of emotions, like grief, torture, rage and then solidify into the deadly one he wore now. His eyes could burn holes through iron with that look and he was thankful he wasn't on the receiving end. Jace immediately sprang into action on his brother's behalf and started organizing the men. The first time he spoke since they were set to leave was to talk to Chance. At least Everett wasn't too far gone to try and explain his reasoning to their younger brother.

"I'll get the men." Jace said, "We'll leave as soon as possible." Everett just nodded, but the look remained. He'd instantly sent a couple of men to Tyler's place, he'd want to come and he needed relief to work his ranch while he was gone. They needed him anyway. Not only was he Kate's ward, he was a good tracker. That was because he'd lived with the Comanche for several years in his youth so tracking would be as easy as breathing for him. Then he chose five of the best that the ranch could spare. Chance wouldn't have it easy when they were gone. Then, to his surprise, his father was having his horse saddled to.

"I'm not too fucking old Jace. So shut the hell up." He said when Jace shot him an odd look. "Everett's gonna need all the help he can get and as far as I'm concerned, I'm the toughest son of a bitch here! And if you think I'm going to stand by while some bastard takes my chance at having grandchildren, you're out of your mind." Jace held up his hands in surrender. His father had a point.

By noon they were ready. Tyler had to change horses because he'd worn his out to Red Oaks. That happens when you race an animal for such a distance. He didn't have time to feel guilty at the frothing creature, because he was too occupied with thoughts of Kate. However, he knew it would be fine with a day's rest. At least it was easy to replace.

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One thing the King's ranch wasn't short of was horses. When they mounted up Everett finally noticed his father and flicked a glance to Jace who just shrugged. Everett nodded and spurred his mustang into an instant gallop. The rest followed suit. If Big Ed was bent on coming there was no one that could convince the man otherwise.

Jace looked at Tyler sharing a worried glance over Kate. He found himself thinking about Ellie. If something happened to Tyler, she'd be all alone. Not that Tyler couldn't look after himself, he was more than capable, but just the same. He made a silent oath to watch him.

In an hour Everett led them to the spot he thought she was abducted. He felt some relief to find her bonnet and a piece of silk ribbon to confirm his theory. Tyler dismounted and walked along the bank of the river.

They got at least half a day on us, thought Everett. Hold on Kate baby. I'm coming and there's gonna be hell to pay.

Tyler counted the number of horses and estimated that there were at least three men that took Kate. He followed the tracks for some distance leaving his horse back with the men. They were headed south... and they were moving fast like the devil was on their heels. Tyler glanced over his shoulder along the bank easily picking out Everett in the group, straight and alert staring back at him with a menacing expression. *That wasn't to far off.* The way Everett looked, some would prefer the devil instead. Something white caught his eye. He picked it up and knew immediately it was part of a petticoat.

Everett waited patiently for Tyler to return. He handed him the petticoat. Everett looked at it and stuffed it in his vest pocket, keeping his expression void of the torment that he was dealing with on the inside. He shifted his eyes to the river while Tyler talked.

"They got maybe six...eight hours on us Everett. There's about three of them. One horse is carrying extra weight."

Kate.

"It looks like they're heading South." He paused, waiting for

that to sink in. “Everett?”

He guided his eyes to Tyler, “I did hear you.”

“Yeah, I know you did.” He actually did. He’d known Everett for more than ten years. The man never seemed to be bothered by anything, but from the first moment he saw him with Kate, he knew different. The calmness that he was displaying now was the only way the man could remain in control. “I just wanted you to know, they’re movin’ fast.”

“Then so will we.” They’ll make the ferry in a few hours if they hurry. Then they’ll ride full out until they kill their horses or themselves, but they will find her. Soon after Tyler mounted, they were on their way in a full out race to the ferry.

Everett wasn’t lying about their pace when they reached the ferry dock in record time, only there was no ferry. Someone had cut the rope that connected it to both banks.

Everett shut his eyes tightly, “Fuck!” he bellowed, seeing the wooden float across the river tangled in some fallen trees. “We get wet then. We can’t lose any more time and ride ten miles north to catch the other crossing. It’ll set us back a whole day.” He said to Jace who had come up beside him.

“Then we get wet, “ said Jace without hesitation. He turned and told the others.

It was a scorching day, so if anything the swim was refreshing besides tiring. They reached the other side way down the river in about three times the rate the ferry would take. They left the water at a gallop just to backtrack up river and pick up the tracks. That was another couple of hours lost.

Everett set his jaw like it was granite, “They have a full day on us now. We ride through the night.” No one complained. No one was dumb enough to.

Tyler never had to track by the light of the moon before, and he was thankful that God felt them worthy enough to give them a full one that night. Several times he lost the tracks but was able to backtrack

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and pick them up again.

Everett knew Tyler was just as determined as he was, but it was agonizing waiting while he regained the trail. Tyler was capable of tracking, more than any Indian he knew, but that knowledge did not ease his concern of what they were doing to Kate. All sorts of images flooded into his head and he fought to stay focused. You'd have to be blind, dumb, or dead, and not want to touch her, and from the looks back at their spot by the river, someone did touch her. A shard of rage went through him every time he thought that. There was a struggle and he hoped to God that Kate got in some good scratches. That way he knew who to shoot first.

It had taken them two days to catch up to Kate's captors. For Everett and the rest, it was agonizing. Most of all Everett.

Tyler had followed the trail let to a gully with an encampment when Everett reluctantly let them stop and rest on the second day. They couldn't risk burning out their horses when there wasn't any way to replace them. It was a decision Everett didn't take lightly, but he had to be logical. Shortly after Tyler returned with the news and Everett took Jace and Red, one of his ranch hands to scope out the place, leaving the rest about a quarter mile back, so not to alert any of the men from the camp who were on watch. They successfully managed to approach the place undetected. The three of them crept along their bellies for the last thirty yards. Jace yanked out a pair of binoculars and looked down into the dark encampment.

"Jesus Everett there's about forty of them."

He took the binoculars from Jace, "Ah hell." He rolled onto his back and looked at Red, "You got any surprises for us?"

"About twenty sticks of dynamite in my pack."

"You hauled that through this heat? Are you fucking crazy." Whispered Jace.

"Yes." Answered red without hesitation like it was no surprise and showing him a toothless grin to prove his point.

"Red I knew you were crazy." He said completely awestruck

and looked at his brother who finally managed his own grin, “You’re both crazy. You could’ve blown every single one of us to bits.”

“But I didn’t.” he kept grinning. “I know my girls and they love me.”

Red’s girls were the dynamite. He worked for the railroad as a blaster when it was built in ’72 through cottonwood, but decided that he wanted to stay in the pretty town and took up a job as a ranch hand. He was the one Everett sent out to blast out irrigation ditches for the cattle.

“What are we going to do Everett?” Said Jace.

“We’re going to get Kate back.” He tossed a look over his shoulder at the encampment in the gully and did another quick inventory. “First we have to pull back. It’ll be daylight soon and we may be spotted. I may have an idea.” He turned his attention to the men, “How far back do you think that town was?”

“About twenty miles I guess.” Said Tyler. “Give or take.”

Everett nodded, and began to relay his plan.

Kate was shoved unceremoniously into a makeshift cell chiselled out of the rock. There were two other female occupants in the cell. Their condition was absolutely appalling. Both of their dresses were filthy and their appearance was dishevelled. One of the women about Kate’s age must’ve noticed her expression and tried to fix her hair.

“My name’s Emma,” said one, “and this is Mary.” She indicated to the young girl fixing her hair.

“I’m Kate. What are they doing with us?” The two women exchanged a look before Emma answered her.

“they use us for their...pleasure.”

Her mouth hung open in shock and then without a further word she abruptly turned to grab the bars shaking them individually to see if any of them were loose. “I’ve got to get out of here!”

“We’ve already done that Kate. It’ll do you good to please them,” said Mary, “Because if you don’t they find satisfaction if you

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fight them.” Then she cocked her head in question, “Didn’t they already—“

“—No!” Kate blurted, “No one touched me.”

“that doesn’t make sense.” Said Mary, “Look at you. How could they not?”

Kate wasn’t going to question it. The trip to this place was horrid enough. The men continuously made lewd comments, but not one of the three that captured her, touched her. She was waiting for Everett at their spot when she heard male voices. Before she knew it they burst through the trees on horses and stopped when they saw her. After seeing the dark look in their eyes, she quickly mounted her horse, but one of them shot her mare who reared up, and she fell off. She tried to run, but they caught her, tied her up and threw her on one of their horses. In the past few days she kept expecting them to do horrible things to her, but none of them did beyond the lewd comments. “I don’t know.” She said, “maybe they are waiting—“ she couldn’t finish. She was thinking they were waiting until they got here, to their lair.

“No, that can’t be,” said Emma, “They—they took me—“ she stopped, “I don’t understand.”

At that moment she couldn’t bear thinking about it anymore. Kate tried her best to shove the images out of her mind that the women must’ve gone through, “How long have you been here?” she said turning back to them. She was terrified of her fate and just looking at the condition of the other two women didn’t do her any good.

“About two months.” Emma answered, “I was working in my garden when a group of men took me.” She involuntarily shuddered. “It was horrible Kate.” She turned her face away not able to stop the tears.

Kate brought hand to her mouth and gasped. “Two *months*?”

“It’ll do you good to pick a favourite and make a play for him.” Said Mary.

“Be quiet Mary, she’s already frightened half to death.” Said Emma.

“That won’t help her.” Said the other woman, “You need to Kate. Find someone big, he’ll make sure no one else touches you. Like Bull. He’s big and you’re pretty enough to capture his attention.”

Kate shook her head, “I’m engaged....and...”

“That don’t matter here. These men don’t care if you’re married. I am...was. They killed my husband.” Mary released a sob.

No way would this happen to her. She looked back and forth at both of the women and lifted her chin trying to feign bravery that she didn’t feel, “Everett will come.” She took each one of their hands in hers, “And when he does. We’ll get out of here.”

“I used to think like that too,” said Emma, then she released a sigh looking at Kate’s hopeful expression, “I hope your right. I pray to God you are.”

Nightfall came too soon and it wasn’t too long after that she heard the metallic rattle of a key in the lock. Kate leapt up and tried to keep farthest away from the door, but five men poured in and Emma was hauled out first, then Mary. Kate screamed as rough hands clamped over her arms.

“Not that one. She’s for the boss. That’s why we didn’t touch her when we found her.”

“Aw hell, Emmitt! Look at her!”

“That’s why she’s for the boss.”

“Then I just want a kiss.”

Kate couldn’t bring herself to look at any of them, for the filthy smell that emanated off them was repulsive enough. When cruel fingers wrapped around her jaw and forced her face towards him she had no choice. He was filthy with greasy hair a fat ruddy face under unshaven whiskers and his breath actually smelled like manure.

“Don’t!” she screeched raking her nails down his face.

That’s when he hit her. So hard it knocked her against the stone wall and she lost consciousness. “You bitch!”

“Stupid bastard!” Emmitt drew his gun and shot the man in the leg who fell screaming to the cave floor. “Serves you right if you

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bled to death Tracy. I told you she's for the Colonel."

Bull bent down and rolled Kate over. Her nose was bleeding and it was obvious that she was going to have one hell of a bruise. Picking her up he ignored the screams of his companion and carried her out of the cell. "Lock him in and let him think about his actions." He said to Emmitt. "the colonel isn't going to be too happy that his knew prize is damaged. If he lives through the night he'll be dead tomorrow."

"I warned him." Said Emmitt.

Bull carried Kate into the house at the far end of the gully laying her down in an upstairs bedroom. Producing a bunch of rope he tied her hands to the headboard. All the while he stared at her. She was more than pretty. She was probably the prettiest thing he'd ever seen. Looking over his shoulder he realized he'd left the door open and got up to close it. Then he sat down beside her unconscious form and began to undo the buttons of her blouse. Because he was so trustworthy, his boss would allow him to undress the women they brought home for him. From the looks of the parts of this woman that weren't clothed, he couldn't wait to see the rest of her.

