

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**

CINDY JACKS



LANDLØCKED

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For ten years, Kathryn has struggled to survive in a war-torn region that used to be part of the United States. Her country ripped apart and her husband presumed dead, she and her son need a miracle to find safe passage to the West. She's not expecting that miracle to come in the form of Captain Brett Logan when he stumbles, injured, onto her front porch.

A privateer for the Republic of Texas, Logan keeps one eye on the

horizon and one hand on his sidearm, knowing the life of a modern-day pirate is often short. When an enemy bomb nearly ends him, Kathryn nurses him back to health. Against her better judgment, she's drawn to the enigmatic man with his tattoos and battle scars.

Kate finds shelter in Logan's arms—and his bed. The captain navigates her body with the same skill that he sails the seven seas. The heat of their passion gives way to deeper currents. But with danger surrounding them, they must struggle to stay together and

survive.

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Chapter One

The dream was always the same —a golden-haired savior on a golden steed. No, not a steed. He was a swashbuckler, sword drawn, golden hair glinting in the midday sun. But who used swords anymore? A flaxen-haired gunslinger, a pistol on his hip. Okay, so the dream itself wasn't exactly the same, but the wish it represented was. Someone to save

her from her nightmares. Someone to hold her, to love her.

Firm lips against hers, the hint of stubble on his cheek. Probing tongue seeking hers. The feel of his hips between her thighs, his heavy frame over hers. Hot and wet and dirty sex. She craved it like chocolate or cheeseburgers. More pleasures she'd probably never know again.

Kathryn awoke in frustration to find herself in her bedroom, her hand in her panties, her most useless body part throbbing. Extracting her hand, she turned her attention to the tin roof over her,

popping as it warmed in the rising sun. She hated when her base physical needs reared their ugly heads. She hated the fantasies—they only made her waking life more unbearable. Knight in shining armor, cowboy...a pirate? As if that was ever going to happen, even if hell froze over. And Kathryn knew all about hell. She'd lived here for ten years.

* * * * *

September 7, 2013

Shoving against the latch—the one that always stuck, the one that

she always meant to fix, but never did—Kathryn threw the window open wide. A moist, hot breeze swept into the kitchen, better than no air at all. The tiny house got so stuffy. She inhaled the scent of the clouds in the distance and basil from the window box.

Seven in the morning and already the heat of the day was stifling. She clipped her long, black hair into a sloppy pile atop her head. The breeze moved across her neck, though it provided little relief. Perspiration already formed beneath her breasts, soaking into her tank top. A few drops slid

down to the waistband of her cotton skirt. A frayed thread clung to her calf. The hem needed repair – yet another task that would go neglected until she found the time to do it.

Ha, *found time*. As if time could be stored and then forgotten about like a stained copy of a recipe in an old cookbook or that key that once had a purpose, but damned if anyone could remember what it was now. Time wasn't like that. It rushed past, churning and frothing like rapids. Most days, she struggled to keep her head above water. It'd been hard enough when

Jonas had been there to help, when he'd been there to hold her when panic and fear overtook her. Swallowing hard, she dismissed his memory. *Not now.*

After she lit the wood-burning stove, she rinsed a load of laundry in a bucket of well water, then went out back to hang it. She'd have to keep an eye on the weather and bring in the wash if it rained this afternoon. The screen door slammed behind her on her way inside, arms full of the bedclothes she'd aired overnight. She folded them and set them on the counter.

From behind a bowed cabinet

door, she pulled the cornmeal, oil and salt. Tired of johnnycakes, she cast a glance at the sourdough starter on the counter. *Best to save that*, her sense of frugality warned. Marcus' birthday was next month. She'd squirreled away some sugar and cinnamon. He'd be so excited when he woke to the scent of fresh sticky buns. Kathryn smiled to herself. Eleven years old already. Life marched on regardless of the adversities surrounding it.

“Momma?”

Speak of the devil.

“Good morning, baby. How'd you sleep?”

“Good.” He yawned and stretched, sinking into a chair at the table.

They ate breakfast and she sent Marcus to do his chores while she packed the cart for market. Fresh produce and the item most in demand—homemade sour mash whiskey. It'd been a good summer. Lots of sunshine with nearly the perfect amount of rain. The same could not be said for past summers, not to mention it'd taken her a good two growing seasons to figure out how to tend a vegetable patch. Much of what she'd learned was thanks to her neighbor, Roy.

“Come on, Marcus,” she yelled, tying her wide-brimmed hat under her chin.

The boy sped out the door, clothed only in a pair of shorts—no shirt, no shoes. His golden skin glistened in the sun, his usually unruly hair wet and slicked back.

“Have you lost your mind?” she asked.

“It’s too hot today. Besides, Sam and me are going to the pond to swim. I don’t need no shoes.”

“First of all, it’s ‘Sam and *I* are going to the pond’. And you think you don’t need *any* shoes. However, I say you do so you will

go back inside and dress properly or so help me I'll leave you at home."

The dark cloud that sat above his brow more and more often these days blackened his features but he didn't argue. When he emerged from the house his feet were shod in grubby sneakers and he wore a dingy t-shirt.

"Thank you. Now let's go, please."

She picked up the handle and Marcus pushed at the back to get the wooden cart moving. Along the two-mile walk, Kathryn met up with other neighbors headed in the

same direction. At the junction of three small farming communities, the marketplace—more of a happening than a locale—was the place to be on the second and fourth Saturday of each month. She waved hello to Susannah, the local apothecary and *hostess* to male travelers, old Sampson, who sold cotton yarn and thread, and of course Roy.

Roy walked next to his mule with a plodding gait until he caught sight of Kathryn. Jogging up beside her, he took the cart handle from her. “Allow me, Miss Kate.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” she

said, but didn't object too strenuously. She took the mule's lead from her neighbor and handed it to Marcus. What harm was there in letting Roy play the gentleman? Peeking under the tarp, she saw his cart brimmed with contraband. Oil and firearms from the Republic of Texas, and coal, spices and tequila from south of the border. Since the attacks twelve years ago and the subsequent collapse of the United States, the Reformer siege had cut off supply lines to the former states that surrounded the Gulf of Mexico, now known as Gulfland—or No Man's Land as the locals called it. It

was the Reformers' attempt at choking the region into submission.

"You've been mingling with privateers," she said.

"Me?" He gave her a sly grin. "Never. I found this stuff by the side of the road."

Of course he had. Roy was the kind of man who knew how to get things. Anything...for the right price.

"Marcus," the man barked, "you're getting bigger every day."

"Yes sir."

"Your birthday's next month, right?"

“Yes sir.”

“I just might have something for you. And for you.” He turned to Kathryn, pulling from his cart a package wrapped in cloth and fastened with string.

“You shouldn’t have.” She covered her mouth with one hand. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“May I open it now?”

“Heck, yeah.”

Her fingers worked the crude knots to reveal a carved plastic comb, a sewing needle, a small glass bottle and a pot of some kind

of balm. She uncorked the bottle and inhaled. Coconut oil. “Oh Roy, thank you, but this is too much. How can I ever return this kind of favor?”

Nervous laughter shook his thin frame. “Don’t think nothin’ of it. I found those by the side of the road too.”

“Well, it’s a beautiful gift. Thank you.”

“You can use the wrapping as a scarf. The coconut stuff’s for your hair and skin, the other’s made from honey and beeswax. I think it’s for your lips.”

“And who told you that? The

bush by the side of the road?" she teased.

He twittered again.

Though he didn't want to take payment for the items, she slipped him a pint of whiskey to show her gratitude.

Kathryn found a place near the pond to set up her cart so she could keep an eye on Marcus while he fished and swam. The other children, ones with horses or mules to draw their family carts, had beaten him there and were taking flying leaps from the rope swing.

A pop of gunfire caught her attention. She scanned the woods

for Reformer troops or Resistance soldiers, but it was just some kids taking shots at a squirrel. She mopped her brow and her bosom with as much modesty as she could. Roy's gaze followed her as usual, a fact she'd learned to live with but one that still unsettled her. Ready to get out of the heat and Roy's line of sight, she set about making her trades for the day.

She'd prioritized the goods she needed in her mind. Firewood, cotton yarn and a spool of thread, clove oil, wheat flour and cream.

"Hey ya, Sampson." She carried a bushel of strawberries and a

gallon of whiskey over to the old man's cart. Despite being in his early seventies, he was still hearty and strong.

“Good day to you, Miss Kate. You look fresh as a daisy.”

“Very sweet of you. Not true, but very sweet.”

His dark skin crinkled around the edges of his eyes as he laughed. “Let me help you with that.”

He took the strawberries and poured them into a plastic crate, then placed an empty gallon bottle, thread and ten skeins of yarn into her baskets.

“Thanks for returning the bottle.

I'll refill it for you for next month."

"Much obliged. Anything else I can get for you?" he asked.

"A quarter cord of firewood. Would it be too much trouble to deliver it tomorrow?"

Sampson patted his old mare. "No trouble at all."

"Thank you." She bussed his cheek and picked up her baskets.

The morning turned to afternoon with more socializing and bartering. Her face had begun to sting from the sun and sweat, but she'd completed her shopping. Time to collect her boy and head home. She found Marcus dozing

under a birch tree. The four sun grannies he'd caught lay gutted and bound together next to him. A sigh lowered her shoulders. She'd never get the scent of fish out of his clothes.

Since he was too heavy for her to pick up anymore, she ran a hand over his freckled cheek. "Time to go home, baby."

His green eyes fluttered open. "Mommy."

Just a small, breathy term of endearment, but to Kathryn, it meant the world. When he woke up enough to realize what he was saying, he'd call her "Mom" or

“Momma” – or “Mother” if she annoyed him, but inside the haze of sleep she could still catch a glimpse of the little boy behind his rush to grow up. She brushed his hair off his forehead. With her dark coloring and his father’s startling eyes, her son’s beauty never ceased to amaze her.

“Let’s go home, baby boy.”

“Kay.” He yawned and scrambled to his feet.

Since it was much lighter than when they’d set out, she let him ride home in the cart. Once back at the farm, he bounded into the vegetable patch to do the weeding,

clearly refreshed by his nap. Kathryn envied his energy. Though her back ached and her head pounded, she had no time to rest. A long drink of well water slaked her thirst and revitalized her a bit. While she made supper, she worked on canning the last of the berries and added to her stash of canned goods. A survey of the larder gave her something akin to peace, for the moment at least. They'd have plenty to eat this winter.

“Marcus,” she called him to the table.

The screen door slammed,

announcing his arrival. "Smells good."

"Yes, the fish you caught fried up nicely. Go wash up, please."

The boy's chest swelled with pride. Ever since his father had been gone, Marcus did his best to emulate what he could remember of the man. One thing Jonas had always been good at was fishing.

They ate dinner while Kathryn read to him from one of his favorite books, *Treasure Island*. If he'd heard the story once, he'd heard it a thousand times, but he never tired of it. Sad would be the day when he no longer thrilled at the adventures

of Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver. Or *Robinson Crusoe* for that matter. The novels were some of the only things she'd managed to take with her from the old country.

The chapter and their meal finished, she sent him to his bedroom to change into his pajamas. At the rate he was growing, she'd have to knit him another tunic this winter.

As the moon rose in the night sky, she kissed his brow and wished him sweet dreams. Marcus didn't protest much and soon the sound of snores carried from the bedroom—charming her in the way only a

child's snores could.

Then, and only then, did she allow herself to ease into her rocking chair by the oil lamp. After lighting the wick, she poured herself two fingers of whiskey, a nightly ritual that included praying for Jonas. If the man were still alive, she prayed for his safe return one day. If he'd met his end, she prayed his soul was at rest. Even after five years, she didn't know what to believe. He wasn't the kind of man who abandoned his family, but she didn't like to think that he'd died trying to save them either.

"We're doing well, Jonas," she

said to the darkness outside her window. A rustle and hushed voices contradicted her

“Goddamn it,” she swore under her breath. Uninvited guests were never a good thing in Gulfland. Grabbing the lamp, she jumped to her feet and fetched the flare gun and shotgun from the safe in the kitchen. Out back, she set off one flare and loaded the double barrel. Deliberate, quiet footsteps carried her to the front of the house. She got the drop on three men—two white, one Hispanic.

“You fellas lost?” she asked.

They turned to her, each

wearing a sneer. The two white guys were tall, thick and looked a bit inbred, with sloping foreheads and noses too small for their faces. They could be brothers. The Hispanic man was shorter but no less beefy. They all smelled like a spittoon, or maybe more like a urinal.

“You got no business here,” she went on. “If you want to get out of here with only the holes in your body the good lord gave you, I suggest you leave, now.”

“Simmer down, missy. We’re just looking for some hospitality, that’s all. We can make it worth

your while," the tallest one spoke. Even in the dim light, she could tell he was built like a brick shithouse.

"Sorry. There's only enough for me and the mister." Her shotgun jerked toward Jonas' old pair of mud boots, which she kept on the porch for just such an occasion.