Everything about this lady screamed sophistication and he wanted to see if it made a difference than what he was used to. Cursing over the fact that she'd worn a corset, he had to roll her slightly to get the laces undone. Tracy must've hit her hard because she didn't even stir. He eased her chemise off her shoulders and stared wondrously at her full breasts. Certainly he hadn't seen anything so perfect. His eyes darted to her face to see if she'd wake up as his rough hand covered one of them and he moaned. Soft as a newborn kitten. Instantly he could feel himself harden. Quickly he undid the belt and zipper of his pants gripping his erection with the other hand. He knew he shouldn't play with her because if the boss ever found out, he'd kill him, but she was unconscious, so there was no one to say anything. Not only that, who could resist such a prize?

Kate wanted to cry. She could feel and hear the grunts of the man as he pleased himself at her expense. The bed moved with every

jerking action he made and she wanted to bite her lip from screaming when his rough hands massaged her breasts. However, she remembered Mary's words, not to fight them, so she feigned unconsciousness. He stopped for a moment and she wondered if he was finished but then she felt both of his hands on her, massaging her like dough. More rough tugging pulled her chemise to her waist then the groaning began again along with the shaking of the bed. She wasn't sure how much longer she could stand this without losing her breakfast.

A knock on the door stopped him cold.

"Bull whatever you're doing with her in there, you'd better stop. The colonel is on his way in."

"Two more minutes." Bull said.

Kate could feel the jerking motion increase as did the kneading of her breasts. Then he groaned and groaned while squeezing her painfully. A moment after he removed his hand and it sounded like he was doing his pants up. Then he roughly removed the rest of her clothing and covered her up before leaving. Only then did she let the tears fall.

She wasn't sure how long it was after that assault that she heard the door open again. This time she turned her face towards it. A man in about his mid forties stood there with an old blue navy coat leaning on a cane. His other hand was held close to his side, and she could see that it was mangled somewhat. He was tall, but not as tall as Everett and from the look of his sharp blue eyes, there was some intelligence there.

"What is your name?"

Everything about this man screamed a warning. He may look helpless, but from the tone in his voice and the icy look in his eyes she knew he was not to be disobeyed. In her most calmest voice she could muster she answered him, "Kate Purnell." For some reason she knew that if she showed fear, he would be displeased.

He nodded, "My men seem to think you would please me. I think they are right." He limped up to the bed and pulled back the

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covers to look down the length of her nude body. A cynical smile appeared on his face. "You are beautiful Kate." His eyes went to hers. "Very beautiful. I think I will be pleased with you."

"I'm cold." She managed while blushing profusely.

He nodded again and flipped the covers back over her. "Did any of them touch you?"

"Who?"

"My men. I don't like used goods." He explained.

"No they didn't not that way." She answered.

"In what way did they touch you?" He said not missing the way she phrased it.

She took a deep breath, "Almost everything but that way." She offered releasing a shudder.

"I see." He sat down on the bed beside her and began to remove his boots, "Are you a virgin?" He asked without looking at her. When she didn't answer he did look at her and a slow smile spread across his face at her expression, "Good." He set aside his cane started to undo his shirt with his good hand, "Now, I want you to give me the names of the men who touched you."

"I don't remember." Her eyes went to his fingers as they undid the buttons so he wouldn't detect the lie she held there.

He peeled off his shirt and she was surprised to see the enormous scarring he had over his chest and down his abdomen. "It won't do any good to lie to me Kate. I will find out from you. I have my ways. First we'll start with who bloodied your lovely nose." His hands went to his pants and she turned away telling him she didn't know the name of the man but she went on to describe him.

She heard the rustle of material as he shed his pants and then the bed shifted with his weight as he pulled back the covers and got in.

"And the bruising on your breasts in the distinct form of a hand print?" he continued.

"I don't know." She lied, "I woke up with it."

"That narrows it down." He slid in next to her.

“Please...” she choked out struggling against her bonds.

“Shhh little treasure. Don’t panic. There’s not much I can do to you, but hold you. I was damaged in the war. I haven’t had a woman since then, but when something like you comes along, I just need to feel beauty next to my skin every now and then.” His hands slid over her breasts then to her flat stomach and stayed there. Soon after he was asleep and because of her exhaustion so was she. When she awoke the next morning, he was gone. Her wrists ached from the ropes and she began to struggle against them. They were tight but not tight enough to pinch off the circulation to her fingers. Then the door suddenly opened and the man named Bull stepped in and closed it behind him. She didn’t miss the knowing glint in his dark eyes.

“I’m Bull.”

She turned her face away with the fresh memories of his assault still clear in her mind.

He bent over her and reached over to bring her face back to his, “Don’t ignore me. When the boss is done with you, I’m staking my claim.” To get his point across he reached over and untied one of her hands and placed it on his blunt arousal. Her eyes flew wide and she struggled to get her hand away, but he was too strong and began to rub it up and down the crotch of his pants. “Now you know why they call me Bull.”

“Maybe it was in reference to your intelligence.” She didn’t know where the courage came from but she regretted it as soon as she said it. For he whipped back the covers and guided his lustful gaze over her, “Push me darlin’, just keep pushin’.” Then his hand covered one of her breasts. “I’ve dreamt about these last night. I’ve dreamt about rubbing my face between them...” and he carried on telling her crude things he was going to do to her all the while forcing her hand over him. She threatened to scream and he told her to go ahead because the colonel was outside and wouldn’t hear her. Then he swore and released her, “This isn’t doing any good.” He began to undo his pants and she began to try and untie the knot on her other wrist to get away from him,

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but within seconds he had released himself and grasped her hand again shoving it against him.

“Stop!” she tried pulling away but he was making odd faces and ignoring her. He leaned over her and braced his hand on the other side of her as he quickened his movements. Kate closed her eyes and wished for it to just end. Then he released a satisfied groan and dropped her hand.

Moments later his eyes opened and went to her, “You have to be the sweetest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“just get out.” She said in a sob.

“No. You need to get dressed. The boss sent me to make sure. Then again,” he eyed her up, “He doesn’t know I’ve been playing with you. If you tell him, you won’t live to see the light of day...you got that?” When she slowly nodded with her eyes wide with fear, he reached over and untied her other hand neglecting to do up his pants. She sat up while pulling the blankets up to cover her nude body and turned her head away. Soon she heard the rattle of his gun belt as he did up his trousers, “No need to act so high and mighty, I’ll have you for my own some day. Then I’ll show you how high and mighty you’re not.”

Kate never said anything. She was afraid that if she did, he would get angry and take it further than he already had.

With that Bull left the room but returned a few minutes later with one of the most beautiful pale blue gowns she’d ever seen. “Wear this. The Colonel will be back in a few minutes and he wants you with him at breakfast.” He said tossing it on the bed and shutting the door behind him.

Kate wasn’t allowed out of the house at all that day and there were at least five men that were specifically set aside to keep an eye on her. It was then she realized that the Colonel was possessive of his women because she doubted she could get away from one man, let alone five. She would have liked to have seen how the other women were doing and couldn’t help feeling guilty that they were being abused and she was sitting in a house with rich furnishings, wearing expensive

gowns, and being fed decent meals. There wasn't another female in the house, even the cook was a man.

Finally she settled herself on a window seat in a sitting room and watched the activity outside. Like every other room in the house, this was adorned with very expensive and fashionable furniture. It even had a piano that would make the Kings look like firewood. It looked as though it was covered in gold leaf and had intricate carvings on the legs. But she didn't feel like playing at all, so she just sat and stared out the window. Once the men decided she couldn't go anywhere, they left her be.

At breakfast earlier, she hardly ate any of her meal while the Colonel probed her intellect for some sort of conversation, but she refused not meeting his eyes. Finally he stood, tossed his napkin on his plate and told her she'd better reconsider her position and that he'd be back later to see if she'd come to her senses. It was said gently but she heard the warning in his tone. Now, she realized after looking around the house, that the Colonel liked nice things, and she was considered another nice thing that he owned. He was a smart man and wanted decent company because it was obvious from the men of his that she'd met, that he wasn't going to get anything out of them. As for reconsidering her position, she had. She needed to survive until Everett came for her. She certainly didn't want to end up like Mary and Emma which made her mind guide back to them. She couldn't help but worry how they were being treated. It didn't seem fair that she was spared, but she still had to endure this man, the Colonel and him touching her. She shivered at the memory.

Then almost as if thinking about him, he walked through the door but Kate chose to keep her sights set on the activity outside the window.

"It won't do you any good to ignore me Kate," he said casually as if he'd known her for years.

She turned her head to look at him.

"Wow, I almost forgot how beautiful you are." He smiled when

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she finally looked at him, although the humour never made his eyes.

She averted her gaze unable to hold his any longer.

"Tell me Kate, have you reconsidered your position like I asked?"

"I have." Was all she said.

"And—?"

"What is it you want from me?" she returned her eyes to his.

"Companionship." He walked over to a cabinet and opened it to remove a bottle of liquor, "Someone to share my bed with." He said without looking at her while concentrating on the task. He pulled out two glasses and poured a healthy helping of liquor in both of them. "And someone I can have an intellectual conversation with." He made a gesture with his hand holding both of the glasses toward the window she sat in front of, "As you can see, I don't have much of a selection." He limped toward her, "Here."

"I—I don't drink."

"You do now."

She stared at him a moment, and saw the determined look in his eyes. It wasn't a request. Reluctantly she took the glass. He seemed pleased and took a drink from own.

"Why are you doing this?"

He took another drink while watching her over the glass. "Why? Because this country owes me." He turned and looked out the window. "I was damaged Kate. I can't have women, I'm scarred from an explosion during the war, and I take back what I think I deserve because the government gave me nothing for my pain. So my men and I steal." He spared her a glance, "And I'm quite wealthy because of it. Just so you know, I can provide for you, if you behave yourself."

"But those women," she stood and nodded to the view outside the window, "What about them. You're hurting innocent people."

"I need to keep my men satisfied. It's a small price to pay. Just be thankful that my men knew you suited my tastes."

Kate couldn't suppress the shudder that washed through her

thinking about what Emma and Mary had been through and what she avoided. “Can’t you let them go?”

He chuckled in a way that made it sound like she asked a ridiculous question, “No.”

“Have you no decency?” she turned her head to meet his gaze.

His expression grew fierce, “Decency has nothing to do with this! I can’t have a beautiful woman like you because I fought a war for my country! If I was any less decent I would give you to my men and watch!” she gasped and he continued, “But I’m possessive, and no one is to touch you but me.” He said bringing his injured hand to her cheek while looking at her in obvious admiration, “Be thankful that you appeal to me Kate.” He added in a softer tone.

“What are you going to do with me?”

His eyes guided over her, “I’m going to keep you Kate.”

“I have a fiancé.” she said.

“Not anymore.” His eyes focused on hers, “Forget him. You belong to me.” He said as if it was an easy thing to do.

Kate turned her head away so he couldn’t see the tears building up. The words were said so coolly that it actually frightened her. Now she knew, he wasn’t a man to cross. “I’ll never love you.”

“Frankly, that doesn’t bother me Kate. I don’t expect a woman like you to love me.” He paused, “Look at me.”

Slowly she did.

“You will understand my rules, for I will only say them once. There will be no other man for you, only me. Don’t make me angry, and don’t try and leave me because I will find you.” He added when he saw her mouth open in a gasp, “I’m sure you realize by now that I’m not stupid, nor do I easily forgive.” He leaned toward her causing her to back up a step, “Just so you know, the man that touched you—I found him still alive in the cell where we keep the woman and strangled him with my bare hands.” He saw her bottom lip quiver, and he lifted his damaged hand. “It may not look like much but it’s still useful. So understand that I’m not a man you want to make angry.”

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"You can't possibly do this." She said.

"I can do whatever the hell I please!" he burst causing her to flinch. His good hand came up and circled around her waist as he softened his voice again, "Kate, don't make me angry or I won't be responsible for hurting you."

She nodded with her eyes wide with fear and although she wanted to back away from him, she knew it would be a stupid move.

"It's good to see that you understand." He straightened and stared down at her, "It's a shame I have to leave tonight, but I'll be back in a few days and we'll get to know each other a little better."