Another sneer. "What kind of man lets his woman come out to face three strangers like us?"

"He can tell light work when he sees it."

At this they laughed.

"And in case y'all are too stupid to notice, that flare tells my neighbors there are some unwanted

visitors here.”

Brick Shithouse took a few steps toward her. “I’m betting none of them things is true.”

“Well, believe this.” She cocked the shotgun. “I’ll unload both barrels if you take one more step.”

The man studied her face, crossing his arms over his massive chest. Kathryn’s heart pounded its way into her throat. If they didn’t leave, she knew she could drop one, maybe two of them, but that left the third one to contend with while she reloaded. And where the hell was Roy?

“I suppose I’m inclined to

believe you," Shithouse said. "We'll be on our way."

She didn't reply but stood inert, frozen to her spot on the lawn as she watched them slowpoke their way down the dirt path and toward Sampson's farm. The man's pit bulls would eat them alive if they decided to drop in on him.

Shaking, she lowered herself to the porch steps and fought the urge to vomit. The clip clop of hooves announced Roy's approach. He looked comical, a Tec-9 strapped to his chest, riding up on his little mule, the beast galloping as fast as her stubby legs would carry her.

Kathryn's knight in shining armor on his steed—not exactly as she dreamed him.

“You all right, Kate?” he asked.

“Yeah, just some drifters. I ran them off already.” She wiped her forehead. “What the hell took you so long?”

Roy dismounted his less than noble steed. “I was—I was in the outhouse.”

“Oh. Well, there's nothing to worry about now.”

Looking around, he ran a hand through his dishwater-brown hair. “If you want, I'll stay out here for a couple hours so you can get some

rest.”

“Go home, Roy. It’s fine.” She stood and straightened her skirt.

“Really, I’ll stay awhile.”

“Suit yourself.”

She went into the house to put away the shotgun. The fact that she and Marcus could’ve been gang raped and murdered by the time he’d shown up gnawed at her. And now he wanted to play tough guy? Kathryn took a steadying breath. Though she tried to be annoyed with him, she couldn’t muster the energy. Instead, she brewed a pot of tea and brought it out to him.

“Is that the tea set I gave you for

Christmas?" he asked.

"It is. I only bring it out when I have special company."

"Thanks." He grinned up at her. His expression reminded her of a runty puppy she'd seen at the pound as a little girl. Hard to stay angry with a runty puppy.

"Good night, Roy. Thanks for standing guard." She gave him a quick hug and headed inside.

"Good night, Kate."

When sunrise came, she found Roy still there, asleep in the porch swing, snuggling with his machine gun.

Chapter Two

Saline spray rose up off the ocean and Captain Logan's purse seiner, *The Yellow Rose*, carved her way through the choppy Gulf of Mexico waters. A garish vessel, painted red, white and blue, it flew the Texas flag and operated under the protection those colors afforded. Despite the blockades along the Gulf Coast and the trouble up North, his ship was

rarely boarded by Reformer inspectors. The old adage still rang true – *Don't mess with Texas* – a fact Captain Logan relied upon. And exploited.

His small crew did busywork to ready the ship for dock. He checked the horizon with his binoculars. Even with the maximum magnification, the island of Galveston appeared as a mere smudge in the distance. Still, they were making good time. In another hour or so, they'd make port. The sizable man sank into his seat on the bridge. Weary from over two weeks either at sea or lying low in

the swamps of Gulfland, he looked forward to a few days at home. No more salt cod and flatbread or canned beef stew. He couldn't wait to sink his teeth into an Angus burger. Or a porterhouse. Or Blanca's barbecue brisket. His lean stomach growled and the thought of Blanca reminded him of other neglected needs.

Jacques, his first mate, peeked into the doorway. "Everything's shipshape, *mon capitaine*." The dark-skinned creole laughed at his favorite joke.

Logan did his best to crack a smile. No matter how long between

ports, Jacques DuBois was always in a good mood, a trait that annoyed the captain to no end.

“Is the extra cargo well sealed?”

“*Bien sûr*. Don't worry.” Jacques clapped an arm around his friend. “We've done this a couple times before.”

At this Logan did laugh. In truth, they'd done this same run along the Gulfland coast well over two hundred times, and every time they came back loaded down with silver, gold and Republic credits that would be hard to explain for a humble fishing vessel.

Pouring a shot of tequila for

himself and one for Logan, the man pulled up a wooden crate to sit on. "I'm worried about you."

The captain threw back his drink and let the burn fade before he replied, "What on earth for?"

"You look tired. Not the kind of tired that a few days' rest will fix, but deep down soul kind of tired. That raid last month got bloody."

"Wasn't my blood, so what's the big deal?"

"I'm just saying, with that sort of thing hanging over his head, a man can get sloppy, make mistakes."

Logan shrugged. Heads rolled in

the course of his business. Jacques knew that as well as anyone else. And all their men came home. The same couldn't be said for that band of Reformer troops. Oh well. Foreign bastards had invaded the United States at its weakest and torn it apart. To hell with all of them.

“If you don't want to come on the next run, that's fine.”

“Don't get me wrong, *mon ami*.” Jacques rolled his glass between his thick hands. “I'm just telling you what I hear.”

“So the rest of the crew has lost confidence in me too?”

Jacques got to his feet and shook his head. “You’re the most pigheaded— I’m not saying anyone’s lost confidence, but there’s a reason they call you ‘Loco Logan’. I’m saying you need to take a longer break.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Logan said, though he had no intention of doing so. He scooted down into his chair and pulled his Stetson over his gray eyes. “Wake me when we make port.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The slaps of Jacques’s boot soles against the ship’s teak deck receded as Logan gave over to the pull of

sleep.

* * * * *

What is that heavenly sensation?

Logan wondered, swimming up through the haze of slumber. A sleepy smile parted his lips. *Blanca*. Docking at port and the trip to the cantina was a blur, but falling into bed with her last night was seared into his memory. And now her warm mouth on his...*oh my God*.

He opened his eyes to find her silky hair—the color of roasted chestnuts—spread out across his lap. “Mmm. Good morning.”

She laughed, tongue running along his inner thigh. “Did I wake you?”

“Parts of me more than others, not that I’m complaining.”

Sliding her bare breasts across his groin and up his abdomen, she planted a kiss on his lips. “Are you hungry?”

One arm cradled her neck and the other swept her hair from her face as he rolled her onto her back. He grazed his lip over the perfumed skin of her neck. “Very.”

Her body offered no resistance as he sank himself inside her – quite the opposite. Liquid heat, soft, wet

flesh enveloped his shaft. He ached to let go, but refused to ruin the moment by jumping the gun. He wouldn't rob himself of the glorious feel of her body quaking beneath him, her cries moaned in stilted Spanish, her teeth sinking into his shoulder. A woman of equal passion he'd never had—though he'd sampled enough trying to find one.

Defiance flashed in her velvety brown eyes. Twisting her hips upward, she flipped him onto his back, straddled him and pinned his arms with her knees. He winced against the pain but didn't object. It

wouldn't do any good if he did.

A waterfall of curls cascaded over her shoulders and brushed the tops of her fleshy breasts. She rubbed a hand along her neck, stopping to caress her nipples, then settling it between her legs. Massaging her clit as she rode him, she grew tighter and slicker. Muscles inside her gripped his cock as if trying to take it deeper. Always happy to oblige, Logan thrust his pelvis against hers. Her face contorted in a mask of ecstasy, whimpers and incoherent exclamations heralded her orgasm. But even once the contractions

within her subsided, she didn't slow her pace.

Bracing herself with both hands against his chest, she continued to ride him until he bucked and swore. He wrenched his arms free and grasped her shapely hips. Burying himself inside her, he clung to her until the raging climax calmed.

Blanca leaned forward and tasted his lips, more of a punctuation to their coupling than a kiss. She let her frame go limp against him.

"I think you missed me," he said, wrapping her body with his.

“Quizás. But only a little.”

Logan put a hand to his chest, feigning an invisible wound. “You’re just cruel.”

“Which is why you love me.”

Did he love her? He enjoyed her company, and that was good enough. His lips skimmed her brow. “One of these days, maybe you’ll let me make an honest woman out of you.”

She chuffed sharply and looked up at him. “As if I’m not already honest.”

That she was, brutally so. He knew he wasn’t the only man in her life, she made no secret of the

fact, even flaunted it on occasion.

“And,” she went on, “making me an honest woman implies that you would be an honest man. But you aren’t. Why do you have to ruin our arrangement? When you’re here, you’re here. And when you’re not...you’re *not*.”

Game, set, match—Blanca. His hands raised in surrender, he said, “All right. All right. I know when I’m licked.”

She giggled and passed a finger over his cheek. “But I haven’t even started licking yet.”

Her hand wandered between his legs, sending a jolt of sensation

through him. He shuddered, too sensitive to enjoy her touch. "Just thirty minutes, darlin'. Give me thirty minutes to recuperate."

But with Blanca's expert attention, he didn't need that long.

* * * * *

Broken trowel in hand, Kathryn fought the urge to curse like a sailor. That made five broken tools this summer. She couldn't put off asking Roy to find someone to repair them. Maybe he'd have one she could borrow for the time being.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she walked through the garden along a cobblestone path to the shed. The staked tomato and pepper plants gave the sea of green splotches of color. Herbs rustling their foliage perfumed the gentle breeze. Bees flitted from blossom to blossom. But instead of seeing the beauty surrounding her, she saw only work. Hard, hot, back-breaking work. Relentless labor, because survival required constant and daily vigilance. Everything she did, each little decision she made revolved around her and her son's physical needs.

The shed door creaked on its rusty hinges. One day soon it would fall off too. Splintered and grayed, the aging wood degraded year by year. It had looked much younger when they'd first come here, fleeing from Northern Virginia and the Reformer invasion of Washington, D.C. The memory of the fallen towers in New York and then the capitol city burning two years later still haunted her.

She and Jonas had headed southwest—as most Americans had—for the newly formed nation of the Republic of Texas. Marcus was only a baby at the time. They'd

stopped in Alabama to rest and restock their food supplies only to find Jonas' family-owned farm deserted, no sign of his relatives. The plan had been to stay only until the fighting died down and Jonas could find safe transportation to Texas—the Gulf of Mexico being the easiest place to cross. That was ten years ago. Somehow their plans to move on always fell through. Marcus was sick or there were too many raids or they had to save up supplies for the journey. Until the day five years ago that Jonas felt compelled to leave.

A familiar pain stabbed at her

heart. She missed her husband, but at the same time, she couldn't stave off the anger that he'd left her alone—as irrational as it was. Granted, he'd left to find a way to get them to a safer place, but even if he were dead, he'd gotten the easy part of that deal. It'd been much harder to soldier on day after day—the fear, the labor and the monotony they'd once shouldered together she now faced alone.

Kathryn chucked the trowel in a rusted wheelbarrow that was missing a wheel. No point in speculation. There were potatoes and yams to be harvested, the still

to check, pails of water to fetch, floors to scrub, supper to prepare. A rustle behind drew her attention. Hat in hand, Roy stood by the garden gate.

“What a pleasant surprise,” she said, trying to keep the annoyance she felt out of her voice.

He held out a boxy object wrapped in brown paper. “I thought you could use this.”

Walking over to him, she let the shed door flop closed. Unsure of whether or not to take the item, she hesitated. “Now you have to stop spoiling me like this.”

“Really, it’s nothing.”

She tore open the paper to find a waxy, cream-colored block with flecks of purple throughout. One whiff told her this was something rare and expensive in these parts. “Is this lavender soap?”

“It is.”

Though she wanted to keep it—it smelled divine compared to the lye and vegetable oil concoction she usually used—she wrapped it up again and put it into Roy’s hands. Her voice as soft as she could make it, she murmured, “This is too much. You should save it for market or someone who can pay you for it.”

“B-but I want you to have it.”

How to say gently what she wanted to say? Laying a hand on his forearm, she said, “Roy, when you give me lavish presents I feel... inadequate. I have nothing I can give you that’s of equal value so then I feel indebted to you. Does that make sense?”

He didn’t speak at first, his gaze seeming to study the intricacies of his shoelaces. Finally, when her meaning dawned on him, he shook his head. “No, Kate. Heavens, no. That’s not why I give you nice things. Before Jonas left, he asked me to help take care of you and

Marcus, if I could. And I can. That's why."

Kathryn doubted the veracity of this statement but she decided to take it at face value. The soap smelled so damn good. "Well, if that's why then I suppose it's okay. I just didn't want to give you the wrong signals. You understand."

"Yes ma'am. I absolutely do." He gave her the package and smiled. Again with the runty puppy look.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked.

"I would love some water. Thank you, Kate."

Roy followed her, his shuffling gait strengthening the puppy likeness in her mind. She could almost feel him nipping at her heels. Once inside the house, her eyes took a few minutes to adjust to the dim light. Marcus sat at the kitchen table, practicing his lessons. He may never have need of reading, writing or arithmetic but Kathryn would be damned if she'd raise an illiterate child. The war would hopefully end during his lifetime and if it did, she wanted him to have the skills to discover there was more to life than crushing physical labor.