Despite how frightened of him she was, she was more scared of bull, "Do you need to?"

His brows shot up, "Now that is possibly the nicest thing I heard in a long time, its just too bad that I know it's not because you suddenly love me. So what's going on?"

She tried her best to hide her lie, and tilted her face up to his, "I just don't know anyone here, and your men scare me." She said reaching up and fingering the lapels of his suit jacket with feigned affection. Bull said he would kill her if she told the Colonel what he'd been doing and if she was left alone with the man, she feared he would finally act on his lust. She near cowered under his intense stare but kept her expression as honest as she could. Finally he nodded as if he believed her.

"It's only until tomorrow. Then we'll take some time to get to know one another." He said giving her a pleased look.

Kate had never flirted with a man before in her life, but she sure as hell would learn. She could feel the Colonel's arm tighten around her waist when she did that small gesture. It couldn't possibly be as easy as that to win the cold hearted man's affection, could it? Regardless, she would do it until Everett came for her.

Just then the door opened, "Boss we're ready."

The Colonel turned his head and nodded.

Kate recognized the man as Emmitt who shot the man in the

cell they were kept in. He looked at her and grinned at the two of them as the Colonel still had his arm around her and she was pulled tight to his chest. Then he shut the door leaving them alone again.

“I’ll see you tomorrow Kate dear. Bull will take good care of you.” The Colonel broke into her thoughts with that chilling statement as he reluctantly released her.

“Don’t be long.” She said meaning every word. This caused him to pause and turned back to her.

“Don’t worry little dove, I won’t.” then he bent down and brushed his mouth across her cheek, “Don’t forget what we talked about.”

“I won’t.” she said softly.

He smiled at her before he turned and limped out of the room.

Kate shuddered after he left. She certainly didn’t like him touching her and didn’t think she could endure it much longer. *Oh Everett, where are you?*

That night Bull came to get her undressed and she finally fought him. Knowing that he would try and play with her again she hid behind the door and when he entered, she grabbed one of the colonel’s canes and cracked it over his head. She turned white with fear as the big man didn’t even flinch. In fact he turned toward her with a grin on his face.

“Now, I’m turned on.” He said grabbing her and ripping her dress off. Then stuffing a piece of cloth in her mouth he tossed her on the bed and threw his large form on her knocking the wind out of her. “I’m taking you for myself. It’s a waste giving you to that man who can’t even get in you.” He started fumbling with his pants and she screamed against the cloth as his erection pressed against her. She fought blindly, swinging her fists and doing her best to get her legs closed then suddenly he went still. She opened her eyes and saw Everett standing over her with a look of pure rage.

Everett slipped the knife between the bastard’s shoulder blades

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as he was attempting to rape Kate. He shoved him off her unceremoniously and instantly gathered her in his arms while she sobbed wretchedly. "I'm sorry dove." He buried his face in her hair. "I should have been here sooner."

"You came." She kept saying over and over again.

"Do you have any clothes?"

She shook her head. "He won't leave me any. I think it's because I might escape."

"Here..." he released her to remove his duster and wrap it around her before picking her up and carrying her out of there.

He lifted her up onto his horse and mounted up behind her grabbing her close again. His expression was unreadable. There was more he wanted to do to that man than just kill him. Kate clung to him and he couldn't imagine what his girl had gone through in those few days. He fought his rage trying not to think about what she had to endure after finding her in that way. They touched her and God knows what else.

His plan had worked. He'd parked a wagon full of several kegs of whiskey not too far from the gully and the men had found it. After a large group left on horseback, they got into the whiskey. It was obvious that whoever led this gang went with the group that rode out several hours ago because he doubted very much he would let the guards surrounding the gully relieve themselves to drink. Those that weren't passed out drunk were killed. It was easy for Tyler to creep through the drunken men and make sure no one stirred. He was the best qualified to enter unseen and unheard. Also, if one of them stirred, he would take care of them. Everett and the others preferred a gun, not a knife, but they weren't raised by Indians either.

After Tyler did his part, then the rest of them came into the gully and as Red started setting the dynamite Everett, Jace, Tyler and Ed searched the makeshift shacks and tents for Kate. Two more women were located and they told him where Kate was. He found her with some big man trying to force himself on her. Everett could barely think

through the haze of fury, but he thought enough to reach for his knife. Within an hour they were all on the rode to home, but not before Red blew the place to kingdom come with his dynamite.

Everett didn't release his tight hold on Kate until they stopped four hours later. Then he asked the other two women if they wanted a bath. There was a creek not too far from where they stopped and he could place men around the perimeter so they weren't bothered. Emma and Mary were eager at the opportunity. He didn't blame them, they looked as if they hadn't had a bath in a month. Then he turned his attention to Kate, "You too honey."

"I don't want to let you go." She said burying her face in his chest.

"I don't want to let you go either, but I want his filth off of you." He said with menace.

She looked up at him then, "He didn't...I mean...he touched me Everett, but he didn't...I mean I'm still..." she started to sob and Everett's face darkened.

Anyone touching her angered him, but it wasn't her fault and he didn't blame her. "I would still want you Kate. Don't think different." He said softly while placing a tender kiss on her brow, "It's not you I'm angry at. I just don't want you damaged. Whatever emotional scars you may have from this will take some time to get over. It angers me that they took something so precious and tried to destroy it. Tyler will show you where to go. I need to speak to Pa and Jace."

She held him tightly

"Kate." Said Tyler.

She shook her head still clinging to him.

He pulled her back from him giving her a slight smile, "Go with the other women—with Tyler. Don't think that he can't protect you as well as I can. There's no way anyone will get near you now." He turned and removed a shirt from his saddle bag. "It's all I got with me, but it's mine. Put it on under the duster." He watched her take the garment and smell it causing him to smile.

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“Okay, Everett.” Just then Emma took her hand to urge her along and they followed Tyler.

“You alright Everett.” Said Jace with unmistakable concern. He and their father waited until the women left before they went to Everett to see how Kate was.

Everett swore for a few minutes when the girls were out of range, “I should have killed them all.” He quickly rolled a smoke, stuck it between his lips and lit it. His hands shook with anger. Taking a long drag he told Jace and his father what he'd seen.

“God! Poor Kate.” Jace near choked out the words.

“Son of a bitch,” Said Ed.

“She said he didn't...” Everett began to shake with anger and was unable to complete what he was going to say, “But he still touched her. Touched my Kate.” He reached up and ran a hand through his hair.

“She was lucky Everett. Remember that. It sounds like you saved her just in time. If you listen to what those other women say, it's horrible. Kate could have been just like them in a few days.” Everett nodded at his Jace's words.

Jace was right. Kate was lucky.

Mary cast Kate a sideways glance, “Is your man upset that you aren't a virgin anymore?”

They had shed their clothes and proceeded to wash themselves with the rough soap the men gave them.

Kate gave her a stunned look, “I am.”

“but how...”

She went on to explain what had happened in the house for the previous two days.

A moment of silence followed before Emma spoke first.

“Wow. You must have really impressed Bull, because he would never go against the colonel's orders.”

Kate shuddered not wanting to think about it.

“One thing is for sure Kate, your man did come for you like you said.”

For the first time in what seemed like ages she smiled, “he really did.” She soaped her hair and rinsed it before getting out and putting on Everett’s shirt. It was almost comical that it came to just above her knees. No doubt he was a big man. Giggles from the water brought her head up.

“Your still swimming.” Said Emma looking at her in the shirt.

Kate managed a small laugh before she pulled on his duster that almost covered her toes.

Everett was waiting impatiently for them to return. He immediately drew Kate to his side when they did. “Do you feel better?”

“I do.”

He kissed the top of her wet head, then turned his head slightly and inhaled the fresh scent of soap. “There’s a town not too far from here. They will probably have a dress shop. I’ll buy you and the other women new clothes and Kate...” he waited until she looked up at him, “There’s a church there too. I would like for us to be married.”

“But Ellie...”

“They’ll all understand. I want this memory to fade. I want to make you forget what you went through and I can’t possess you without that ring on your finger.” He cupped her face in his large hands, “We’ll have a big celebration when we get home. But I want you next to me from now on. It doesn’t seem decent to expect you to sleep next to me when we’re not married.”

“Everett,” she answer softly, “I’m not leaving your side tonight, or any other night. I don’t care what people think, especially after what I went through.”

“You’re sure.” He said searching her eyes.

“Very.”

“Still. The wedding tomorrow.” He added with a concrete tone.

“okay.” She knew that set look about him.

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Everett laid out her bedroll next to his and the other two women slept on Kate's other side. It didn't stop him from pulling her next to him and throwing his blanket over the both of them. She nestled her head in the crook of his shoulder and fell into a deep sleep. It had probably been days since she'd slept so well.

Jace laid out his bedroll next to his brother.

"Jace roll me a smoke." Everett whispered. Kate was laying on his other arm.

Jace chuckled and did as he asked, lighting it before handing it to him. Then he rolled himself one.

"She seems better now."

"Yeah, the bath did her a world of good."

"You sure about this wedding?" he cast him a sceptical look.

"More than ever." Everett shot him a look of reproach.

"Just checking." Jace grinned, "Women like those big fancy things you know."

"Do it with Ellie then." Everett countered with a bemused smirk.

"Nice try..." he took a drag off his smoke, "Although, she did look mighty pretty the other night. Mighty pretty." He cast him a sideways glance to see if Everett would give anything away in his expression, but he didn't. Maybe he was wrong about what he saw at dinner the other night. Maybe he didn't know anything.

Unknown to both men Kate smiled.

"You be careful Jace. She'll get tired of pining over you and start looking elsewhere."

"Naw, she's been in love with me for years..." he paused, "You think so?"

Everett hid his sly smile, "Could happen."

That didn't sit well with Jace at all. He thrived on Ellie's hooded looks of love. Not once did they ever bother him. Other women who chased him became annoying, but Ellie was different, and now that

he'd had her, it really didn't sit well with him to have another man touch her. "Quit talkin' like that. I'm too damn handsome to lose her affection."

Everett chuckled.

Sometime later Kate awoke. It was still dark out and the embers of the fire were down to an orange glow. She reached beside her, but Everett was gone. Alert she sat up as alarm went through her, then she heard her name.

Jace was still awake, he called her name and when she noticed him he nodded in the direction that Everett went in. She gave him a grateful smile and wrapped the blanket around herself before she got up and wandered in the same direction. She had shed the duster earlier because it was too rough to sleep in and was only wearing his shirt. It wasn't long before she found him. He was sitting on the edge of the creek chucking rocks across the bubbling water.

He turned his head when she approached, "You're supposed to be asleep." He said with unmistakable concern when he realized who it was.

"Hmm." She said, "So are you." She settled down beside him and wrapped her blanket over his shoulders.

Putting a hand behind her on her hip he pulled her closer.

She leaned against him, "I thought you weren't going to let me out of your sight."

"Jace was watching you." He answered with a shrug.

She smiled, "You kept him awake for me?"

"No, he's like me. He doesn't need much sleep." He explained.

"Oh." She eyed him thoughtfully, "Did you want to be alone." She noticed that his tone was slightly strained and had an idea why.

"I did." He tightened his grip, "However, I'd feel better if you stayed."

"I will then." She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into him as he put his arm around her waist. She knew what had

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happened to her bothered him and he was taking the blame for it. He shouldn't. If anything he should be relieved that he showed up at the right time. However, she knew that anything she said to him, wouldn't change how he felt. Everett could only relieve Everett's guilt and she knew that. For the next hour or so they just sat in a serene silence while he carelessly rubbed her hip and listened to the sounds of the night together.

It was him who moved first, "Come Kate, let's go back to bed." He stood and held out his hand to help her up. "You need your rest after what you've been through, and I'm feeling mighty tired myself."

This time they both slept when they settled back into their bedrolls. Jace was also asleep when they returned. Tyler was just being woken up by one of the other men to switch watch for the rest of the night. He nodded to the both of them before he went off into the dark while placing his hat on his head. Everett pulled Kate against his chest and wrapped his arms around tightly around her. She settled into him like she was made for him. He was relieved that she didn't withdraw after what she'd been through. For the rest of the night that's how they slept and not once did he loosen his hold on her.

In the town interestingly named, Serenity, the men deposited the women in the dress shop with two outside to keep watch. Everett plunked a roll of notes on the counter and told the seamstress to have them ready in less than two hours and the extra money was for confidence. His dark eyes lit on her pointedly.

She reached over and peeled off a several notes and handed the rest back to him, "I heard a rumour that someone hit the Raiders' camp in the gully. Not just hit them, blew the place to bits. Mister, no one had the braves to do such a thing. You can keep your money." She glanced over at the three women before continuing. "Those men killed my nephew last year over a horse. I can't imagine what you three have been through." She smiled genuinely, "I'll fix you up real nice."

"I appreciate that ma'am." He indicated to Kate who stepped

forward, “anything you can find in the way of a wedding dress?”

“I’m sure I can. Congratulations honey.” Kate nodded allowing a smile to cross her lips. Then the woman clapped her hands and several other women appeared. She issued instructions and dragged them through the curtain into the back rooms. The woman then turned her gaze on Everett again, “I wish my nephew had someone like you to look out for him. You went after your woman didn’t you.” The handsome man’s single nod was an affirmation. “Well,” she said straightening to her five foot height, “I hope you killed everyone of them then.”

“I hope so too.” He drawled. Then he told her he’d be back in several hours before he left. He walked down the street with his father and made arrangements at the church. Then he went shopping for a ring. His men were ordered to stay out of the saloon and keep an eye out for any of the men that happened to get out of the gully after Red had blown it to bits. His father and him split off while he went back to get the women. Ed went to purchase a buggy for them to travel easier in and told Everett he’d meet him at the church.

Kate actually felt like a lady again as she stared down at the cream colored lace gown that she was dressed in. When Everett entered the shop and took a long appreciative look at her, she felt even more like a lady. He didn’t say anything, but he didn’t have to. She knew exactly what that look meant. She approached him and he bent down and lightly brushed his lips across hers. Then he straightened and gazed down at her with a glint of pride in his eyes as he hooked her arm in his. Just then Emma and Mary came out of the back wearing expensive walking gowns.

“Even before I never had anything so lovely.” Said Mary looking down at the material. ‘I appreciate it Mr. King.’ Emma followed suit and flattered him with comments.

Kate looked up to see him nod slightly and a bit of color rising to his cheekbones. It was obvious that he wasn’t used to buying women things or receiving flattery for it.

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The wedding was short but it was nothing more than Kate wanted. She wanted to be Mrs. Everett King more than her craving of a big fancy wedding. Everett had changed his clothes and was wearing a black custom made suit and string tie with a white shirt and black hat. He looked undeniably handsome. Ed gave her away and Emma and Mary stood up for her as Tyler and Jace stood for Everett while the rest of the men were their guests. The only regret she had was Ellie not being with her.

“She’ll forgive us.” Everett said when she voiced her concern again.

Everett placed a simple wedding band on her finger and she thought it was the most stunning piece of jewellery she’d ever had. He mentioned after that he’d get her something more appropriate but she refused.

The group of them celebrated in the hotel dining room over dinner until the early hours of the morning then Everett took Kate’s hand and told her it was time for them to go to bed. Once inside their suite he turned to her, “Honey if I frighten you in the least, you’ll let me know right?”

“I’ll never be frightened of you Everett.” She said truthfully as she reached up and began to undo the buttons of her gown.

“Stop.” He said gently, “I’ve dreamed of doing this myself.” That got him the first ravishing smile since he’d rescued her. “You have got to be possibly the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

“Everett,” she said as her hands went to his gun belt buckle while tilting her face up to his, “Make me your wife now.”

“With pleasure.” He said and took her mouth under his. It didn’t take long for him to get their clothes off and he couldn’t deny the unbelievable relief he felt at her eager responses to him. She may not have been raped like the other two women were, but there was some damage. He was just relieved that it didn’t involve her responses to him. He scooped her up and placed her on the bed and covered her soft body with his.

When their naked bodies met she already moving passionately beneath him while their mouths met and fought like it would be the last time they would be together. It was desperate and full of naked desire. She cried out when he lifted her thighs high against his hips and entered her.

“It’s okay Katie baby,” he rasped against her mouth, “It’ll pass.”

Kate never felt such pain and a sob escaped her.

“Oh God Kate, don’t cry!” his mouth gave her tender kisses on her cheeks and her mouth. “I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

She took a deep breath and stared up at him, “It’s okay Everett.”

“Honey, I can’t stay still any longer, I’m dying.” He groaned as she shifted under him.

She could feel the muscles on his back tremble with restraint beneath her fingertips and she nodded. “Does it get better?”

“Oh yes.” He smiled and kissed her again. Slowly he began to bring her back to his level of desire using his knowledge of her body and passion. Soon she was moving under him and he began to move within her again.

“Oh!” she moaned as a new sensation replaced the pain.

“Better—much better.” He said against her mouth not breaking rhythm.

Then she began to moan almost to the point of shouting.

Everett could feel her thighs tighten against his hips and began to increase his pace. He was making enough noise himself. Never in his life did he expect her to feel so good and he’d had a lot of women. She was soft and felt like warm silk against his skin and now her moans of pleasure were breaking through his own spell of ecstasy raising him to an undiscovered height. She screamed his name arching under him while tossing back her beautiful golden head as he raised above her and freed his own shout of release.

They lay together in a tangle of sheets, sweat and limbs. Everett rolled off her but kept her tight to him. Neither one of them

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said a word for a long time. He actually thought she fell asleep until she started playing with the hairs on his chest causing him to adjust his head and look down at her.

“I’m okay Everett.” She said tilting her face up to his.

He smiled down at her. She always seemed to know what he was thinking. It was true, he was worried he’d hurt her.

Lifting herself up on her elbows so she could stare down at him, she smiled. “It hurt at first, but then—wow.” She said not able to hide the blush.

Everett grinned and threaded his hand through the long golden strands of hair that spilled over his chest and onto the bed. “Come here baby.” He said huskily as his fingers threaded through the hair at the back of her head and pulled her mouth toward his.

When morning came, Kate lifted her head and smiled at her husband, “Shouldn’t we get up.”

“No.” he answered while running his hand down her bare back. “I’m not done with you yet.”

“All right.” She easily agreed causing him to give her a rare smile.

“You sure you’re all right Kate?”

She laid her head back down on his chest, “Never better.” She released a satiated sigh, “Never better.”

“I didn’t hurt you.” He said hesitantly. “I know what you said, but—”

“You could never hurt me” she interrupted with a genuine smile and received a tight squeeze for it. Then she lifted herself up so she was level with his gaze. His hands roamed up and down her naked sides while she hovered over him.

“You have to be the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen.” He said thickly causing her to give him a ravishing smile. He could swear his insides just melted with that gesture and his heart swelled in his chest for her. Never in his life, could he have imagined himself married

to such a beautiful woman, a woman who was not only unselfish, but understood him completely.

“Why Everett. I think that’s the first time you actually told me how you feel.”

“You know how I feel. That’s why I love you so much.” He said seriously, as his warm gaze searched her expression.

Tears flooded into her eyes and she lowered her mouth to his. He was right. She always seemed to know what he was trying to say without saying it. It never bothered her before that he hadn’t said the words, but now, when he actually said them she felt an overwhelming wash of emotion.

He returned her kiss while rolling her onto her back and bringing his weight down on her.

It was mid morning when they finally arose and got dressed. Everett took her hand and led her downstairs and told her not to wander too far while he paid the bill. Tyler spotted him and nodded to Kate while he went to talk to Everett at the front desk. Kate needed some fresh air. If she just waited outside the doors to the hotel, she was sure that Everett wouldn’t mind. As she stood there she was approached by a young man in a navy suit who tipped his hat and asked her for directions. She explained that she didn’t know this particular town when Everett suddenly stepped out of the door grabbed the man by the collar and shoved him off the walk. It was so quick it startled her.

“Everett...” Kate tried to defend the poor wide-eyed man but he ignored her and practically shook the other man senseless.

“I didn’t know.” The stranger sputtered when Everett vehemently mentioned that Kate was his wife.

“Bullshit! There’s a ring on her finger.” He gave the man another shove causing him to nearly lose his footing when he released him and shook an angry finger in his direction. “You as much as look at

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her, I'll shoot you." The other man couldn't scramble out of there quick enough.

"God Everett, he was just asking for directions." Kate said in exasperation.

"No he wasn't." Everett answered taking her arm and leading her back into the hotel, "He saw a gorgeous blond standing outside the hotel and thought she might be travelling here without her husband. That's why I told you to wait inside for me."

"You don't know that." She tried to keep up with his long stride.

"I do. And that wedding band on your finger is as plain as the hair on your pretty little head. That's the first thing any man notices when he sees a woman who looks like you." He stopped and faced her, "Do not be so trusting, look where it got you." He instantly regretted his words when she paled several shades and her mouth fell open, "God Kate, I'm sorry." He didn't care who was watching, he pulled her into his embrace, "I get angry and sometimes I say things that are offensive."

She nodded against his chest.

"That's why I'm not a man of many words."

"It's alright Everett. I understand." She did after the initial hurt of his words passed. He was protective of her, and he had every right to be as her husband. Not only that, she was careless, especially after what happened. Never in her life did she consider that a man looks for a ring on a woman's finger, but it made perfect sense. Even as a woman who found a man attractive, she would look for a ring on a handsome man's finger.

"Honey, the last person in the world I want to hurt is you." He cupped her face in his hands and searched her eyes.

She reached up and ran a hand down his chest, "I know Everett. I understand. I will try my best to listen. I don't know what I was thinking. I guess I just feel safe around you and never thought that the man was being a leech." She saw him smile, but he still didn't release her as his gaze studied hers.

“I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I sure as hell am not going to question it.”

The ride back to Red Oaks was long. They had to make two side trips to drop Emma and Mary off with relatives. Two days later, they were on the King’s land. Tyler split from the group to head home.

Chance rode to meet them and instead of barraging Everett, who he knew wouldn’t answer his questions, he asked Jace if Kate was okay.

“A little shook up.” Jace told him the rest of the story.

They reached the house just before nightfall and Everett helped his wife out of the buggy. “We’ll retrieve your things tomorrow Kate.”

“That’s fine.” She answered trying to stifle a yawn.

He smiled down at her, ‘Come. I’ll show you my...our room” he led her into the house and down to his room and pulled back the bed for her as she undressed, “I need to speak with my family. But I’ll be up as soon as I can.”

She stifled another yawn, and he gave her a light kiss on the mouth and told her to expect to be wakened up when he returned. She answered with a sensual smile and he left. The last thing she remembered was how unbelievably comfortable the man’s bed was. She awoke sometime in the night to feel the bed shift and Everett pull her back against him. It was brief and she was asleep again.

While Everett was climbing next to his wife, Jace was climbing into a woman’s bed also.

“What the hell are you doing here!” Ellie screeched as she jumped up out of bed.

“I’ve come to see you.” Jace drawled propping his arm on his bent leg while laying on his side, “Come back to bed. Tyler’s with Chance and Jeb, who seems to have abandoned the church this week to go whoring, and I know Silvia’s in town visiting her sick sister.”

“I’m not sleeping with you.”

“Yes you are.” He said firmly ignoring her protest

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Ellie planted her hands on her hips, "Get out of my bed. What makes you think you can crawl in with me after God knows what you've been doing with Cassie Davis over the past few weeks."

"I've done nothing with Cassie. I haven't even slept with her." He said evenly.

"She says something different."

"It was something different, but I didn't make love to her and it was some time before I even touched you."

Ellie blushed, "You get out of here. That fact that you even touched that trollop makes me want to go and get Tyler's gun!"

"Actually, I didn't touch her—at all. Now come here." Cassie actually did all of the touching, but he certainly wasn't going to share how and where with her, she was already fuming. He patted the spot beside him on the mattress.