“Hey, Mr. Jackson. What are you doing here?” he asked. “Want to play ball?”

“Not until you finish your essay,” Kathryn cut in.

Roy shrugged. “She’s the boss. But when you’re finished, I’d love to play catch.”

Pretending to gather ingredients for dinner, she sneaked glances at the man. The collar on Roy’s shirt was a little frayed and his boots bore a variety of scuffs and scratches, but other than these minor signs of wear and tear, his clothing was in much better repair than hers.

His hair and fingernails were clean. She bet he owned a pair of gardening gloves. When he smiled – which he did a little too often – his teeth looked to be in good shape. His body was a little too thin and his features too sharp, still, he obviously had things he could offer her. And Marcus. The thought alarmed her, but then again, she couldn't pretend any longer that Jonas was coming back and she was so very tired of trying to cope on her own.

Was it weak of her to think this way? And at this point, did she really care if it was? Roy was

obviously smitten with her. Why not take advantage of that? And it wasn't as if he wouldn't get what he wanted out of the bargain.

Ignoring the lump in her throat, she asked, "Roy, would you like to stay for dinner?"

Delight lit up the man's face. "I would love to. But only if I can contribute some fresh peaches for dessert."

She bit her lip and smiled. "That would be lovely."

Chapter Three

Captain Logan watched his crew load up *The Yellow Rose* with three weeks' worth of supplies for their voyage to Portersville Bay, Alabama. Or what used to be Alabama. As part of the Gulfland territory, the area had no formal government anymore.

Going through his mental checklist, he surveyed the containers as they passed by him.

Food, water, clothing, blankets, toiletries, storm gear and of course the cargo. On this run they were smuggling various firearms and medical supplies past the Reformer blockade to three rebellion outposts near Mobile. Rifles, machine guns, grenades—whatever they could procure from Texas and Mexico and supply to the Resistance. Granted, he and the crew were richly rewarded for their efforts, but for Logan it was more about supporting his former countrymen. The Resistance was the only hope for Americans who longed to see their country reunited and free.

The humid night air attached itself to his skin like a woolen cloak, but with no moon and no other traffic it was the perfect evening to ship out. Logan brushed his hair back from his forehead and put on his Stetson. His flame-stitched cowboy boots carried him aboard the vessel. Jacques stood on deck supervising the men.

“Report, First Mate DuBois,” Logan said.

“Aye, Captain. This here’s the last of the supplies to load. Cargo’s secured in the extra hold. Fishing nets ready to deploy. All crewmembers are present and

accounted for.”

Logan clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man. What says our friend in port authority?”

“With skirmishes in the Outer Banks, the Chesapeake Bay and off the coast of Maine, the Reformer navy is spread thin. About a third of the blockade vessels have been called to duty elsewhere.”

“We couldn’t ask for better conditions. And you’ll be happy to know I got plenty of rest at Blanca’s.”

“I’m sure you didn’t get out of bed, but that’s not the same thing as resting, Captain.”

Logan smiled and shook his head. "After I make my rounds, I'll be in my quarters working on the charts. There are some weather systems out there I'd rather not tangle with. Have Clark take the first shift at the wheel. You take it at midnight and I'll take over at dawn in case we get stopped by Reformer inspectors."

When faced with six feet three inches of card-carrying Texas citizen who always had a .45 on his hip, the Reformers usually waved Logan and his "fishing boat" through any checkpoints. And it'd been months since *The Yellow Rose*

had been boarded. The captain liked to think of the thinning Reformer presence as a good sign. Maybe the tide had turned and the Resistance was gaining ground.

A quick walk-through of the ship showed everything running smoothly, just as Jacques had said.

They don't respect what you don't inspect, the voice in Logan's head echoed. Brett Logan, Senior. What a piece of shit that man had been. Hard drinking and he had this way of backhanding Brett Logan, Junior that left the admiral's knuckle prints on his son's cheek.

“Shut up, Dad,” Logan

grumbled, pushing away his father's ghost.

Dim lights lined the passage to the belly of the ship. The narrow stairwell to his private quarters groaned under his weight. Jacques had offered many times to repair the creaking boards, but Logan told him to leave them. No one could ever sneak up on him with them in place. He didn't worry about this crew, but it wasn't as though running guns attracted the most upstanding of sailors. One could never be too careful.

A low chest with shallow drawers held his navigation charts.

Though *The Yellow Rose* boasted three GPS locators, he preferred to plot their course the old-fashioned way. No reason to allow his movements to be tracked unless absolutely necessary. Besides he could do the run with his eyes closed. But sailing required an attention to detail he took seriously. His life and the lives of his crewmembers depended on him doing everything right. Powerful storms, various obstructions—both man-made and natural—not to mention those pesky Reformer warships made each journey a matter of life and death. *Sudden*

death, if they were caught dropping a shipment of guns to a rebel group. His compass and ruler in hand, he set about his work.

A half hour later, a knock at his door interrupted him – Cookie with Logan’s evening snifter of brandy and Cuban cigar.

“You need anything else from the galley tonight, Captain?” Cookie asked.

“That should do it, thanks.”

The door creaked shut as Logan lit his stogie. Taking slow, absentminded puffs, he studied his work. After he’d triple-checked it, he summoned Jacques to take the

updated charts to the bridge.

Work finished and facing an early shift at the wheel tomorrow, Logan sipped his brandy and settled into his bunk with a novel. Sometimes reading quieted his mind, blocked out haunting memories that shook him from his slumber, nauseated and drenched in sweat. No such luck tonight. By midnight, he abandoned the prospect of sleep altogether.

* * * * *

Kathryn's hands ached as she mixed a sweet potato batter, but at

least the last of the harvest was in. Roy had been a big help pulling up the potatoes and yams.

A small pork roast with apples simmered on the wood-burning stove. She heated the griddle and poured the first batch of pancakes. The heat of the kitchen made her a little lightheaded; she pushed at the sticky window latch—except this time it didn't stick. A feeling of wonderment tugged her brows together. Roy must've fixed it. There were some advantages to having another pair of hands around the house.

Actually, there were a lot of

advantages. The sound of him and Marcus playing ball floated through the open window. The boy's laughter tended a spot in her heart that otherwise lay neglected. She called Marcus and Roy to supper. That Roy thought to stop and wash his hands—and remind Marcus to wash his—impressed her. She could let her guard down a smidgen now that she had backup. Yes, that was the perfect word to describe how she'd come to think of her neighbor the past couple weeks. Backup.

Roy led the prayer before they tucked into their meal. He wasn't much for dinnertime conversation,

but neither was Marcus. They both ate with gusto while she stopped to cut her meat or take a sip of water. They finished long before her. Roy supplied two chocolate bars for dessert. Marcus wolfed down his share in three seconds flat. After a few hands of cards, the grandfather clock in the living room sounded eight.

“Bedtime,” Kathryn announced. “You, young man, need to brush your teeth after all that chocolate. And thank Mr. Jackson for the candy bar.”

Marcus pushed away from the table. “Thank you, Mr. Jackson.”

“You’re welcome.” Roy turned to Kathryn. “Hey, while you’re getting Marcus settled, there’s something I need to get from my house.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

He made a locking motion over his mouth. The man and his surprises. True, he meant well and they were always pleasant surprises, but Kathryn knew one day he’d call in all those favors. It was only human nature.

Once Marcus brushed his teeth, she settled him in his bedroom. She wondered, at his age, if things were normal—if Marcus had grown up

in a saner world, would he still want her to tuck him in? But he lived in a world of explosions, poverty and disappearing fathers. He was very much afraid of the night and justified in being so.

“What would you like me to read?” she asked.

He rubbed his eyes and yawned again. “*Treasure Island.*”

“*Again?* We just finished it last night.”

“Pleeease. I like the pirates.”

“Okay, okay.”

The cover of the book hung on by only a few threads. She picked it

up with care and began to read. In about a half hour, the boy's breathing evened out and she knew she could slip away.

She closed the door to Marcus' room and walked to the front porch. Roy waited there. He whisked a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from behind his back and presented her with it.

Smiling at the gift, she said, "I'd ask you where you got this, but I know the answer to that. Let me fetch some glasses."

When she returned with two canning jars, Roy popped the cork with his Swiss Army knife.

“I think it’s supposed to breathe a little bit...whatever that means,” he said.

She set the glasses down and took a seat next to him on the swing. Back arrow straight and hands resting palm down on his rigid legs, he looked like a boy waiting outside the principal’s office.

“It’s a little cooler tonight than it has been,” she noted.

“Yeah, it’s not too bad.”

A symphony of cricket chirps did little to fill the uncomfortable silence between them. Looking up at the stars, she tried to remember

the names of constellations from her college astronomy class. It felt like a lifetime ago since she'd had the time to concern herself with such trivial things.

Roy picked up the glasses and poured each of them some wine.

"Thank you." Kathryn took her glass.

Roy gave a halfhearted toast, "Cheers."

"Cheers."

No longer accustomed to the flavor of wine, she was overwhelmed by the heavy fruit flavors. Not that she'd been a connoisseur back in the old days.

Funny how things that were only ten years gone manifested themselves in her mind as *old*—the old days, the old country, her old life—when it was the existence she eked out now that made her *feel* old.

Without any prelude to the bold gesture, Roy clamped her free hand in his. “Kate, I... I got something I need to say.”

She sipped at her wine and steeled herself. “Okay. What’s on your mind?”

“You know I got nothing but respect for you and I know as well as anyone how much you loved

Jonas. And he loved you too —”

“I prefer not to think of my husband in the past tense.”

He released her hand, leaving it damp, and wiped his palm over his pants leg. “Right. Sorry. I didn’t mean to imply... But you’ve waited five years, and *I’ve* waited five years.” He hung his head. “This isn’t coming out right.”

After another sip of wine, she offered him a consoling pat on the shoulder. “Just say it. Don’t worry about the ‘right’ words.”

Roy took a staccato breath and blew it out. “What I’m trying to say is that I like you. I always have, but

Jonas was—is a friend, so I never said anything. And I know you don't feel the same way about me. I'm not much to look at and I'm not smart like Jonas. But I've got some money saved up and I want to help. Not that my help is conditional on you...you know... 'cause it's not." His words choked off.

She put a gentle hand on the side of his cheek. "Help with what?"

"If you'll go with me, I can take you and Marcus to Texas. And from there we can go anywhere. California, Washington, Canada. Hell, Paris if you'd like. France, not

Texas. Unless you want to go to Paris, Texas.”

“That’s very kind of you, but—”

“Now, don’t say no yet. Please, don’t say no. I’m not proposing anything sleazy. I mean, if you get so you like having me around, if you give me a chance, nothing would make me happier. But like I said, taking my help doesn’t mean you’d have to take me.

“Think about it, Kate. There’s only so long the Gulfland rebels can hold off the Reformers. There’s violence in this area every day. You and Marcus gotta get while the getting is good. I can help with

that. I *want* to help with that.”

As much as she'd anticipated this moment, she found that none of her prepared responses came to mind. She picked at a string on her frayed shirt. “Roy, I-I don't know what to say. I gave up hope of ever getting out of here a while ago and now...”

She didn't finish her thought, the unspoken truth hanging between them—she didn't love Roy and never would, no matter what he did or said.

“Well, don't answer tonight. Sleep on it. Please. Just think about it.” His hand brushed by hers,

hovering for a second and then retreating.

“Yeah. Of course I’ll think about it. I’d be crazy not to.”

“All right then. I’ll let you be. Good night, Kate.” He planted a rushed peck on her cheek and rose to leave, then hesitated. “Think about it, please?”

She nodded and waved, one hand still gripping her glass of wine. The genie was out of the bottle—now what the hell was she supposed to do?

* * * * *

17 SEP 2013, 0700 hours. Weather, fair. Course, steady. Crew – bored out of their minds. They've swabbed the main deck so many times, I'm afraid they might wear through it.

Logan closed the book and sought out his first mate. He found Jacques in the pilothouse.

“Bonjour, mon capitaine. Comment ça va?” the man asked.

“Smooth sailing. A bit too smooth. You know what I'm thinking?”

DuBois grimaced. “Midnight Mexicali?”

“Midnight Mexicali with flaming tequila shots.”

“If I may suggest, Captain, how about just regular tequila shots? Last time we served them flaming, Cookie nearly burnt down the galley.”

“That had less to do with the flaming and more to do with the number of shots Cookie ingested. Liar’s dice isn’t his game.”

“True, but still, couldn’t hurt to err on the side of caution.”

Logan scratched the stubble on his chin. “You make a good point. Who’s been the biggest pain in the ass this trip?”

“Graves.”

“Put him and Chaplain O’ Bryan on notice that they’re pulling twenty-four-hour duty starting at twenty-three hundred hours. Everyone else is welcome to participate. Tell Cookie to open a case of the *reposado*. It’s going to be a good night.”

“*Oui*, or a very bad one.”

“You worry too much.” The captain rolled his eyes.

“One of us has to, sir.”

That night, music poured from the sound system in the mess deck.

Tequila shots flowed as freely as the Rio Grande. The sailors had broken into smaller groups, betting and bluffing through round after round of dice. Weeks' worth of wages changed hands until only a few players remained a couple hours later, Captain Logan among them.

First Mate DuBois suggested they break to sleep off some of the *Cuervo reposado*. Cookie would wake them at dawn, but Logan woke long before the man knocked on his door.

His own hoarse cry ripped him from his slumber, bunk dampened with sweat that rolled off him like

the rain shower beating at the porthole. Choked with emotion—fear and anger—he bolted upright. Goddamn night terrors. He'd suffered them since he was a child. Drawing in the humid air of his cabin, he tried to slow his ragged breath. As if the mattress held some sort of virulent disease, he hurried out of bed. He didn't bother to cover his nudity, but made a beeline for the washbasin and splashed water on his face. Cool droplets raced down his lean chest and back. Meeting his own gaze, he studied his light eyes and hair, just like his father's. He turned away

from the mirror with disgust. Forty-two years old and nightmares still shook him, reduced him to a quivering mass of fear just like they had when he was three or four. One should not have graying temples and still be afraid of the dark. Of course it wasn't the dark that scared him. Perfectly horrible things happened in the light of day. Pulling on a pair of fresh jeans and a loose cotton shirt, he waited for Cookie to summon him to the mess deck.

Three chapters of an old novel later, Cookie's nasal voice carried through the wood door, "Thirty

minutes, Captain.”

With another glance in the mirror, Logan told himself to put on his game face.

When Logan joined his crew, two men sat at the captain’s table. One he knew well, a sailor by the name of Dandy—so dubbed because the man had a penchant for shoes—the other didn’t look old enough to have hair on his privates.

Logan took his seat at the table. “What’s your name, son?”

“Carver. James Carver, sir.”

“Well, Jimmy, take a good look at that pile of money now, because in about two hours, it’ll all be

mine.”

Carver laughed at Logan’s good-natured teasing.

The game play resumed with a round of shots for the players. The men rolled the dice, capitalizing on their good luck and trying to bluff their way through bad throws. An hour and a half later, Dandy was nearly tapped out, but Logan and Carver were still flush.

Shaking the dice cup, Carver asked, “How do you pick the men that go on a drop with you, Captain?”

“Depends who’s unlucky enough to get the short straw.

Why?" Logan replied.

"I'd like to go on the next run."

"Don't get too big for your britches, boy."

Carver rolled a sixty-five and tossed twenty credits into the pot. The dice passed to Dandy who tossed in the last of his cash but rolled only fifty-one.

On his toss, Logan called out, "Mexicali."

"Liar," Dandy declared.

Logan lifted the cup hiding the dice to show a two and a one. He had indeed rolled a Mexicali—the combination that beat all.

Conceding defeat, Dandy pushed away from the table. "That's it for me. 'Night y'all." Carver bid the man good night.

Scraping in his winnings, Logan asked, "What say we put an end to this contest—next roll we both go all in."

The young man sneered. "What's the matter, can't hang, old man?"

The insubordination irked Logan, but he decided to laugh it off. "That's Captain Old Man to you. You game or not?"

A toothy grin on his face, Carver agreed to the terms of the bet,

adding one caveat — “If I win, I also get to go on the next run.”

“You touched, boy? Is that why you keep harping on this subject?”

“My dad used to say it’s all about making connections in life. I figure who better to sponge connections off than Captain Loco Logan.”

Logan chewed on the end of his cigar. “Now you’re just kissing ass, but I’ll take your terms. Point’s moot anyhow because I’m about to wipe the floor with you.”

“Aye, Captain Old Man.”

The kid had *cojones*, that was for

sure, perhaps more *cojones* than brains, but Logan couldn't help but take a shine to him. He shook the cup of dice and slammed it down on the table. A brief look revealed that Logan had rolled a measly forty-one.

"Five hundred," Logan lied.

Carver checked his dice, his face screwed up in thought. "Liar."

Nodding, Logan pulled the cup away and took the required shot of tequila. Carver's turn to roll, the boy announced that he had two hundred.

"Liar," Logan said, certain Carver was bluffing.

When the young man whisked away the cup, displaying two ones, a cheer went up from the crew. Carver raked in the sizable pot as Logan tipped his hat to him. The crew's cheerful mood was the best reward Logan could've hoped for. Happy men were productive men. He patted the young sailor on the shoulder and shook his hand. It'd been a very long time since someone had bested him at dice.

"See you at the drop, Captain."
Carver grinned.

"Be careful what you wish for."
Logan stood, stretching and yawning. Then he graciously

bowed out. Let the kid have his moment in the sun.

* * * * *

The Zodiac dipped lower in the water, weighed down with the last load of cargo. Logan pulled the brim of his off-white Stetson over his eyes to shield them from the afternoon sun. Peering down from the bow, Jacques tossed him the rope that had tethered the motorized raft to *The Yellow Rose*.

“Same drill as always?” the Cajun asked.

“You know it. If Carver and I

aren't back in an hour, ship out without us. No heroics. Now get back to fishing waters before a blockade ship spots you."

"Aye, aye, Captain. And you be careful, I'm getting a bad vibe today."

"You always get a bad vibe on drop day. See ya in an hour." Logan cranked the engine and steered the boat toward the beach. The hull jumped and splashed, cruising over light, choppy waves. White foam churned behind him. Clear skies, clear beach, on-time Resistance caravan, last load headed ashore, what could go wrong today? Knock

on—er...PVC. Logan tapped the side of the raft.

Several feet from the coast, he killed the motor and coasted onto the sand. Seaman Carver stood, hands on hips, looking every bit as young as he was. Logan tried to remember a time when his own eyes held a spark of adventure like that, but he couldn't. The kid had short, coffee-colored hair without a lick of gray and unlined skin stretched over lean muscle; he couldn't have been more than eighteen or nineteen.

“You trying to get shot?” Logan asked him.

“Captain?”

“You see any of the other soldiers out here in the open?”

“No sir.”

“There’s a reason for that. Wait in the woods until the truck’s ready.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Logan pulled the brim of his hat down farther, heading for a copse of scrubby pines. The Resistance officer in charge of this pickup, Lieutenant Ty Wiggins, met him with a handshake. “Captain Logan, you motherfucker, how’s it going?”

“Can’t complain, Ty.” The

captain returned the other man's strong grip.

"We're ready to load. Let's see if we can get everyone out of here in one piece."

Logan followed his friend to a black utility vehicle. A locked aluminum box held several thousand in gold and gems—watches, rings, necklaces, all donated by patriots or taken off fallen Reformer soldiers. Logan could fence the swag once he hit Texan soil again.

"Your former country thanks you," said Ty, handing off the box.

"I have faith it will be my

country again one day very soon.”

The two men continued to chat while a team of five guys plus Carver finished loading up the crates. They heard the plane long before they could get a visual on it.

“Get in the truck,” Ty ordered.

Logan scanned the trail for Carver. Where the hell had that boy gone?

“I gotta find my man.” Logan headed for the beach.

“Get in the truck, Captain!” But the lieutenant’s calls went unheeded.

As fast as his legs would carry

him, Logan sprinted to the beach. Carver was dragging the last box toward the pines.

“Carver, let’s go, get in one of the trucks,” Logan yelled.

The kid didn’t seem to hear him.

“Carver. *Carver.*” Damn him. The boy had headphones stuffed in his ears. Logan had told Carver to leave that fucking thing on the ship...hadn’t he? No time to second-guess himself now.

Running up to him, Logan shook the kid and pulled out the earbuds. “Bomber headed our way. Move it, son. Jump in a truck.”

The color drained from Carver’s

face. They hightailed it across the white sand—the kid took off like a shot and outpaced Logan by a good two yards. *That's it, boy. Move it.* Too many young men had died already, this one wouldn't if Logan had anything to say about it. Unfortunately he knew all too well that God didn't give a damn about what Logan had to say.

Ty and his crew were already on the go. Logan understood the decision. The weapons and vehicles were worth more than the lives of two sailors. One truck trailed behind, a soldier hanging out the back encouraging them to jump in.

Logan was too far behind to catch up, his lungs burned—his age and penchant for cigars taking their toll—but at least the kid would make it. Logan watched Carver pick up his knees higher, pump his legs harder and nearly catch the hand offered to him.

Then the world exploded.

Blinding light and unbearable heat knocked Logan backward. He saw a glimpse of blue sky, a trail of black smoke and then nothing.

Nothing except pain and darkness.

Chapter Four

Logan's eyelids felt as though they were made of concrete. He managed to open them a little. A dim pink sky told him he must've been out for an hour or so. Reaching up to feel his head, he expected to find a cleaver there. Wet and sticky. His hand came away bloody, but he didn't feel any shrapnel embedded in his skull.

He sat up and immediately

regretted doing so. The charred scrub pines in front of him tilted and spun. Bile and acid raced up his throat along with bits of salty fish. Turning to the side, he gurgled and retched. Pain shot through his torso each time his abdominal muscles contracted. Once he'd emptied his stomach, he dabbed at his mouth and chin with his shirt sleeve.

After several minutes, his vision steadied enough for him to scramble to his feet. His legs buckled and threatened to falter, but somehow managed to support his weight. Blood-soaked, his shirt clung to his skin. A thin scrap of

metal about the size of a playing card protruded from his right side. Other cuts and swollen knots covered his arms and legs. He felt like a human pincushion or, more aptly, a poorly butchered piece of meat.

Faltering steps carried him to the water's edge. He sank to his knees, dipped in his hands and splashed his face to clean some of the blood matting his eyelashes. The salt water stung like a son of a bitch, but at least his eyelids didn't stick together anymore when he blinked.

A dark shape to his left caught

his eye. His hat. It sat near the waterline, just out of reach of the waves. He picked it up and out of habit moved to place it on his head and a blinding stab of pain ripped through his side. Forcing himself to his feet, he turned around to survey the damage.

The smoldering remains of a truck sat across the wooded path from him, or the little that was left of the path. The bombs had left bald, blackened sections of earth. From what Logan could tell, the Reformer aircraft had unloaded several cluster bombs but made only one direct hit on the caravan.

He limped to the heap of twisted metal. Sulfur and the stench of death twisted his innards. He spat on the ground, still stumbling around, desperate to find someone else alive, but he found no one in one piece, much less alive. For once, Logan's slow running pace had paid off. Cold comfort in the face of all this carnage.

Blown past the SUV, a body bore shredded scraps of denim fabric. Oh God, *Carver*. All the other soldiers had worn camouflage.

No. Logan shook his head. Not Carver. He was supposed to get out. The boy—because at Carver's

age a so-called man was really no more than an overgrown boy – was supposed to get on the last transport. He was supposed to make it out. But the last transport had been hit.

Tears stung Logan's already burning eyes. He set his jaw against them, choking on bile. Again, a sound from the sky. A helicopter this time. A scout. And after the helicopter the dogs would come. Half-blind with pain and grief, Logan considered surrender. He was too tired to run, too weak to defend himself. Looking over at the once vital young man, he'd have

given anything to trade places with him. But a voice inside his head screeched at him to get up.

You can't help him now, it shrieked. Your shipmates have all gone. You have to move. Get up for fuck's sake. Get up!

He forced himself to his feet, crying out against the agony he felt as he moved. Putting distance between himself and the bomb site held the best chance for his survival. If the trek didn't kill him first. The gash around the shrapnel in his gut continued to leak blood but his instincts pushed him to keep going.

One foot in front of the other.
One foot in front of the other.
That's all he had to do. Keep
going...just keep going...

* * * * *

Stinking drunk for the first time in years, Kathryn rested her head against the back of her rocking chair. Roy's words echoed through her mind in an endless loop. She replayed in her mind the events that had led her to this new personal low. Events over which she'd had no control. She'd thought she could do this, but really, the cost was too high. Fact of the

matter was, she couldn't imagine herself embroiled in a passionate kiss with that man. Not that passion should be important at this point, but it was. She shook her head and the room spun. Woo, no more wine. She'd almost finished the bottle Roy had left for her.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, she willed herself to get up. As quietly as a piss-drunk woman could, she crept to Marcus' room and pushed the door open. The rise and fall of the boy's chest warmed her heart more than all the wine in the world could. She reminded herself to keep her eyes on the

prize. Marcus would benefit most from the union she contemplated with Roy. A boy needs a father-figure and she could do worse than Roy. And then there was everything the man could give her son. A better place to live, better food, better clothes. Better, better, better. Roy's world was better than hers. The logical decision stared her in the face. Why then couldn't she convince herself to make it?