"My God you are infuriating!" she shouted. "Get out of my room!" she pointed toward the door.

"Ellie, get that gorgeous ass back in this bed, or I'm coming out of it. I'll take you against that wall, if I have to, but I'm having you."

She stomped her foot in protest.

"Fine, have it your way."

Before she could blink he was up out of the bed and she didn't even have time to run before he shoved her back against the wall and lifted her up on his hips. "Baby you know your mine, give in."

His touch completely dissolved her anger and rendered her helpless, "Don't Jace." She pleaded trying to ignore the warm flushing deep in her pelvis.

"Hush up...I know you love me," he murmured against her neck as he fidgeted with the hem of her nightgown.

"Please." She murmured. "I can't."

"You can." He said continuing his assault.

"God, you are driving me nuts." She moaned, "I can't—you're not good for me."

"Honey, that's a lie." He said seriously as he lifted his head and

stared at her. “We’re damn amazing together and you know it.”

“I don’t want to be another statistic.” She said as her eyes watered up.

“Another what—?” he said incredulous, “You are no statistic Ellie.”

“All of those women Jace—“ she said allowing her tears to fall. It was the first time she allowed him to see her cry.

“Women?” he shook his head slightly while smiling, “There haven’t been any women since I’ve had you Ellie.” He lowered his head and kissed the wet streaks on her cheeks, “You’ve ruined me. I’m going crazy honey. All I can think about is you.” He brushed his mouth across hers.

“Jace please.” She repeated. She couldn’t deny the elation over his confession, but she was pregnant and had enough to worry about. When she told Everett that she would try on her own to deal with this, she meant it, but him touching her all over again lit a fire within her and she knew then and there that she’d never be able to deny him. She loved him.

“Please what?” He hoisted the garment up over her breasts and took one in his mouth.

She gasped.

“Please what?” He repeated switching to the other one causing her to release an exquisite feminine moan. Cupping her bottom, he turned her and laid her back down on the bed. “Beg me honey....whatever you want...” he murmured, pulling down her underwear while suckling her pert nipple.

“Oh God...don’t stop.”

He chuckled and slid into her warmth. Then growled at the sensation, “not a chance.” He began to move within her, “I’m going to stay all night until I’m satisfied.” He said before he captured her mouth again. Soon the noise of squeaking bedsprings mixed with their moans of lovemaking and true to his promise, Jace didn’t leave until the first light of dawn.

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Everett was already up and sitting on the porch rolling a smoke when Jace walked up the steps.

"Where you been?" Everett asked while tucking his tobacco back in his vest pocket.

"Busy."

Everett brought his head up and looked at his brother.

Jace knew that look, "It's none of your business Everett."

"Not usually, no."

"Don't you have a beautiful wife somewhere?"

Smiling Everett nodded. "Yeah. I do, but she's sleeping...finally." He managed a bit of a smile remembering her beautiful naked body entwined in the sheets clearly satiated and sound asleep. Although she was asleep when he crawled in next to her earlier, he couldn't help himself and started to caress her until she woke with possibly the sweetest smile he'd ever seen.

Jace nodded and turned around to the sunrise, "Lucky bastard."

"If you keep visiting her like that. Tyler will hold a gun to your head and make you marry her."

Jace shrugged, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I do."

He looked at his older brother for a moment and shrugged his shoulder in defeat. He obviously knew, "Kate tell you?"

"Kate doesn't know anything." Everett admitted looking at his younger brother.

"Ellie then?"

"No."

"How?"

"I found Ellie's choker in the stall."

Jace swore. "Who else knows?"

"Just Pa."

"I'm not marrying her." He said defensively.

“never said you should, but you should know something.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“She’s pregnant.”

Jace swore he could feel all the blood leave his body, “How the hell do you know that?”

“She’s pale, she hardly ate anything at dinner the other night, and she looks like hell. Ma looked like that when she was pregnant with Chance. I told her she needed to tell you, but obviously she’s still trying to deal with it all on her own. She’s one hell of a tough woman.”

Jace took off his hat and scratched his head, “Hell, a baby.”

“I’m pretty sure you’re the father. Ellie would never let anyone else touch her.”

“Yeah.” Was all he said.

“Jace?”

“Give me a minute, I’m still reeling from the being a father bit.” It wasn’t what some people would think. Actually Jace felt euphoric over the fact that he would be a father. Only it hit him like a herd of stampeding bulls. He just never thought that he would soon be one.

Everett smirked, “Pa won’t make you marry her, and neither will I, but you better figure out how you’re going to help her.”

Jace nodded and took the chair beside Everett. “Poor Ellie” he sighed, “Hell, Tyler’s going to shoot me.”

“Probably.” Everett smirked taking a drag off his smoke and spared him a sidelong glance riddled with amusement. “If you’re lucky he’ll just shoot you. Regardless, it’ll serve you right. You should have never taken advantage of her feelings like that...it was low.”

“Yeah it was, but she looked so damn good in that dress the other night.” He put his face in his hands, “I lost my head...it was stupid. Then I got hooked. What the hell am I going to do?”

“Pa says I have to stay out of it, but that was more along the lines of busting you up.”

“Figured something had to stop you from busting my jaw.” He shot him a sideways glance. “I seen that look you gave me over dinner

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last week when Ellie was here. I wasn't sure then, but now I am."

"You have a problem keeping your hands to yourself around her Jace. That should tell you something."

"It tells me she's goddam irresistible." He shot back, "And beautiful, and I'm a man for Christ's sake Everett. Anyone would have a problem."

"Yeah sure." Everett nodded, "But she only wants you and now there's a baby involved. So, I'll give you a few suggestions, seeing as I've had time to think about it." He took another drag and continued, "You need to talk to Ellie and see what you can do. You need to find out if she's open for us to be a part of your kid's life. Secondly, you gotta leave her alone Jace..."

"Don't know if I can..." he rolled his eyes heavenward, "God Everett...she's just so damn sweet. Everything about her is sweet. She even smells good. It's like putting a starving little kid in a candy shop by himself and telling him not to touch a thing. Then there's the way she reacts to my touch, it's like someone lit a fire in her and..."

Everett held up his hand and cut him off actually laughing, "Then marry her."

Jace groaned.

"It's not so bad to wake up to the woman you love for the rest of your life..."

"Anyone would think that about Kate..."

"...and Ellie." He released a frustrated breath, "put it this way Jace, what if someone else were to marry her?"

"Cold day in hell." He gritted out before he could stop himself.

"Man you are a fool. You don't want anyone else to touch her, no one else to raise your baby, and you won't marry her. You do love her Jace. Your problem is admitting that the girl got you and not the other way around. Ellie probably won't marry you anyway; you can be such a bastard. She'll probably end up marrying some banker...some bore. Even with a kid, she's so pretty, someone will marry her. Hell, Chance would marry her tomorrow if she asked him." Everett stood up

and flicked his smoke over the porch rail, “you have to tell Tyler that he’s gonna be an uncle too. You’re on your own there. Pa won’t let me touch you but I hope to hell Tyler beats the shit out of you.” He went in the house.

“What do you mean, she might not marry me?” Jace called after him.

“Go to bed.” Came Everett’s faint reply.

“Ah hell.” Jace swore and stuck his boot on the porch rail. Ellie would marry him, she loves him. If not he could name a half a dozen women that would marry him in her place. He stood up, “Shit.” He sat down again. What did Everett mean ‘someone will marry her’. He stood up again, swore once more, and trotted off down the steps.

Everett watched him go with a smile pasted on his face. Turning he went to his room, stripped his clothes and crawled in next to his wife.

“Where you been?” came her groggy voice.

“Telling Jace to go and propose to Ellie.”

“And...”

“He’s on his way there now.”

She smiled into his chest, “You’re such a clever man.” He groaned as he felt her hand between his legs.

“Now I’m a man who’s hot for his wife.”

She laughed as he pushed her onto her back and took her mouth under his. “Ever since I married you, I can’t get enough of you.”

“You couldn’t before.”

“yeah, but I’m allowed to play with more of you now.” He chuckled against her mouth.

She laughed again then it was abruptly cut off by her moan when she felt him pull her legs up his hips and enter her. She didn’t stop moaning there. He pulled her knees up higher and continued to rock in her with a controlled rhythm purposely meant to drive her wild and it did. He pinned her hands over her head, arched above her and increased his movements. Afterwards, he would be thankful no one

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else had a room at that end of the house for the amount of banging the headboard was doing against wall. Kate was the most desirable woman he'd ever been with. There was no effort needed to arouse him. He'd already taken her tonight before he went down to wait for Jace, but it never seemed like enough for him and she was always willing and ready to please him. The only other thing he could possibly ask for was children. The thought alone of her having his child made him strive to get deeper in her. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she shuddered beneath him finding her release. He gripped her hips, arched higher and found his with a throaty groan, plunging twice more in her to spill his seed deeply.

“I love you.” She murmured against his chest.

He groaned again, kissed her tenderly, and fell asleep as he lay on her.

Kate didn't care. The mattress gave enough so she could still breathe. She loved the feel of him on her. His large hard body completely covered her and then some.

“Honey move over.”

Ellie opened her eyes to see Jace, “What are you doing back?” She absently moved over so he could get in beside her.

“Compromising you so your brother will force us to marry.” He reached for her.

“Really?” her whole face brightened.

“Yeah, since I know you aren't going to agree. I thought of another way.”

Ellie laughed for the first time in days, “Jace...I really love you.”

“Yeah, I know you do; now how about you show me how much before Tyler shows up and shoots me?”

He didn't need to ask her twice.

The next day when Jace brought Ellie home with a ring on her finger Kate ran and hugged her. Apparently Tyler didn't shoot Jace but

he did have a black eye and a couple of bruised ribs. That was before he dragged the both of them off to the preacher.

Everett clapped a hand on his shoulder, "You got off lucky."

"Yeah, but that's just because he didn't catch me dallying her at the time. Which was a fluke to say the least. Christ look at her, even now I want to..."

Everett couldn't help but laugh. "Welcome to wedded bliss."

The months past and Ellie's belly started to swell in evidence of her and Jace's baby. Kate had discovered her own pregnancy but decided to only tell Everett not to draw attention from Ellie. Everett was overjoyed and Jace asked him if he started drinking in the morning because of the good mood he was in, but they didn't let on. Every Sunday Tyler would come for dinner, he'd long since forgiven Jace for compromising his sister when he saw how devoted he was to her.

Kate and Ellie had made a trip to the dress shop one day because Kate knew Ellie needed larger dresses for the winter months when she started to grow big. Not only that she could wear them after her. They had just come out of the dress shop when a familiar voice ran through her like ice water.

"Kate."

Kate slowly turned at the sound of her name and dropped her reticule. "No." she breathed.

"Yes." The colonel stood behind her with several of his men, guns drawn. Behind him was an expensively decorated coach with another four men on it.

Ellie saw the look of terror on her cousin's face, "Kate, what..."

"I'm just here for you." The colonel said, "If you make a fuss, I'll take your friend."

"She's pregnant."

"I don't care." He said in that familiar unemotional tone.

She knew he meant it. Slowly her eyes guided to her cousin's pale face, "Tell Everett I'll be waiting for him Ellie." Kate said softly as

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the color drained from Ellie's face.

"Kate..." Ellie began to weep and took a step toward her but stopped, as Kate shook her head. "He'll kill you." She choked out.

"She's right. Don't move honey...not until we're gone." He said while he gripped Kate's elbow and pulled her to his side possessively, "Or my men will shoot you, pregnant or not." Then he turned to Kate, "Say goodbye darling."

Kate shook her head again this time in despair as she took a long hard stare at her cousin before he pulled her toward the coach. "Tell him Ellie. Tell him."

"I will." She sobbed.

Tears rolled down Kate's face as he pushed her into the coach and closed the drapes. The men took guard on top as the stage started to move.

"I couldn't get past missing you." His eyes guided over her. "It took me a few months, but I was finally able to track you down."

She turned her head away from him.

"You certainly cleaned up beautifully."

"I hate you."

"I know darling, but I'm hoping to change that."

Her eyes met his, "That will never happen."