Because it makes me feel like a whore. Her eyes watered but she refused to weep over something so silly. She should be glad she was alive. She should be glad she had a

son to make sacrifices for. How many mothers walked through their lives, arms empty, hearts turned to ashes because of this hellish war? She needed to be thankful, not petulant, that someone of Roy's means showed an interest in her. Eligible bachelors were in short supply and even if they hadn't been, who wanted a widow in her late-thirties with a ten-year-old boy to boot? Oh sure, skipping meals and hard labor in the fields had kept her figure in wonderful shape, but she wasn't exactly a pinup girl. Not ugly either. Attractive enough, but never

gorgeous. Not even in the glory of her youth.

Plus, Roy wasn't asking for her to give up the goods immediately. Maybe on the way to Texas, he'd grow on her. Of course he'd had ten years to grow on her... *Stop. Stop being negative*, she admonished herself. He was a decent and generous man. Perhaps that was it — what galled her most was that she needed a man to make it to safety.

She remembered the old days, when she earned her own way in the world, had her own apartment, her own car...her own everything.

She'd married Jonas because she loved him, not because she needed a man in her life. But the reality of her current situation was this—if she set out for Texas on her own, without the money to pay for passage on a privateer vessel, she'd have to travel over land. The roads were littered with Reformer checkpoints and the off-road areas were full of thieves and worse. Even with the shotgun at her side, she wouldn't be able to fight off a whole gang. Still, were it only herself she had to worry about, she might've taken the chance, made a break for freedom, but not with

Marcus. She couldn't take the chance that he could get killed...or worse. Roy's proposition was a godsend, her answer would be yes and that was that.

"No ifs, ands or buts, Kate," she told herself and walked outside with a kerosene lamp. The night air alleviated some of her dizziness. She settled into the swing and folded her arms over her chest. Before long, she dropped off to sleep.

The sound of someone scraping their way up the gravel path roused Kathryn.

"Roy?" she called out.

Someone uttered an unintelligible response, but it wasn't her neighbor. The silhouette backlit by a full moon was too tall and too broad to be Roy.

She jumped up and went to get the shotgun in the gun safe. Her eyes took a second to adjust to the darkened house. Stubbing her toe on an end table, she did her best not to shout a stream of expletives. Her fingers fumbled with the key she wore around her neck and the lock fought with her. When it finally gave way, she grabbed the gun and a box of shells.

With the barrel of the shotgun,

she nudged the door open. The disheveled man swayed, almost toppling over a few times. She made a show of loading and cocking her weapon.

“I don’t want any trouble,” she said, filling the doorway with her body as best she could. “Just turn around and go back the way you came.”

“Help.” The man wheezed and coughed into a dark cloth. “Need help.”

She took a few steps closer, grabbing the lantern and holding it up to inspect the stranger. A wave of shock darted through her.

Bloodied face, bloodied clothes. He more closely resembled a gore-covered zombie than a man.

Again, he pushed out the word, "Help," then promptly doubled over. He gagged and heaved to no avail.

Lowering the gun, she held out her hand. "I guess you do need some help."

With slow steps, she helped the big man up the stairs and into the swing.

"Stay right here," she said. "I'll be back in a minute."

Jonas' old medical bag would have most of what she needed to

help this guy out. But why should she waste her most precious supplies on a total stranger? She broke into them only when absolutely necessary. Of course, common human decency dictated that she do something in this situation. She couldn't turn him away, not in his condition. Then again, if he'd made it on his own steam from wherever he'd been injured to her neck of the woods, he'd probably be okay in the morning. Or maybe she could summon Roy and he could see to the injured man.

A thud like a sack of potatoes

thrown to the floor broke into her racing train of thought. She grabbed the bag from the mud room and trotted out front.

Great. All two hundred plus pounds of man had collapsed facedown on her porch.

“Now why’d you go and do that?” Her question fell on deaf ears.

The last thing he needed was another head injury. She knelt beside him, pulled him onto his back and opened the medical bag. Once she cut open what was left of his shirt, all doubts about helping him fled her mind. He’d been in

some sort of explosion. Bits of wood and metal stuck in his chest, throat and face. One large scrap had sliced into his abdomen, making a gash several inches long.

Everything she'd helped Jonas study in med school flooded back. She took the man's vitals—his breath was a bit shallow but his pulse was strong. Blood pressure a little low, but not bad. As best she could in the limited light, she checked his ears and nostrils for blood. He had at least one burst eardrum. The wound to his torso concerned her most. She couldn't tell if it'd hit any major organs or

blood vessels. If it had, this poor man was screwed. Gauze sponge at the ready, she pulled out the sharp fragment. The wound bled but didn't gush. A good sign. She applied pressure to stave off any further blood loss.

His eyes fluttered open but he didn't seem to understand what was happening.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked.

He licked his lips but didn't answer.

"What's your name?"

"I-I can't." He blinked a few times. "Logan."

“Okay, Logan. My name’s Kathryn, you can call me Kate. I’m fixing up the cut on your belly. And I think you have a concussion. Do you know how you got hurt?”

“Bomb.”

“Just lie still then, so I can help you.” She secured the gauze sponge over the gash and took out sterile saline solution and more dressing to clean the rest of his cuts and bruises.

“You’re so pretty,” he murmured.

“Huh, now I know you’re concussed.”

He continued to drift in and out

of consciousness as she worked on his multitude of cuts and burns. She picked out as much shrapnel as she could. The work seemed to go on forever and she knew she'd missed a lot because of the poor lighting. Finally, she checked on the wound to his gut. The blood flow had eased to a trickle. Time to stitch him up.

“Hey.” She shook him lightly.

“Hmm?”

“Can you stand up and walk inside?”

He took her offered hand and struggled to get to his feet. Leaning against her, he hobbled inside the

house. The sofa seemed as good a place as any. After she settled him, she fetched all the lanterns in the house, a washbasin full of soapy water and some clean linens.

“Hope you aren’t the modest type. I gotta clean you up more before I can sew you up,” she said.

He clutched on to a cowboy hat and she had to pry it from his fingers to get him to release it. After stripping off his sidearm, she helped him out of his boots, pants and underwear. She tried not to look at his penis as she extracted bits of wood and metal from his torso and legs. Instead she studied

his muscular arms and chest, which were peppered with tattoos, many nautical in theme. "You a sailor?"

"Mm hm."

A sailor who'd been in an explosion. And judging from his clothes he wasn't affiliated with any military organization. Did she have a privateer naked in her living room? She couldn't worry about that now. She'd already jumped in neck-deep. There would be time for a question-and-answer session once his brain was less scrambled. But after she turned Logan around to wash his back, her feelings toward him didn't grow any warmer or

fuzzier. Emblazoned over his left shoulder blade was the image of a flag—one red block, one white block, and a lone star in the middle of a field of blue.

Oh God, he's a Texan. Her upper lip curled in contempt. This night kept getting better and better.

Marcus padded into the living room and gave a yelp. “Momma, what’s going on?”

“This man’s hurt and I’m trying to help him,” she said, continuing to wipe away dried blood.

The boy’s eyes widened and he pointed at the skull and crossbones on Logan’s biceps. “Mister, are you

a pirate?"

"I'm a patriot," the man slurred.

These days, there wasn't much of a difference. "Marcus, go back to bed."

Though clearly unwilling to do so, the boy did as he was told.

Chapter Five

The morning light woke her, not that Kathryn slept much all night. Her back ached from dozing in the rocking chair. After she'd fought off the urge to push Logan's Texan ass back out her front door last night, she'd stitched him up. He'd have a nasty scar, but he'd live. She also did her due diligence, waking him every couple of hours to see if his condition remained stable. He

knew his name and that he was from Texas, but not his current location or her name. Not unusual for a person with a head injury.

Exhaustion weighed down her limbs but she pulled herself from the chair. She kept a small jar of instant coffee in the pantry—another gift from Roy. Today seemed like a perfect day to indulge in a cup. A possible pirate and confirmed Texan, a wounded one at that, asleep on her couch. And then there was Roy's proposition to contend with. A grumpy smirk on her face, she added another spoonful of grounds

to her mug.

Marcus, slow from his own interrupted night's sleep, lumbered into the kitchen. Yawning and stretching, he plopped into a chair.

"Morning, baby." She kissed the top of his head.

"Morning," he said between yawns.

Her quiet moment over, she busied herself with breakfast until a rustle and cry from the living room drew her attention.

"Don't try to get up." She hurried to stop her patient from tearing out his stitches. The sutures were fishing line, the surgical nylon

long gone after Marcus' rambunctious toddlerhood. Granted, the fishing line was strong, but less flexible, therefore more likely to tear through the surrounding skin.

"Where am I?" Logan asked, his gaze bouncing around the room. He moved a hand to his ear and pulled out the cotton she'd packed in it.

"Don't fiddle with that. You burst an eardrum." She plucked a fresh piece from the medical bag on the end table.

"That's why everything sounds weird. Where am I?" he asked

again.

“You’re a little southeast of Bayou La Batre. In No Man’s Land.”

“You mean Gulfland?”

“You say tomato...” She pulled up the rocking chair and sat facing the sofa. “What’s your name?”

“Logan.”

“Yeah, that much you told me last night. What’s your full name?”

“Captain Logan.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Now I know your momma didn’t name you ‘Captain Logan’, what’s your full name?”

Logan cleared his throat. “Brett.

My first name is really Brett, but I don't like it. Everyone calls me Logan."

She pulled back the sheet to check his wounds. "Are you a privateer, Logan?"

"*Pirate*," Marcus called from the kitchen.

"*Privateer*," she corrected her son.

"I'm a patriot of the former United States of America," Logan repeated his response from the night before.

"Hmph, of course you are." She peeled back the gauze from the

gash on his torso.

“What’s that mean?”

“Either you’re a Texan or a patriot. Can’t have it both ways.”

His pale face turned pink. “So you’re no fan of Texas then?”

“The first sign of trouble, you guys pulled out of the Union. Led the way for California and the Northwest to do the same. You must be so proud, Mr. Patriot.”

“If we hadn’t we’d probably be in the same miserable state as Gulfland and the Midwest.” He narrowed his eyes and his body tensed.

“Take it easy now.” She slathered more antibiotic ointment on the cut and covered it with fresh gauze. “You don’t need to get worked up. We can debate politics another day.”

He closed his eyes. “Well, thanks for patching me up even though you hate me and everything I represent.”

In spite of herself, she smiled. “You’re welcome, though I think I should have my head checked.”

He seemed to understand her thinly veiled hint. “As soon as I’m strong enough, I’ll get going. And you don’t have to worry, there

aren't any warrants out for me or anything. We're careful when we raid Reformer encampments."

"Some pirate you are," she teased.

"Privateer," he corrected her.

"Patriot," Marcus shouted from the kitchen.

At this they all laughed, though Logan's good humor was cut short. Grabbing his side, he grunted.

"Do you want something for the pain?" she asked.

"Kind of you to offer, but I don't want to use up your supplies. I'll live."

She walked to the kitchen and retrieved a pint of whiskey. "This'll help. My own private brew, there's plenty of that."

"Thanks." He opened the bottle, took a swig and offered her some.

She settled into the rocking chair again and took a drink. Motioning to his injuries, she asked, "What were you doing when this happened?"

"Probably best you don't know." His eyelids drooped.

She set the bottle next to him. "Get some rest, I'll make you something to eat if you think you can keep it down."

“Thank you,” he mumbled.

As she walked into the kitchen, she found Marcus tiptoeing toward the back door. “No way, mister. Chores first, then you can go play.”

“But I want to tell Billy and Sam about the pirate.”

She caught him by the shoulders and turned him to face her. “You can’t tell anyone, Marcus. You hear me?”

“Okay.”

“I’m serious. We could get in a lot of trouble.”

The boy nodded and Kathryn hoped she’d driven her point home.

“Go do your chores, please.” She handed him the broom. “But let Captain Logan rest.”

No more objections, Marcus set to work on the front porch.

* * * * *

An hour later, the front door slammed and Kathryn rushed to scold Marcus for making too much noise. Instead of her son, she found Roy waiting in the entryway.

“Hi there, Kate.” He took off his hat and offered her a package. “Chicken, for dinner tonight.”

“Oh. Thanks.” She wiped her

hands on her apron and cast a glance over her shoulder. Logan hadn't stirred but he was snoring loudly enough for Roy to hear.

"Aren't you going to take it?" He pushed the brown paper package at her.

"Yeah. Well, no. Let's talk outside." She ushered Roy through the door and saw Marcus up the road, throwing rocks into the runoff ditch.

"Kathryn, what's wrong?" the man asked, his features even more pinched than usual.

"I may need a few days." She made a show of coughing into her

fist. “My throat’s raw and I’m feeling rundown. I don’t want to get you sick.”

“Don’t worry none about me.” He touched his wrist to her forehead. “No fever. It’s probably just a cold.”

“Could be, but it could be the start of something more serious—”

“All the more reason you’ll need help with Marcus. I don’t mind.”

“That’s kind of you, but—”

This time Marcus cut her off. He came running up the road shouting, “Did you see the pirate, Mr. Jackson? Just like Long John Silver.”