"Someone must've wanted you back real bad to blow up my place and kill over thirty of my men." His eyes darted to her ring finger, "You husband perhaps?"

She nodded and fixed him a determined stare, "He'll come for me again."

The Colonel leaned back against the cushioned seat and inclined his head slightly, not the least bit bothered by her threat. "Well, I don't intend for him to find us this time. We're heading south to Mexico."

"He'll find me Colonel. You don't know Everett." She may have sounded brave, but inside she was a mess. She wanted to scream and cry knowing what was in store for her. He had told her not to leave, not

to have another man in her life and to obey him. She did none of those.

Ellie ran down the walk as fast as her legs could carry her. She was crying so hard that she could barely see through the tears when she bumped into Jeb as he was coming out of the store with Cassie of all people. Ellie was so distraught she didn't care.

"Ellie? My God, what happened."

"A man took Kate—oh God Jeb, he was the devil I swear!"

She was crying so hard he barely understood her, "Okay honey, take a deep breath. You need to calm down with that baby in you."

She nodded and took several gulps of air, "We have to get to Everett."

"Ma!" he called through the door of the store and Mrs. Coulter came bustling out at the tone of her son's voice.

"I'll take care of her Jeb, just go."

Surprisingly it was Cassie's voice not Mrs Coulter's. When Ellie looked at her, there was genuine concern on the other woman's face. Then she slipped her arm around her and led her into the store as Jeb ran toward the stable.

"Come on Ellie. It'll be all right. You'll see." Said Cassie as she led her back into the store.

"What happened?" Mrs. Coulter said when saw Ellie's sobbing swollen face and rushed toward her.

"She said something about a man taking Kate Purnell." Explained Cassie.

"Oh dear. She looked up, "Where's Jeb?"

"He went to the Kings to tell Everett."

"I'll get Jim to take you home honey." Said Mrs. Coulter.

Kate nodded still barely able to speak.

"I'll be right back."

"I'll stay with her." Said Cassie.

She nodded and hurried to the back of the store.

Ellie turned her attention to Cassie with her eyes questioning.

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Cassie shrugged, “sometimes I’m not a nice person.” She said seeing the question in her eyes, “Sometimes I am. I was jealous Ellie. I always wished Jace would look at me like he did you and you never gave him reason to stare at you like that. I did my best to capture his attention and not once did he look at me with the adoration that he looks at you with. My father may be a judge, but I never really had much affection from him.” She paused, “But I really like Jeb.”

“Really?” she wiped her eyes and stared at the other woman.

She nodded, “I’m sorry for all of the things I said. I hope you can forgive me in time.” She flushed a little, “I started going to church.”

Ellie thought if the roof didn’t cave in with Cassie going, she couldn’t be all that bad. “You really mean that.”

“I do. I’m trying to change.” She managed a smile, “I know I’ll never be as nice as you or your cousin, but I can try right?”

Jeb didn’t even bother with a saddle, he just threw the bridle on and took off at a break neck speed leaving a trail of dust in his wake.

Everett swore to nobody in particular, “Why the fuck does everyone want my wife!” He started loading firearms on his horse in a mix of men who were doing the same. Two men were already sent to the Purnell’s to retrieve and relieve Tyler

“I’m coming too,” Said Jeb, “But I need a saddle and a gun.”

“Yeah,” Jace said, “Chance, find Jeb a rifle and a saddle.”

“Right away.” Answered Chance, “This way Jeb.” Although Everett wasn’t allowing him to go with them again, at least he could help ready the men.

Jeb turned and followed him.

Jace kept watching the road to the house for the Coulter’s wagon. He was distraught over losing Kate again, but hearing from Jeb how he found Ellie was tearing him up. He wanted to hold her and make her forget. Not only that, he was blaming himself for letting the women to go to town without one of them. Ellie was perfectly capable

of looking after herself and Kate, but not against this guy.

“You should stay home Jace.”

He turned to find his older brother looking at him. “No.” he said without hesitation.

“Ellie’s going to need you.” He said seriously.

“Ellie will understand. If this was her missing and Kate was home, you’d do the same.”

“You’ve already done this once.”

“Yeah, so I know what to expect.” Someone called Jace through the crowd. Ellie was home.

“Last chance.” Said Everett.

“No.” said Jace, “I’ll be back after I see to my wife. Don’t you dare fucking leave without me.” He said with turned and ran to the house.

Everett would have, but he had to wait for Tyler. Jace would have been mad, but it would have eventually passed. He returned to packing his horse.

Ed was there to meet her when Mr. Coulter pulled the wagon up in front of the house. He embraced her in one of his bear hugs and wouldn’t let her go, “Thanks Jim.” He said over her head.

“Anytime.” He turned and looked at the crew by the barn, “Is Jeb going with you guys?”

“ I think so,” He pulled Ellie back and looked down at her with concern, “Are you going to be okay?”

She nodded, “Kate was so scared and I couldn’t do anything.” She released a sob. “Where’s Jace?”

“Ellie!”

She heard Jace’s voice and before she even had a chance to turn and face him she was pulled into his tight familiar embrace. Then she finally did cry.

He bent his head low so he could whisper softly in her ear, telling her things were going to be fine.

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“Kate wanted me to tell Everett that she’ll be waiting for him.” She sobbed burying her face in his chest.

“I’ll tell him.”

“It was that man that took her before, the one with the cane.”

“Everett already knew. I don’t know how, but he did. Don’t worry honey, we’ll get her back—again.”

She nodded and allowed him to hold her again.

Ed watched his son hold his wife and despite the tragedy of the day, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride at watching the two of them. Ellie and Kate were the best he could possibly ask for in daughters in law. Now he was going to be a grandfather, and quite frankly was completely impatient to teach the child everything he knew about being a cowboy—or cowgirl. It all seemed bittersweet in view of this psycho that had taken Kate.

“Ellie, I’ve got to go with Everett.” Jace said softly.

“I know.”

“Pa,” Jace lifted his head and looked at his father, “Take care of her for me.”

“I will son.”

Brushing his lips across hers he murmured against them while placing his large hand on her swollen belly, “Take care of my son.”

“Daughter.” She said with a forced smile.

He kissed her again, and then the shouts of the men brought his head up, “Your brother’s here. I’ve got to go.”

“I love you Jace.” She said.

“I know you do sweetheart.” His eyes warmed to a honeyed brown when she said those words. He released her and with one final look, turned to head back toward the barn.

Ed put his arm around Ellie’s shoulder and drew her close, “He loves you too honey, he’s just too damn stubborn to say it.”

She rested her head against Ed. He would know, she supposed. He knew his sons well.

“I won’t hurt you Kate, if you obey me. You broke your promises to me.”

“I know.” She spared him a glance.

“Although I should punish you for your behaviour I have decided to forgo that because I’m not giving you a chance to do it again. Besides, marking your lovely figure or your face is not an option—yet.”

She shuddered.

“So, tell me darling, how are you going to make this up to me?”

She focused her eyes on his, “I don’t know.” She murmured.

“Well, I’m going to help you figure it out.”

“How?”

He leaned forward on his cane that he’d placed between his knees, “You can begin by obeying me from now on. That means you do everything I say. Absolutely everything.”

“And if I do—“ she tilted her head, “Are you going to keep your men from touching me.”

“That was regretful, but then again you didn’t tell me who touched you last time,” he leaned forward even more so he could stare directly into her eyes, “Because I would have torn them limb from limb after I gutted them.”

She felt a chill go up her spine. It wasn’t what he said, it was the emotionless tone he’d said it in. The man had absolutely no conscience.

He finally leaned back in the seat after he let his words and stare affect her, “I suppose your husband took your virtue.”

She turned her head away.

It was a confirmation to him, “It doesn’t matter Kate, after knowing you, I know that purity of yours is through to the bone.” He paused, “So tell me, are you pregnant yourself?”

It was impossible to resist the terror that ran through her. What would he do to her baby if he knew? Would there be time to get away from him before he found out. What if she confessed and he

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killed her right then and there.

“To help you dispel your worries, I always wanted to be a father,” he smiled with complete emotional detachment. “From the way you look, I suspect your husband is quite handsome, so the child will be no less than perfect. As I’m sure you’ve already figured out, I like perfect things. I like you.”

“This will never be your child.” She said finding her courage momentarily.

“He will never know his real father, and where we’re going you will beg me to take the child as my own to protect him.” He watched her shake her head, “You will Kate. Trust me.”

The last thing she wanted to do was trust this man. Unknown to Everett she still had nightmares over him. *Please hurry Everett.*

Everett scanned the horizon as the sunset was silhouetting the distant mountains while Tyler hopped off his horse and walked along the ground before he crouched down and traced the coach’s wheel tracks with his fingers. “They got a good four hours on us.” He said over his shoulder while running his hand along the sidewall of the indentation in the ground.

“Maybe we’ll catch them before mid morning.” Everett said from on top of his mount.

Tyler straightened up and looked at Everett, “I got a funny feeling about this.”

“Why’s that?” Everett said with rising curiosity. If Tyler had a funny feeling, he was smart enough to listen.

“Either this guy is as brave as sin, or he’s got a plan.” He pointed to the tracks, “He’s in no great hurry and that worries me.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“I guess we shouldn’t underestimate this guy,” said Jace, “Maybe he’s learned from the last time.”

“You’re probably right, because I would have.” Everett said. And if he felt even a fraction of what Everett felt for Kate, he wasn’t

going to let her go for anything. He dismounted and stretched his back before walking up to Tyler.

Jeb looked over at Jace as Tyler and Everett continued talking, “Where the hell did he learn to track like that?”

“Tyler?”

“Yeah.”

Jace smiled, “It’s a long story. The short version is he ended up straying from his parents when they were moving out here, and a band of Indians picked him up. He was eleven or so—“ Jace tried to remember, “But eventually they returned him to his family when he was eighteen. He learned a lot in that time.”

“Wow. I didn’t know.”

“Nobody does except us and now, you.” Jeb explained, “They were Comanche.”

“Oh.” Jeb spared a glance at Tyler, “I didn’t think Comanche were around here.”

“Small bands are. They migrated to Northern California from the west years ago to escape the government reservations. They move around with the seasons, and Tyler still keeps in touch with them. They keep to themselves most times, but will kill if cornered to protect their people.”

Tyler looked passed Everett to the group of eight men that they brought with them.

“What are you thinking Tyler?” Said Everett, who recognized the expression on his friend’s face.

“I’m thinking there are not enough of us.” His eyes went back to Everett, “I need to ask a friend for some help.”

Everett dismounted and approached him while reaching for his tobacco out of his vest pocket, “how long is this going to take?”

“This time a year, they’re only a half a day’s ride.”

Everett swore as he rolled a cheroot.

Tyler watched him knowing that he wasn’t going to be pleased about it, “There’s something wrong here Everett. Can’t you feel it?”

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“No. But my mind isn't on that entirely. I'm too focused on revenge.” Inside he was an anguished mess, even though he portrayed a man who was very much in control. Tyler seemed to understand.

“I need to go with my gut on this.”

Everett looked past him to the horizon again before he settled his eyes back on him, thinking that delay would put Kate farther and farther away from them. “Yeah, I'm thinking I need to trust your gut too, because my gut is just plain unsettled about everything.”

Tyler nodded, “I'm sure this Colonel is counting on that and your priority to just get your wife back.”

“It's what I was thinking, and I'm usually smarter than that. Last time, we must've killed at least thirty of his guys.” Jace came up at that moment catching part of the conversation.

“At least thirty. What's going on?”

Everett lit his smoke and took a drag, “Tyler's going to go get help.”

“Of a different color of skin variety?” he raised his brows.

“Yeah, Horse Runs Fast has a village a half a days ride from here.” Tyler explained.

“Comanche?”

“My blood brother. He's the chief of the clan now.”

“Tyler seems to think that the Colonel has probably laid a trap and I'm beginning to agree.” Everett explained after taking a long draw off his smoke as his eyes guided back to the direction his wife was taken.

“Can't blame him, we practically annihilated the last army he had.” Jace added with a grin at the memory. Then he flicked a glance to his older brother, “Why the hell is this guy is so obsessed with her?”

Everett took another drag while giving his brother a knowing look, “Do you need to ask—it's Kate.”

Jace nodded, “Point taken.” He turned his gaze back on Tyler, “Get going then.”

“All right.” he turned toward the direction of the coach, “He’s heading south,” he stretched his arm toward the route, “And he’s not covering his tracks as you can see, so following him won’t be too difficult. “ he looked back over his shoulder at the men who were waiting patiently, “I’ll take Jeb with me in case I run into trouble.”

“Hey Jeb.” Called Jace, “We need you.”

Jeb nudged his mount forward and Jace explained the plan. When he was done Jeb said that he was fine going with Tyler.

“Wait for me Everett.” Tyler said as he mounted his horse, “She’s my cousin.” He added with a pointed stare, “I want him just as bad.”

“I know.” He said, “No matter how hard things get. I’ll wait.”

Within five minutes they were gone.

That night the Colonel’s men set up a large tent and Kate was pacing the floor on the inside. She could see the outline of men placed outside the tent from the glow of a fire to make sure she didn’t escape. She tried to calm herself but the more time went by that she was alone, the more edgy she became. Night was falling and he would come to sleep next to her. That would mean the humiliation of removing her clothes all over again. Who would he send this time and how could she possibly fend him off without hurting Everett’s baby. However when the flap of the tent was pulled back she turned to face the Colonel himself. He stared at her for a moment unnerving her.

“Get undressed Kate. After last time I learned my lesson. Now do as I say, or I will risk sending someone in to do it. I’ll be back in a half an hour. Get into bed.”

She nodded slowly and he left after getting her response. It was difficult undoing the buttons on her blouse, because her fingers were shaking so much. Then the tears started to fall as the memories from before started to come back. She would give anything to be sleeping next to Everett’s hard body tonight. To sleep next to the man she loved.

She wiped the tears away, not wanting to let the man see that he’d affected her, and removed the last of her clothes before she

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crawled naked into the makeshift bed.

True to his word, he returned a half an hour later and sat down next to her as he proceeded to undress himself. Kate pretended to fall asleep with her back to him but he wasn't stupid and she should have known better.

"Face me Kate." He said as he pulled back the blankets and moved next to her, "I need to feel you."

Suppressing a shudder she rolled over and ended up burying her face against his neck.

"You have the sweetest smell I've ever had the privilege to know." He murmured.

Kate said nothing. She was busy fighting the tears of repulsiveness that were stinging her eyes.

"It's not so bad darling." He continued seeming to know what she was thinking, but wasn't the least bit deterred by it, "You'll get used to me." To get his meaning across he pulled her tight against him, "I'm sure my body has nothing on your husband's, but you'll get used to it." he paused, "I've had a lot of time to think about this man who came after you and I know that he's got skills, but I also know that he won't stop at nothing to get you back because I'd do the same thing."

Kate leaned her head back to look at him not able to stop the sudden fear that started to throb through her especially when his eyes sought out hers. They were so cold she felt chilled.

"He's got to die Kate."

"No." she choked out.

"I can keep having this man try and kill me and my men. Any other man would have given up by now. Not only that, good loyal men are really hard to come by, and they're expensive. You belong to me."

"Don't please—I'll do anything you ask." It was the tone in his voice that told her he had something planned, something horrible that Everett wouldn't know about.

"you will anyway Kate. Not only that, with him gone you will have me."

This time the tears did start to fall.

“Now now, darling, I can’t have that.” He reached up and brushed them off her cheeks, “You’ll have your every hearts desire as long as you obey me. I have a large estate in Mexico and you’ll be wearing the finest gowns, wearing the most beautiful jewellery...”

“I only want my husband.” She managed in a choked sob. This man may have been intelligent, but he was also insane.

“That will pass.” He said reassuringly, “And you’ll make me a father too.”

“This is not your baby.”

“I told you already that you will beg me to take it under my protection. Where we are going is quite hostile. If the locals know that the child is mine, they will not harm it.”

Kate’s mouth fell open.

“Just as they will know you are mine.”

“That didn’t stop Bull.”

“Ah yes, the man your husband knifed in the back.”

“He was trying to rape me.”

“And if you were honest the first time about the bruises on your body, I would have taken care of him myself.”

“You scare me.”

His hand came up and caressed her jaw, “Yes, and that’s what will keep you honest with me from now on, right? For the sake of your child. I don’t expect you to love me Kate, I can see that you love your husband, but what I do expect is complete loyalty. Is that understood?”

“I have no choice.” She said barely above a whisper.

“No you don’t. Now,” he guided her head back to his chest, “Go to sleep, we have a long journey ahead of us, and I don’t want you looking too tired.”

That night Jace found Everett leaning against a tree with one hand on his rifle beside him and the other holding his smoke. He’d volunteered to take first watch. Jace knew it was because the man

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couldn't sleep.

Without saying a word, he sat on a large rock next to him and proceeded to roll himself a smoke. Everett had slowed their pace behind the Colonel as Tyler suggested. He didn't want to come upon them sooner before Tyler returned just in case his assumption about a trap was true. Not only that Jace knew that there was no way in hell Everett could resist rushing in with guns blazing over the anger he was feeling. In fact, looking at him now calm and composed, you would never know the rage he was dealing with except for the look in his eyes.

"She has nightmares about that man Jace." Everett finally spoke after a long silence, "She doesn't think I know, but I do."

"We'll get him this time." Jace said lighting his own smoke.

"Yeah, we will." He paused looking at his brother, "She's pregnant."

Jace snapped his head up, "The hell you say?"

"We didn't want to take the glory off of you and Ellie yet." He explained, "We were going to tell the family next week on Pa's birthday."

"Ah Christ, no wonder you're so worked up this time." If it was Ellie, instead of Kate, Jace would be beside himself. Knowing that his wife and child were in the hands of a madman would push him over the edge. He didn't know how his brother was holding together and to those who didn't know him, he would seem as calm as the night, but Jace did know him. The man must be a mess inside. He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. He should have told Ellie he loved her.

He cast another glance at his brother, "How you holdin' up really Everett?"

"I feel like the ground was taken out from under my feet." He admitted calmly. "The one thing in my life I've been proud of was marrying that girl. It was like I finally noticed that there were stars in the sky when she walked into my life." He paused, "And when she told me I was going to be a father, I thought my heart would burst." He looked at Jace, "A *father* Jace."

“I know how that feels.” Jace admitted with a slight nod. It was the same way he felt when Everett told him about Ellie.

“I swear to God, it’ll kill me if I lose either one.” He said quietly turning his attention back to the night.

“That isn’t going to happen. Kate’s a smart lady, she’ll survive.” Jace said with concrete determination, “And we’ll take care of him this time so there’ll be no more of this.”

“Thing is, I don’t know what that man will do when he finds out that she has my child in her. From the things that she has told me, he’s a collector of beautiful things. If he finds out she’s pregnant, he might see that as a flaw. I’ve been trying not to think about the consequences.” He couldn’t hide the shudder that went through him, and adjusted his posturing to try and regain his composure. One thing was for certain, if that bastard touched a hair on his wife’s precious head, he would take his time killing him.

Three days later, the coach pulled into a small town called Louistown just prior to the Mexican border. The Colonel escorted Kate into the only hotel with two of his men flanking them. He couldn’t help but feel proud when he emerged from his coach with such a beautiful woman. He knew that he was the envy of every man within eyesight. Taking her hand, he helped her down the step and placed his hand on the small of her back possessively as they went up the steps to the hotel.

“I thought you would like a bath darling.” He said as he led her up the stairs.

Actually she would have.

“I’ll make sure there’s adequate protection for you, I’m in need of a drink.” He nodded toward the saloon down the walk.

“Please don’t let the men in the bathhouse with me.” She turned to him pleading. “Please. I won’t run I promise.”

He stared at her for a moment contemplating her words. She really had no place to go. She was in unfamiliar territory and the town was full of thieves and murderers to begin with besides his own men. However he was sure her husband wasn’t that far behind and he would

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make sure he was ready for the man this time. He had his own private army waiting for him here and had no fear of his own safety, but Kate was a rare beauty.

Finally after a prolonged silence he nodded, "You give me your word?"

"I do."

"I'll set three men outside. You'll have no help inside. I won't even let a woman in to tend you. Can you manage things yourself?"

"I can." She quickly agreed.

"I'll send some dresses over from the dress shop prior to that. The rest is up to you. Like I said, I don't trust my men not to touch you." He studied her expression a moment so he could get his meaning across, "Remember Kate, this town is untamed, not like your pleasant little place. If you're found alone, you won't have a chance. Do you understand?"

She quickly nodded her head.

An hour later Kate was soaking in the tub alone. The colonel had stayed true to his word and had the bathhouse heavily guarded while she soaked. Her cerulean blue walking gown hung on a hook on the wall nearby. *Nothing but the best* she thought looking at the clothing. It was made of the finest silk with exquisite embroidery and would make any woman feel like a queen, but she felt far from it. Tears escaped her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as her hand guided to her belly now just barely showing the signs of her pregnancy. "Don't you worry," she whispered, "Your daddy will come for us." It was more for her own sanity that she spoke the words than her unborn child's, regardless, it made her feel better. She knew that Everett in a rage was deadly and despite her aversion to violence, she wanted this man dead. He would never leave her be no matter what.

Suddenly a scraping caught her attention and she turned to see a couple of boards from the back wall bend and a man she never seen before crawl through the opening.

Quickly she shot to her feet and frantically grabbed a towel to

cover herself.

“Don’t scream,” he whispered as he stood.

Kate never seen an Indian before in her life, but she certainly knew this was one despite his cowboy threads. She couldn’t scream if she wanted to, she was frozen in place from sheer fear. He spoke excellent English and if she didn’t see him, she wouldn’t have known he was an Indian from his voice.

“I’m a friend of Tyler’s” he said as his eyes guided over her, “Are you his cousin?”

Just the sound of her cousin’s name made relief pour through her and she near collapsed from it. Reaching for the edge of the tub she slowly sat down on the ledge while nodding.

“My name is Horse Runs Fast.”

“Where’s my husband?” she asked.

A noise outside the door made him pause. He put a finger to his lips and listened for a moment. Satisfied they weren’t heard he continued, “They’re waiting outside of the town. It’s not uncommon for Indians to come here and because your family might be recognized, they sent me.” He grinned, “I’m good at sneaking in places where I don’t belong.” He grabbed her gown and handed it to her, “Get dressed, I’ll get you to follow me out. Three men are guarding the front doors, but no one thought to guard the ally, and these boards are feeble.”

“Turn around.” She whispered.

He sighed and slowly did what she asked giving her a view of his two long black braids that hung down his back.

Kate didn’t think she could get dressed as fast as she could, but she did, “This man is a cold blooded killer, he threatened to kill my Everett.”

“I don’t think he knows who he’s dealing with lady. You’re husband reminds me of the Grizzly bear when it’s trapped. He has much anger in him.” He said with a grin not turning around.

Kate actually smiled for the first time in days. “I’m done.”

“lets’ go.” He bent down and pushed back the boards as quietly

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as he could. When she tried to help, she realized she didn't have half the strength this man did, and could hardly budge one of them. He easily bent several of them so she could crawl through. Kate tore the hem of her dress trying to crawl out but it was barely visible.

Once outside he led her to two saddled pintos and hoisted her into one of them causing her skirt to ride up to her knees. The whole time she was shaking like a leaf in the wind at being discovered.

"Can you ride?" he said looking at her trembling hands as she took the reins.

"I'll sure as hell try." She answered with courage that surprised herself.

Horse Runs Fast chuckled and leapt into his own saddle without using the stirrups. "You follow me, no matter what you hear or see. This Colonel has people everywhere, and we will be followed. You stay with me. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then let's go!" he heeled his horse into an instant gallop causing dust to fly and Kate did the same, nearly losing her grip.

They weren't even out of town when she heard the Colonel's shouts and trailing gunfire. He must've been on the way to get her, but she dare not turn around and see him. As the horse thundered under her she had a death grip on the reins and couldn't let go if she wanted to. She kept her eyes fixed on the man in front of her, but knew that the Colonel's men were probably already mounted and on their heels.