Kathryn shot her son a stern look but Marcus babbled on oblivious. “There’s a pirate at the house. He’s tore up pretty bad, but Momma stitched him up and she thinks he’ll live.”

“What now?” Roy furrowed his brow.

“That’s enough, Marcus. Go in the house.” She pointed at the front door.

“But—”

“*Now*, please.” She gave her son her don’t-trifle-with-me face.

The boy fell silent and trudged inside.

“What in the world’s going on?” asked Roy.

“I-I didn’t want to get into this with you, but yes, we have a houseguest. A *temporary* guest. More like a patient. He’s only here until he’s healthy enough to travel.”

“Who?”

“Says his name’s Logan.”

“Captain Loco Logan?” Roy’s eyes grew wide.

“You know him?”

“By reputation only. Bad reputation. This isn’t right, Kathryn. He shouldn’t be here. Do

you know everything he's mixed up in? He runs weapons and supplies for the Resistance. He steals supplies from the Reformer army, and what he doesn't steal, he smuggles in from Mexico."

"I know that." Actually she didn't, but she wasn't about to admit her ignorance to Roy. "He assures me his operations have been clean."

"Maybe so, maybe not. You willing to take that risk?"

A wave of anxiety rolled through her but she steeled her resolve. "I can't just throw a seriously wounded man out in the

street. Not one who helps the Resistance.”

“Believe me, he’s well paid by both the Resistance and the Republic of Texas. He’s a privateer –emphasis on the ‘private’. You think he’d do the same for you?”

More than once this morning, Kathryn had asked herself the same questions, grappled with the same concerns. She’d come to the conclusion that it didn’t matter whether Logan deserved her help, or the risks she was taking. What mattered in No Man’s Land was people helping people. It’s the only way they’d survived this long and

she told Roy as much.

“Fine. Here.” He thrust the chicken at her. “Dinner at five as usual?”

“Yeah.” She took the package and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Roy.”

“What about your cold?” he joked.

“Ha. Yeah, I’m sorry I lied. I didn’t know what else to do, how you’d react to...everything.”

“You’ve made up your mind. Who am I to argue?”

Despite his assurances that he’d respect her decision, Kathryn

worried she'd sunk even farther into quicksand. Question was—how much farther would she sink and would anyone be there to throw her a rope?

* * * * *

At dinner, Marcus sat next to Logan instead of next to Roy like he usually did. The boy bubbled over with questions. Did Captain Logan have a ship? Had he ever been in a battle at sea? Had he ever killed a man?

Logan grinned and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "I couldn't be

a captain unless I had command of a ship. And it's not like being a privateer in the old days. I've never been in a sea battle."

Kathryn noted that Logan didn't answer her son's last question and she wasn't about to press the matter. His very presence at the table had her off balance—as hard as she tried to place her attention elsewhere, her gaze constantly returned to the captain. And every time she stared at him, an unsettling warmth heated her cheeks...and other parts of her body. It had to be how he was dressed. She'd given him some of

Jonas' clothes to wear and out of the corner of her eye... If she looked directly at him the apparition of her husband disappeared.

He's not Jonas, she reminded herself. Logan had asked once to whom the clothes belonged, but accepted her reply that they were her husband's and she'd rather not talk about where he was.

Tamping down unwelcome emotion, she tried to focus on the dinner conversation.

"What's a privateer?" asked Marcus.

Logan replied, "I work for the

Republic of Texas as kind of a private contractor. My men and I provide aid to the Resistance and cause trouble for the Reformers.”

“So that Texas can occupy Gulfland,” Roy chimed in.

Logan dipped his head in partial concession. “The ultimate goal is a rebirth of the United States, but yes. Until that’s accomplished, Texas has a vested interest in resources available in Gulfland.”

Roy scoffed. “And you have a vested interest in continuing conflict here. Bet you’ll miss that extra income from the weapons trade when this region stabilizes.”

Kathryn cleared her throat and indicated Marcus. “Gentlemen, I don’t think this is the time to discuss such things.”

Tense glances passed between the men, but they appeared to agree with her. Logan shifted his focus to his plate and finished the last couple bites. “The chicken’s delicious. Thank you, Kathryn.”

“I butchered it this morning,” replied Roy.

“Thank you both then.” Logan gave a strained smile. “I hate to eat and run, but I’m a little worn-out.”

“Of course.” Kathryn got up to help him but Roy held up a hand.

“I’ll help the good captain. You sit, enjoy a little dessert.” The man produced a chocolate bar from his coat.

“Thanks.” She looked from Logan to Roy. No love lost there, but at least they’d been civil through supper. Once Logan had settled in on the sofa, Roy returned and took Kathryn’s hand, nodding to the back door. She followed him into the backyard.

“Kate, thank you for a lovely dinner. I’m going home a little early tonight,” he said.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I’ve just had enough

of Captain Logan for one night.”

“Oh. Okay.” Relief passed through her. She’d had about enough of the two of them taking veiled jabs at each other. She gave Roy a quick hug and thanked him for the chicken. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Sure. Yeah.” Roy nodded and waved. “Good night.”

Chapter Six

Logan slept through most of the next day, but by late afternoon, he felt stronger and his head clearer. He pulled himself off the sofa and trudged into the kitchen. Kathryn sat at the table, working on a bushel of butter beans.

“You need some help with that?” he asked, slowly taking a seat next to her.

“Hey, you’re moving around

better.” She pushed two bowls to the middle of the table.

“Yeah, and my ears aren’t ringing as much.” He picked up a pod from one bowl, shelled it and deposited the beans in the other bowl.

“That’s good.” She grinned absentmindedly. Her face lit up when she smiled and Logan wondered if she knew that. A flash of memory tugged at him. Had he told her once how pretty she was? He held his side as he chuckled.

“What?” she asked.

“When you were patching me up, did I flirt with you?”

Her laughter echoed around the kitchen. “Yes. Yes, you did. Must be second nature for you.”

He studied her face, her olive skin and the few laugh lines around her coffee-colored eyes. Ebony hair spilled over her shoulders and down to her pert breasts. The impression of her nipples against her threadbare shirt made it clear she wasn't wearing a bra. He shifted his attention to her classic face—her high cheekbones and aquiline nose drew his gaze to her plump mouth.

“For what it's worth, you *are* pretty.”

She scowled at him. “All the sweet talk in the world isn’t going to get you out of shelling beans with me.”

Leaning a little closer, he caught her gaze, the scent of her hair flooding his nostrils. Coconut. “I offered to help, remember?”

“True. So I was right the first time. You’re just given to flirtation.” She held the eye contact, unwavering—a penetrating stare framed by tendrils of black. She had to know she was attractive.

Logan’s mouth tingled. If he leaned in a little closer... A twinge from his stitches nipped that

thought in the bud. Holding his side, he sat back. "This reminds me of sitting in my momma's kitchen. We'd practice my spelling words and shell beans or shuck corn."

"Should I quiz you?" She smiled. It was if the clouds had parted and warm sunshine passed over her face.

"Galveston Elementary Spelling Bee Champion, two years running. Oh yes, it's true." He puffed up his chest as much as his stitches would allow.

"What grades?"

His hand grazed hers as he dropped a shell on the pile, an

accident, but it sent a little jolt of electricity through him. Clearing his throat, he answered, “Third and fourth.”

“What happened in fifth grade?”

“I let Judy Trenton win so she’d kiss me after school.”

What would it take to get Kathryn to kiss him? More than winning a spelling bee, he’d wager.

She waggled a finger at him. “Which proves my original point—you’re a bird dog through and through.”

“You got me.” He tipped an imaginary hat to her. And speaking

of hats... “Hey, did I have a Stetson with me the night I showed up here?”

“As a matter of fact...” She pushed away from the table and walked into her bedroom.

Logan watched her backside shift from side to side with her easy gait. Her skirt hung from her hips and swirled around her knees. When she came back, she held his most prized possession and dusted it with a flick of her wrist.

Handing it to him, she took her seat again. “And I secured your .45 in the gun safe. The rest of the contents from your pockets are on

my dresser.”

“Aw, there’s my baby.” He popped the hat onto his head. Sure, it was a little worse for wear, but it felt so right.

“No hats at the dinner table.”

“Yes ma’am.” He set it aside. A lady with manners and she was familiar with gun calibers. Christ, she was the perfect woman.

“What’s so special about the hat?” she asked, shelling another pod.

“It was my grandfather’s—my momma’s daddy. He was a rancher, a real cowboy.”

“Sounds like you and your mother were close.”

He nodded. “Still are. She lives nearby.”

Logan couldn't put his finger on it, but something in Kathryn's demeanor softened at the mention of his relationship with his mother. Made sense. She and her boy only had each other. Again he wondered what had happened to her husband. It didn't take much imagination to figure he'd been lost during the attacks. Or he could've been pressed into service with the Reformers. Soon Marcus could be too. He was getting to that age.

Shaking away the thought, Logan asked, "No company for dinner tonight?"

"No." She focused on her butter beans.

"I don't think Roy likes me much."

She snickered. "I don't think he does either."

Studying the light in her eyes, he wondered what she saw in that tool. Not that he was making any assumptions, but Roy seemed pretty territorial when it came to Kathryn. Just like Logan knew when to fold and when to bluff during a hand of five-card draw, he

sensed she didn't harbor the depth of feeling that Roy did.

"That's all right. I'm an acquired taste," he said. "You didn't like me much the first day either."

With a smirk on her face, she chucked an empty pod on the table. "I stitched you up, didn't I?"

"That you did and I'm forever in your debt." Again he pretended to tip his hat to her.

Hmph. Forever in her debt. The captain knew how to lay it on thick.

She watched him strip the bean pods, her gaze drawn to the

deftness of his fingers. Dressed in her husband's clothes, he seemed like a ghost sitting at the table with her, but it was only the clothing. The timbre of his voice, his carriage, even his attitude was different from Jonas' – more arrogant, more imposing.

His face had started to heal and the swelling had gone down a lot, though brownish-yellow rings still underlined his eyes. She could tell he was a handsome man, the kind of guy who always got what he wanted whether by charm or by force. Usually she didn't like that type of man and yet, when he

spoke about his mother something vulnerable bubbled to the surface. Were she honest with herself, the tug in the pit of her stomach—and regions farther south—had nothing to do with ghosts. Captain Brett Logan was an enigma shrouded in mystery, wrapped in her husband's clothes...and Kathryn couldn't stop staring at him.

* * * * *

The thermometer read one hundred point six. For good measure, Kathryn shook down the mercury and took Logan's temperature again. Still a hundred

point six. He'd been improving for the past few days—more color in his cheeks and needed less help to move about. But this morning he didn't look good, his skin was pale with a green tinge to it and he seemed weaker, though he hadn't complained.

“Let me take a look at your side,” she said, unbuttoning his shirt. He'd been changing his own bandages, surely he would've mentioned signs of infection.

“I'm fine.” As he said this, beads of sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Hush. Let me see it.” She peeled back the dressing and

gasp ed. The wound was fiery red, swollen and weeping. "Dammit, Logan. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Like I said before. I don't want you wasting your supplies on me."

"And how easy will it be for me to bury you when you keel over in my living room? Did you think of that?"

He waved away her concern. "Don't be so dramatic. I've been in worse shape and survived."

Kathryn sighed and rubbed her temples. What to do, what to do? Logan needed antibiotics and there was only one place she could get those. "Get some rest, we'll see how

you're doing in a couple hours."

But she knew his condition wasn't going to improve.

By noon, Logan was shivering and sweating at the same time and his fever spiked to a hundred and three plus. His eyes were glassy and he lacked the energy to do anything but sleep. She gave him some aspirin, which would help with the fever, but Kathryn couldn't wait any longer. As much as she hated to go to Roy for help, she had no choice.

"Marcus, stay here with Captain Logan," she told her son. "Try to get him to drink some water. I'll be

right back.”

“Yes, Momma.” He sat in the rocking chair and stared down at the very ill man. “Is he going to be okay?”

“I don’t know, baby.” She kissed the top of the boy’s head. “But we’ll do our best.”

She made her way across the dirt path that separated their property and marched through the fields that backed up to Roy’s house. As she climbed the wooden steps to the back door, her stomach twisted and flip-flopped. She rapped on the screen door and called out, “Roy?”

He didn't answer so she walked around front. There he sat on his porch swing.

"There you are," she said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Kate." He gave her a crooked grin. "How you doing?"

"Good, thanks. How are you?"

He shrugged and took a sip from a flask. "Feelin' no pain. And to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Well," she smoothed her blouse and her skirt, deciding to cut to the chase. "I need a favor. I need some antibiotics, if you have some. Please."

Furrowing his brow, he asked, "Everything okay with you and the boy?"

"Yes, we're fine."

He nodded and pursed his lips. "So this would be for Logan then?"

"Yeah, he's taken a bad turn."

A sneer of disgust twisted his features. "You got something to trade?"

The question surprised her. He'd never asked her to barter for goods and she hadn't thought to bring any whiskey with her. Not that he needed any more, judging from his breath.