Tyler stood on the top of the ridge with binoculars. When he saw the dust in the distance he turned and shouted to the others. "Riders coming!"

Everett crushed out his cigarette beneath his boot and strode over to Red, "You ready?"

"Yeah boss, the ridge is wired up." He gave him a toothless grin. "I hope Tyler splits before I blow it to hell."

"You wait until my wife comes through first." He warned.

“No problem boss. One wife, and one Indian.”

Christ, I hope the man can count, he thought turning around to see Jace and the rest of the men with their rifles aimed on the narrow path between the ridges. He wasn't sure how many men the Colonel had, but he was sure they wouldn't be expecting the tribe of fifteen Comanche warriors off to the side of his men on horseback in full war paint. It was impressive to say the least. Tyler had promised them whatever what was left of the horses and loot after they took care of Kate's captors. Horse Runs Fast volunteered to go into town and look for Kate himself. He promised Everett that he could get her out without bloodshed, but he must be ready because more than likely he would be bringing an army of men on his heels. Everett mounted up and pulled his rifle out of its leather sheath and balanced it on his forearm. It was intense, the wait. However, if Horse Runs Fast was returning like hell was on his heels. He had Kate.

Tyler lifted his binoculars again. The Colonel's men were pretty close to them. *This was going to be risky*, he thought. He would have to make sure he signalled at the exact time for Red to blow the ridge and get his ass out of there. After a few more minutes he could see the billowing skirts of Kate's gown and that let him know that Horse Runs Fast was in the lead. Yet right behind them were at least twenty men and in the far distance he could make out some fancy coach. He smirked, *the Colonel*. Obviously because of his injuries, he couldn't handle a horse so well. Everett had told them everything that Kate had relayed about the man to him. He turned and let out a shrill whistle which was answered by several whoops. He saw the warriors turn their horses to circle around the ridge by another path.

Kate could hear the shouts of the men closing in on them and still refused to turn around and look but remained fixed on the back of the man in front of her. She was terrified. They were on a full out gallop across rocky terrain now and not too far ahead were rocky cliffs divided by a worn path. *We will be caught*, she thought with dread, and this time the Colonel won't forgive her for running.

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They raced through the narrow opening and that was about the last thing she remembered before an earth shattering noise split her ears. Everything seemed in slow motion after that and then the thunderous noise of the cliffs shattering around them. Her horse reared and unseated her. She landed with a painful grunt on the ground and rolled over pushing herself up on her arms just to see the men that were chasing them get blocked off by the rocks. Then she heard the gunfire and shrill noises and the shouts of men beyond after the noise of the falling rocks ceased.

“Katie!”

Before she could turn and look she was hauled up off the ground into strong arms.

“Everett!” she sobbed

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head and clung to him. If she was, she certainly didn't feel it as soon as he embraced her.

“Oh thank God!” he said and his voice cracked. “Let's get you out of here.” He said keeping her close to him as he led her to another horse.

“What's happening Everett.” She asked still hearing the gunfire and hollers of men on the other side of the landslide.

“Tyler's blood brother and his warriors are taking care of the Colonel's men.” He said through gritted teeth. He wanted to be involved in it, but his wife was his priority.

“—the Colonel?” she couldn't stop the trembling that started.

“Will not be able to touch you again.” He answered casting her a glance. “I shouldn't have let you go to town without an escort.”

“God Everett!” she stopped and faced him, “Don't you blame yourself.” She didn't mistake the pain in his eyes.

He shook his head subtly.

“I mean it!” she said, “None of this was your fault! No one could have guessed that the man would come after me again, especially after what you did to his last encampment.”

She was right, but it didn't ease his guilt, "Are you all right honey?"

"I am now." She said, "I knew you'd come." Her eyes watered up and he gathered her in his arms again.

"You're my life Katie. Of course I would come. I can't breathe without you." He embraced her again and lowered his head on top of hers.

Tyler managed to escape without getting caught in the blast and Met up with Horse Runs Fast. No one was left alive, except for the Colonel, who was bleeding from a bullet in his shoulder, as he was forced to his knees in front of Jace. Jace stood staring at him with his rifle slung over his shoulder and several Comanche warriors behind him.

Slowly the Colonel raised his gaze to the tall man, "I take it that you're the husband."

Jace shook his head, setting his cold eyes on him. He didn't seem like much now that he was kneeling at his feet, but he could see the cruelty in his eyes. "You'd wish I was."

Then the Colonel's eyes darted to another man who was approaching on horseback. He sat atop his black mustang with the poise of a man who was unforgiving. He expected no less. The man who married Kate would have to be a strong man who could protect her and win her affections.

Everett's hatred increased as he approached the group seeing the man kneeling on the ground in front of his brother. He reluctantly left Kate within the safety of his men not telling her what he intended to do.

Dismounting he flicked his duster back over his hip and withdrew his six shooter without slowing his pace as Jace stepped aside. Without a word he approached the man lifted his gun and shot him between the eyes. The Colonel slumped over with a soft thud and hit the dusty earth, lifeless.

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“Son of a bitch.” He said vehemently while holstering his gun. Without a backward glance he turned and walked back to his horse.

“Let the vultures have their feast,” he said to Tyler, “He doesn’t deserve any respect.” Jace spit on the ground by the man’s body and followed his brother.

Tyler didn’t disagree. He walked over to Horse Runs Fast and clasped his arm, “I owe you.” He said.

“You bet your ass you do.” He grinned.

“Remind me why I taught you English.” He smiled.

Horse Runs Fast laughed while he turned and hopped up into the saddle, “Take care of your family brother.”

“I will.”

Six months later

Jace was pacing furiously in his father’s study as Ellie’s screams could have practically torn the house in half. His brother Everett sat on the sofa not the least bit amused by Jace’s behaviour because in a few short weeks he’d be doing the same thing. Now he’d wished it was Kate going through this first so he wouldn’t know how horrible this was going to be.

“Christ, this can’t be normal!” Jace said stopping in front of his brother while gesturing to the ceiling.

“It is.” Said his father from the door with a smile on his face. “I went through it three times. Remember, you’re a big man, so the baby won’t be small by any means.”

“How did you do it?” Jace said turning to face his father with a complete look of helplessness.

“I drank.” He said with amusement making his way over to the liquor cabinet. “Come here you two.” Ed poured both of his sons a healthy drink of whiskey.

Just then Ellie’s screams stopped and Jace fearing the worst tore out of there like the room was on fire.

“I guess it’s just you and me Everett.” He said seemingly unaffected by the frantic behaviour of his middle child.

“Is she alright?” Everett asked.

A loud squeal of a baby was his answer.

Ed nodded, handing him a glass of whiskey, “It seems we can drink to being a grandfather and an uncle.”

Everett grinned and downed the contents of the glass.

Jace didn’t care about barging in his room unannounced but he stopped dead still when he saw the infant in his wife’s arms. His eyes went to Kate and Mrs. Soter who were standing beside her grinning. Suddenly he felt overwhelmed with such emotion that he went to the bed, sat down and gathered both of them in his arms.

Mrs. Soter cleared her throat, “We’ll be back later.” She tugged Kate from the room who was already tearing up at the display.

The baby squealed and wiggled under his embrace and reluctantly Jace eased off, while his eyes looked over the baby, “He’s beautiful.” She said softly.

“She.” Said Ellie smiling.

“*She?*” he said taken back, “I was so sure it was a boy.”

“Not all Kings have to be male.” She laughed, “There’s enough of them as it is.”

“I won’t argue.” His eyes guided to her, “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “Are you okay with having a daughter?” she said allowing some worry enter his expression.

“I don’t care, as long as you’re both healthy.” He kissed her forehead. “What did you want to call her?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to call her Beth Ellen King, after our mothers.”

“It’s perfect.” He ran his finger along the babe’s soft cheek noticing that she’d already settled into a relaxed sleep but twitched her cheek at the touch. “God, she’s so *beautiful*.” He said in awe. Then he turned his attention to Ellie, “Like you.”

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She didn't know what to say. Jace always seemed to tease her when he made compliments, but this was said seriously. "You think I'm beautiful?"

"Honey, I always thought you were the most stunning woman in Cottonwood or the whole damn state for that matter. I was just too stupid to tell you." He said softly, "But I won't make that mistake again. I can't tell you how proud you've made me today. I've never done anything in my life that could equal this or even possibly come close to it. There's not one day that has gone by since I married you that I've thanked God that you're in my life." He brushed away the tears that started to fall from her large emerald eyes, "I should have said this a long time ago, but like I said, I was stupid. Ellie forgive me for not telling you how much I love you sooner."

"Jace—" she choked up unable to continue.

He touched his forehead to hers, "When I heard you screaming, I swear someone ripped my heart out."

She smiled, "I'm fine Jace. You know I'm tough."

"And you're mine." He said capturing his mouth with hers.

Epilogue

"Uncle Chance you promised!" said Austin.

Chance took his eyes off of Beth for a moment to look at Everett's oldest child. The boy was definitely his father's son. Tall for five and already ordering around their employees with that same autocratic tone his father possessed. Earlier at breakfast he promised him he'd practice roping with him. Unfortunately he'd forgotten that Beth wanted riding lessons at the same time. "You need to be patient Austin. Beth asked first. "

"yeah", came the little girl's voice on top of the roan, "And you'd better respect a lady or I'll tell your pa."

Chance howled with laughter as Austin's face contorted in anger, much like a mini Everett.

“Aw hell.” He said.

“Watch your mouth Austin.” Came Everett’s voice.

This time the boy flushed, ‘You say it pa.”

“Yeah well I’m a grown up.”

“Grown ups have all the fun.” He kicked the dirt with his boot.
“It’s not fair.”

He ruffled the top of the boy’s dark head with his large hand,
“But kids get away with a lot more, despite what your mother tells you.
Now, why the glum face?”

“Uncle Chance promised me roping lessons.” He shot an
accusing look at his uncle who just grinned and shrugged while holding
on to the lead of Beth’s roan.

“It seems that he’s busy.”

“Everyone is always busy.”

“Well your mom has her hands full with your little brother who
seems to think its fun to dig all of the ashes out of the fireplace and
paint the floors, but I’ll give you some time.” His son’s face lit up and
Everett could feel his heart swell with love for him.

“Really?”

“Sure, but we’re saddling up and heading out on the range. No
more roping a skull on a log.”

Austin released a whoop of pleasure and ran full tilt to the
corral to get his horse.

“Tell Morgan to help you.” He hollered after him.

“Sure thing.” He said over his shoulder not slowing his pace.

“He’ll put frogs in my boots over this.” Said Chance.

“Probably.” Chuckled Everett, “if he does, you got off easy. Hi
honey.” He said to Beth. The little girl was a spitting image of her
mother except she somehow ended up with dimples making her look
twice as adorable when she smiled, like she did now.

“Hi Uncle Everett!”

“Aren’t you a little old to be led around.”

She stuck out her bottom lip in an irresistible pout, “I’m older

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than Austin, but Uncle Chance says I don't practice enough."

His eyes guided to his younger brother, "Austin can take his gelding full out on the range Chance, give her some freedom while Ellie's not watching, and she'll be fine."

"Ellie will have my head. I'm not that crazy." Said Chance raising his brows.

"Just do it inside one of the corrals."

"Please!" said Beth.

Chance rolled his eyes, completely giving over to the little girl. "Don't tell your mother."

She crossed her heart in an exaggerated promise.

As chance headed toward an empty corral, Everett turned away and followed the same path his son took, but at a more relaxed pace. He couldn't be happier. Being a father changed his whole outlook on life too. He had two sons, one five, the other two and Kate exceeded his expectations in a wife and mother. He was just as much in love with her when he married her six years ago, if not more.

Jace and Ellie were expecting their second child any day now, but Beth was more than a handful being raised in a house full of boys and men, she could easily command them to do just about anything with that adorable little face of hers. He chuckled to himself. A little girl from Kate might be a nice thing to try for.



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