“I left in a hurry, but you know I’m good for it. You can drop by later and pick up some whiskey or canned goods. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want, huh?” He shuffled to his feet and disappeared into the house.

Kathryn wrapped her arms around herself and studied her work boots. The leather uppers had cracked, soon they’d be worn through. Lately, she’d felt an awful lot like these boots.

Roy returned holding a plastic bottle, but he didn’t hand it to her. Sinking into the swing, he said, “I

don't get you, Kathryn."

"What do you mean?" She didn't look at him.

"I done so much for you and I done it 'cause I like you. I care about you and Marcus."

His words drove a knife into her chest, guilt over the fact that she'd accepted his kindness knowing full well what it meant and that she didn't feel the same.

"I know you do, Roy." Sitting next to him, she touched his hand. "I appreciate everything you've done for us. What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I can see the writing on the

wall. I saw how you were looking at him the other night.”

She thought back to their dinner together. She knew exactly what Roy was talking about, but damned if she'd admit it. It was Jonas' clothing that had drawn her gaze and nothing more. “I don't know what you mean. I'm just helping him like I would anyone else.”

“Would it kill you to show *me* a little tender loving care, Kathryn?”

She stood. “Roy, you're drunk.”

“And not as handsome as Captain Logan, I'm sure.”

“I knew this was a mistake. If I could get the antibiotics anywhere

else I would, but I can't, so please, stop acting like a lovesick schoolboy and help me out."

"I know this guy's type, Kate. What'd he tell you? He runs weapons and supplies to the Resistance. Did he tell you about his side business smuggling drugs into Texas for the Mexican cartels?"

"He wouldn't do that."

"Oh shit." Roy let out a laugh that crackled with bitterness. "You know all about him, huh? It must be love."

"Just give me the medicine and I'll be on my way."

Clearly hurt, the man chuffed a

disgusted sigh as he clapped the bottle into her hand. "Here's what you came for. Run back to that no-good snake in the grass, but you mark my words, Kathryn. He's trouble and he's not worth the moldy cheese it took to make those pills."

"Thank you for this, Roy." She hesitated, waiting for his reply, but none came. He pulled himself to his feet and plodded inside. The screen door slammed shut behind him.

* * * * *

After dinner—which he didn't

eat—Logan's fever still hovered at one hundred and two or three. Kathryn had given him two double doses of penicillin throughout the day, trying to get the drug in his system fast enough to do some good. All she could do now was pray.

Settling Marcus into bed, she read him a few pages of *Treasure Island* but couldn't concentrate on the words she recited.

"Momma, that's the third time you read that sentence," said Marcus.

"I'm sorry, baby." She closed the book and kissed his forehead.

“You’re worried about Captain Logan.”

Like most children, nothing got past him. She didn’t bother trying to deny her fears. Instead she replied, “Yes. I am. He’s very, very sick.”

“I don’t want him to die.” He snuggled closer to her.

“I don’t want him to die either.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “If Captain Logan dies, will he see Dad in heaven?”

Kathryn flinched, in actual physical pain from Marcus’ question. It’d been awhile since he’d asked about Jonas, as if

keeping that optimism alive cost him too much. For the first time since her husband had left, she leveled with her son. "Marcus, Daddy went West because he loves us. He wanted to find help and... and I don't know what happened to him." Her heart turned to stone and her eyes watered as the truth formed on her lips. "But yes, it's likely he's in heaven now."

"Don't cry, Momma." He patted her cheek. "You're going to make me cry."

She gulped down a sob and wiped her eyes. "Okay, no crying. Time for your prayers, mister."

It took every bit of her iron will to keep from breaking down as Marcus asked God to watch over his father's soul and Captain Logan too.

* * * * *

Shouts tore Kathryn from her slumber. She'd fallen asleep on Marcus' bed and it took a few seconds for her to get her bearings. The boy stirred and his eyes fluttered open. Clearly the cries weren't his.

"What's going on, Momma?" he asked.

“I don’t know. Stay here.”

She sprang to her feet and rushed into the living room. Logan was the one crying out. Body rigid, fists clenched, he shook his head, begging someone to stop.

Marcus peeked around the corner. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s having a nightmare. Go back to bed, baby.”

Eyes wide, her son watched a second longer and then did as he was told.

When Marcus had bad dreams, Kathryn would hold him and stroke his hair and tell him everything was all right, but this

was a full-grown man in combat mode. No way was she getting within striking distance.

She turned the rocking chair to face him, taking a seat and murmuring to him, "Logan, you're just dreaming."

"No!" he shouted. "Leave her alone."

"Logan...Logan." She took a steadying breath. What would his mother call him? "Brett. Brett, wake up."

Extending a tentative hand, she touched his forehead. He was still burning up.

"It's Kate so please don't take a

swing at me. You're just having a bad dream." She shook his shoulder.

His eyes popped open but clearly he didn't see his surroundings. "Don't you lay a finger on her, Daddy."

He bolted upright, chest heaving and sweat dripping off him in rivulets. Brow knitted and hands shaking, he reached out to her. "Kate?"

Before she knew what was happening, he scooped her into his arms, desperately clinging to her. His skin was hot. Her cheek against his hard chest, she could hear his

thunderous heartbeat. Mouth dry, her own heartbeat racing, she braced her hands against his torso.

“Brett, are you okay?” She shifted, trying to look up at him, but he held her fast, his strong arms rigid.

“I’m here with you, right?”

At this, she grinned a little. “Yeah, you’re here with me and Marcus. Scared us half to death.”

Falling silent, he pressed his cheek to the top of her head. She put her arms around him, rubbing his back and making shushing noises. His staccato breath smoothed out and his posture

began to relax. Running his thumb over her chin, he tilted her face to look up at him.

“I don’t feel good.” His eyes glowed with fever.

Though his heartbeat had slowed, Kate’s still hammered away. God help her, in the arms of a critically ill man, all she could think about was his body heat against hers.

Pulling away from him a little more, she said, “You’re really sick.”

He moved his rough hand down her neck then released her, lying back on the couch. Kathryn touched her throat as if the warmth

of his touch had left a palpable trail. Shaking her head to clear it, she set about caring for him.

She popped the thermometer in his mouth and poured him a cup of water from the pitcher on the end table. Still one hundred and three.

She gave him another dose of antibiotics and some aspirin. After he downed the pills, he took her hand. "Can you stay with me?"

His features were tight, the ghost of fear in his eyes, and her heart ached for him. What had his father done that haunted him so?

Touching her fingertips to his brow, she wiped the sweaty hair

from his forehead. "Sure. I'll stay."

He fell asleep quickly, snuggling her palm against his cheek. His breath grazed the underside of her wrist, leaving the sensation that a lover had placed a delicate kiss there. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to pretend the arm he clung to didn't belong to her body.

He's sick and frightened, she admonished herself.

Once his breathing became regular, she extricated herself. Slipping into the rocking chair, Kathryn watched him. His face was now relaxed, the lines around his eyes and mouth smoothed out. The

small cuts and bruises had begun to fade. He looked almost boyish except there was nothing boyish about his body. A shiver passed through her that she'd just been held flush against his sinewy frame. Every muscle defined, every peak and valley in the right spot along the landscape of his abdomen, he was beautiful in the moonlight. Even in the dim light, she could make out the tattoos on his arms and chest. His war paint, his ink – it told a tale about who he was in a jumble of images that extended from his right forearm over his shoulder and onto his right pec.

Waves and a sailing ship, a skull and crossbones, a rose with a single thorn and a name on a ribbon beneath it.

Who is "Blanca"? she wondered. None of her business, really, but she couldn't help but feel a little jealous—as if she had a right to feel that way.

He shifted and grunted in his sleep.

"Shh. You're okay, everything's fine," she murmured. Resting her head against the back of the chair, she rocked back and forth slowly and ran her fingers through his hair. "You have to get better, Brett."

With a yawn, Kathryn lost her battle against the pull of sleep.

“Close your eyes,” a baritone voice instructed her.

She did as she was told, chuckling. “Why?”

A finger to her lips, he brushed his mouth over her neck. Shivers passed through her, her nipples tightening. She felt his hand inch its way under her skirt, slowly skimming up her thigh. Her pussy contracted, a pulse of arousal claiming her body. He passed his lips over hers. Roughly he pulled her into his arms, his pistol digging

into her hip. At least she thought it was his gun – he was, after all, clearly happy to see her.

His fingers inside her panties drew her focus back to him.

“You’re already wet,” he said, gravel in his voice.

She heard the sound of his zipper – he ripped off her panties, plunging his cock inside her. Every inch of her skin burned with desire.

“Look at me,” he commanded.

Kathryn opened her eyes to find herself the subject of a steely gray gaze...

With a start, Kathryn's eyes flew open—for real this time. Logan slept on her sofa and she was fully clothed, dozing in the rocking chair. One bit of the dream rang true—she was soaking wet. She pulled herself to her feet and headed toward the kitchen, fleeing the imagery of her shameful dream.

Jonas' eyes were green.

Chapter Seven

Two days later, Logan's fever broke. He bounced back, gaining strength with each passing day.

Clothed in more of her husband's garments, Logan strode into the kitchen, the morning sun showing off the reddish highlights in his golden hair.

"Kate, do you have a razor?" He rubbed at his face, an inch of beard covering his jaw and chin.

“Sort of.” From a drawer, she produced a paring knife that had been ground to a straight edge. “Jonas used to use it.”

Handing it to him, she hesitated.

“If you don’t want me to use it...” he said.

She turned the handle over in her hand, plucking the blade with her thumb. “No. It’s fine, but it probably needs sharpening.”

Once finished with the whetstone, she offered him the knife, handle-side out.

“I-I don’t know how to use a straight razor,” he stammered, the implicit request hanging between

them.

With a halfhearted chuckle, she pulled a chair up to the washbasin and motioned for him to sit. Stripping off his shirt, he settled into the seat, leaning back.

Wetting her fingertips, she lathered up her hands. No choice but to hover over him, she leaned in to soap his beard. His gaze flitted to her bosom and then straight ahead again, but the damage was done. Flames licked at her cheeks, racing down to her pussy. Ignoring the throbbing between her legs, she put a swipe of foam on each of his cheeks, over his chin and mustache.

He looked like Santa Claus. She smiled at him and wiped lather from his lips. His mouth was softer than she'd thought it would be.

Though the weather had turned cooler, Kathryn fanned herself, heat radiating from beneath her clothes. "Do you mind if I open the kitchen window?"

"Not at all."

She leaned across him and cranked the lever, letting in a breeze perfumed with basil and sage.

"It's nice out today," he said, a hitch in his voice.

"Yeah. It is." She pulled up a

chair and sat close to him. His breath smelled of her homemade peppermint toothpaste, warmth came off his skin in waves. Butterflies in her stomach distracted her for a moment but she managed to regain her focus on the task at hand.

Placing a hand on his strong shoulder, she steadied her first downward stroke. The razor scraped across his face with a scratching sound, revealing a fresh patch of hairless skin. After she'd finished one cheek, she gripped his chin with her thumb and forefinger, turning him to look the

other way. His neck arched at an angle that showed off every sinewy muscle. Her gaze wandered down his body, the rise and fall of his broad chest, his pulse at the base of his throat. Kathryn took a deep breath, trying once again to ignore the fact that he was one of the most beautiful men she'd ever laid eyes on. What would he do if she leaned forward and kissed the warm spot just behind his ear? She imagined running her mouth down his neck, letting her tongue trail over his fragrant skin. Blinking away the torturous imagery, she managed to finish the shave without climbing

onto his lap and covering his mouth with hers.

“There you go.” She wiped the remaining soap from his face. By accident—by accident?—she let her fingertips pass over his baby-smooth cheek. Electricity shot through her and she fought off a shiver.

His gray eyes darted from side to side and he didn't get up as she'd expected him to. “Could you—if you don't mind—could you wash my hair? I still can't bend to do it and I don't want to get my stitches wet and I hate to ask, but...”

She swallowed and wiped her

hands on her apron. "Sure. It's no problem."

Easing his head back against the washbasin, she noticed his abs tense. "Is that position okay?"

"It's fine."

No matter how many times she corrected herself, her gaze returned to his taut torso. In the light of day, the tattoos stood out against his tanned skin. Something about the tats intrigued her, made him seem more dangerous. Exciting. She'd never been with a man like that. Then she noticed another woman's name scrawled across his chest.

He's already spoken for, she

reminded herself.

Wetting his hair, she brushed the fine strands away from his face. She lathered her hands again and set about scrubbing his scalp. Locks of hair slipped through her fingers like silk and more than once she smoothed them across her hand just because she liked the feel.

“Mm, that’s nice.” He looked up at her.

Her throat tight, she didn’t know how to reply. Ignoring the hammering of her heart, which echoed between her legs, she finished rinsing his hair with a few dipperfuls of water.

“Okay, you’re done.” She wiped her hands on her apron again.

“Thank you.” He sat up and blotted at rivulets of water that streamed down his sculpted neck.

“No big deal.”

He gave an impish grin. “It’s been awhile since a woman has touched me like that.”

Her cheeks grew hot and she tamped down the impulse to rake her fingers through his wet locks. Before she could stop herself, she asked, “Who’s Blanca?”

“What?”

“On your chest,” she pointed at

the tat. "Who is she?"

He looked down at the rose on his chest. "An amazing woman who will never be mine. I'd had a bit too much tequila the night I got that tattoo, thought it might impress her. It didn't."

"You still have a relationship with her?"

"Not so much a relationship as an arrangement—her word, not mine."

"Hmph. Should've known."

Still toweling his hair, he asked, "What's that mean?"

"Nothing." Her cheeks burned

hotter, anger replacing chagrin.

“It meant something.” He crossed his arms over his chest, arching an eyebrow.

“You’re just that kind of man. A girl in every port, a flagrant disregard for social standards. It’s that devil-may-care attitude that lets you stretch the limits of decency.”

“Oh yeah? How so?” His posture stiffened, he towered over her, leaning forward, his scent flooding her nostrils.

“Well, you know.” She dropped his gaze and busied herself cleaning up. “Roy says you run heroin for

the Mexican cartels.”

“Heroin?” Furrowing his brow, he shook his head. “No. Hell no. I’ve never smuggled hard drugs like that.”

“‘Hard drugs’? Am I correct in assuming you’ve run what you’d consider ‘soft drugs’?”

Again he advanced on her, too close for comfort. “Sometimes during the course of a business deal, I have to be flexible. I do favors for powerful men and they procure the medical supplies and munitions I need. But it’s only marijuana or generic Viagra, maybe counterfeit painkillers. Nothing

that would ever hurt anyone.”

“It could hurt me and my son, having a drug smuggler in the house.”

He narrowed his eyes. “But when I was just a gun-running pirate, that was okay?”

Kathryn slammed her hand on the counter. “As soon as you’re stable to travel, I want you out of my house.”

“What’s with you? First you don’t like me because I’m a Texan and Texans didn’t do enough to keep the Union together. Now you don’t like me because I’m willing to go too far for a cause I believe in.

You're an awfully hard woman to please."

"Why on earth are you trying to please me in the first place?"

His gaze locked with hers and he sighed, but gave her no answer.

Of all the stubborn, skirt-chasing, infuriating men. Kathryn ground her teeth. He talked about casual sex and smuggling dope as if these activities were as normal as eating breakfast. A man who tattooed himself with a woman's name on a drunken whim? Had he no respect, no boundaries?

Throwing her hands in the air, she headed for her bedroom, but

Logan stepped in front of her. At first she thought it an act of aggression, but instead of malice or annoyance on his face, she saw something else flame in his eyes. One large, work-calloused hand glanced over her cheek and he brushed away a stray lock of hair.

“What do you think—?” she began to object. He put a finger to her lips and caught her around the waist. More barbed indignation sprang to mind but her mouth refused to cooperate. In fact her whole body had turned mutinous at the feel of his warm skin. Visions of her dream flashed through her

mind.

His lips pressed to hers. Not a peck or a whisper of a kiss, but a full measure of passion. His tongue sought out hers, hot breath against her cheek, strong arms bound her torso to his. She gripped his shoulders, struggling to resist the fire raging between her thighs.

How long their embrace lasted, she couldn't say, but when they parted she had to fight the urge to draw him in again.

Her eyelids heavy, she opened them halfway to see his look of amused satisfaction.

“Sorry, I interrupted you,” he

murmured. "You were saying?"

Damned if she could remember. She touched her fingertips to her chin, her lips still tingling. Without another thought, she grabbed his neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. The scent of his skin freshly shaven with her lavender soap filled her nostrils. Mixed with his body chemistry, the fragrance took on a woody musk. She inhaled again, unable to get enough.

Backing her against the table, he sent a few books and a pan of silverware clattering to the floor, not that either of them noticed. Her ears rang with the blood pounding

through them, the same throb manifesting between her thighs. He moved his hands down to her backside, hitched up her skirt and scooped her up. Wrapping her legs around his hips, she clung to his neck, mouth hungry, their tongues intertwined.

Slam.

“Mom, I’m back.” Marcus’ voice doused her desire.

Before she could push Logan away, the man set her down and wiped his mouth. Kathryn tried to smooth her hair and skirt before the boy entered the kitchen.

“Mom?” he called out again.

She cleared her throat. "In here."

Logan reached for the mess on the floor but winced in pain and jerked upright. The hand clutched to his bandage came away spotted with blood. She looked down to find a blood stain on her shirt. What was she thinking, acting like a horny teenager with an injured man?

"Sit," she instructed and pushed Logan into a chair.

Marcus rounded the corner and saw the blood. "You okay, Captain Logan?"

"Yeah, just popped a stitch, I

think.”

“Fetch me the medical bag, please,” she told her son.

He ran, unloaded his catch in the sink and took off for the washroom. By the time he'd returned, Kathryn had stripped away the old gauze, revealing that Logan had broken four stitches. She cleaned the reopened gash with whiskey. A slight hiss came from the captain. Marcus turned white as a sheet.

“Baby, why don't you get some fresh air on the porch,” she said.

“Yeah, Mom. I think I might.” Trying his best not to wobble, the

boy picked up his fish and plodded out the back door.

Without a sound or a flinch, Logan endured the thick needle passing through his skin. The sutures repaired, Kathryn applied salve, fresh gauze and bound it with a strip of cloth.

“Thank you,” he said once she’d finished.

“You’re welcome.” A gentle smile on her face, she packed up the medical supplies.

“I’ll help Marcus with those fish.” He pulled on his shirt, walking to the back of the house.

After he’d gone, she put a hand

to her lips. What had just happened? A wave of guilt coursed through her. She'd lost control and that was unacceptable. She had responsibilities that far outweighed her physical desires, no matter how acutely she felt them for Logan. Barely coming to terms with the fact that her husband was gone—well and truly gone—she had no business messing around with a man she hardly knew. Not to mention the obvious hazard of an unwanted pregnancy. It'd been so long since she'd had to keep track of her cycle, but if she remembered the date of her last period correctly,

she'd be ovulating right about now. And did she even remember how to make the contraceptive tea Susannah had taught her to make? God, what had she been thinking?

Well, in all honesty, she knew what she'd been thinking—the feeling of his mouth on her neck and the scent of his skin replayed in her mind, sending a jolt of arousal through her.

“Forget it,” she told herself and stooped to pick up the books and silverware from the floor. Easier said than done. A lot easier.

Logan rushed to join Marcus in

the backyard.

Why on earth are you trying to please me in the first place? Her voice echoed in his mind.

It was a good question. A very good question. With all she'd done for him, her kindness, he'd become fond of her and Marcus, but it was more than that. When he was around her, he felt as if she were the only woman in the world. When she walked into the room, everything else went away. The noise in his head, his worries and fears—she quieted them all. He didn't have a name for what was developing between them. At least

he hoped she had feelings for him. She was so easy to be around, but underneath that ease was something else—a baser desire he understood better.

He licked his lips, the taste of her honey lip balm still there.

“You need some help with your catch?” Logan asked Marcus.

The boy turned, grinning, and nodded.

Logan took out his pocketknife and sliced open a trout, scooping out its entrails with one hand. As he worked, Logan did his best to curtail the throbbing in his loins. Fish guts—the next best thing to a

cold shower.

Chapter Eight

Logan's days with Kate and Marcus bled together. Time slipped by until he'd been there for over two weeks. Despite his best efforts to discuss their momentary lapse of reason, Kate refused to discuss it— not while he helped her with dinner each night, not when he made the trip to the marketplace with her and especially not when he sat shirtless in the kitchen as she

took out his stitches.

“Kate, we need to talk,” he insisted.

“About what?”

“You know about what.”

She put a hand to her temple, shaking her head. “I’m sure I don’t.”

Logan didn’t know what to think—how could she pretend nothing had happened? But he was good at compartmentalization too. He tucked away the emotion he harbored for her until he’d almost convinced himself it had never existed. Almost.

This morning, a repetitive thumping roused him. Marcus sat at the kitchen table doing math problems.

“Hey, buddy,” Logan pulled on a flannel shirt. “Where’s your mom?”

“Chopping firewood.” The boy crossed out something he’d written.

Logan gestured for Marcus to follow him. “Come on.”

Marcus looked curious but didn’t question Logan. They stepped into their boots and went out back. Sleeves rolled up, wearing a pair of jeans that had seen *much* better days, Kathryn wielded an ax

and split a small log in two. His gaze flitted to a patch of bare thigh exposed by a tear in her pants but he shifted to look at the ground.

“How old are you?” Logan asked Marcus.

“I’ll be eleven next week.”

Logan nodded and ran his hand along the scruff on his jaw. “Kate,” he called to her. “Put down the ax.”

She gave him a quizzical look and wiped her brow. “Has the cavalry come to save little ol’ me?”

“Step aside. This is man’s work.” He grinned at her, hoping she wouldn’t plant the ax between his eyes.

Pretending to look around, she replied, "All I see is an invalid and a boy. When are the men coming?"

"Ha, ha." Logan reached for the ax.

"You're serious?" Kathryn leveled her gaze at him. "Marcus is too little."

"He can work on the kindling with the hatchet."

With a withering look, she handed over the protective goggles she'd been wearing. He put them on and set up a log on the chopping block. With one powerful swing, he brought the ax down dead center on the log and it cleaved in two.

“See, Marcus, easy as pie. Care to give it a go?” he asked the boy.

Marcus made a face and said, “Uh, *no*.”

Logan leaned the ax against the woodpile and sat on the chopping block. “Come here, buddy.”

Begrudgingly, Marcus complied.

“Listen,” Logan went on. “You’re getting old enough to learn how to help your momma with some of the tougher chores around the house. And you don’t do them because they’re fun—no one likes chopping wood—but it’s gotta get done. You do it because she’s your mother and you love her and she

takes really good care of you. Don't you think she deserves a little break?"

The boy shrugged. "I guess so."

"Did you hear that, Mom?"

Logan winked at her. "Go put your feet up, have some coffee or tea or whatever it is y'all do to unwind."

Kathryn laughed and shook her head. Logan loved the sound of her laugh, it lit up her face and her eyes sparkled. There was a lot about her he could force himself to ignore, but not that, not how pretty she looked when she laughed.

Kissing the top of Marcus' head, she agreed to leave the "men's

work” to the “men” and headed inside. Logan watched the sway in her hips as she retreated. An ache radiated through his groin. Okay – so he was doing a terrible job ignoring her. He shook away the thought.

Logan put the goggles on Marcus and set up a small log for him that had already begun to split on its own. The first couple of tries, the boy missed the wood altogether and lodged his hatchet in the chopping block. Eventually he got the hang of it and before long, the “men” had worked their way through the pile, Marcus

particularly proud of the kindling he'd created.

When they came in, they were laughing and joking around. Kathryn was in the living room, reading a book.

"Go wash up," she told Marcus and the boy clomped to the wash basin.

She called Logan over to her and he sat next to her on the sofa.

"Thank you." She put her hand on his.

Warmth from her touch passed through him but he kept his tone even. "For what? Earning my keep? You're welcome."

“For that, but also for taking some time with Marcus. He really looks up to you...and it’s good for him to understand what it means to be a man. I coddle him too much, I know.”

Logan nudged her. “That’s your job. You’re his mother.”

She nodded and fell silent but didn’t take her hand away. He couldn’t tell what was going on in her mind, but he could see the wheels turning. It was all he could do to contain the obvious question – what had happened to the boy’s father, to Kate’s husband? But he didn’t dare ask. Having done

something to get back in her good graces, he wasn't fool enough to screw it up again. Whatever was causing that little crease on either side of her lips to deepen, he'd have to let it be for now no matter how much he wanted to cup her face in his hands and kiss away her troubles. Then he'd let his mouth meander down to her breasts, biting at one nipple until she gasped. Bending her over, he'd slide her skirt over her hips and sink himself into... His desire becoming evident, he shifted in his seat, leaning forward to hide his erection. Yeah, he was the master of

compartmentalization. Right.

He caught a bead of sweat with his sleeve as it streamed down the side of his face. "I guess since I'm healthy enough to chop wood, I should get a move on soon."

"Yeah. I guess." She looked down at her book. "Do you know where you're gonna go?"

"I don't have a clue. I need to find a way to contact my crew. I'm sure they've given me up for dead by now."

Keeping her gaze trained on her reading, she pursed her lips. "Well, you're welcome to stay here. Until you know what you're going to do.

You can't just go off without a plan."

"I thought you wanted me gone as soon as I was healthy enough to travel."

"Shut up." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

He chuckled and nodded. "Okay."

* * * * *

Kathryn watched Logan at the helm of his ship, golden hair ruffled by a light, salty breeze. He corrected their course and hitched the wheel in place. A wicked grin spread across his lips as

he noticed her in the doorway. Without a word, he walked over to her and snaked his arm around her waist. His mouth was so close to hers she could smell his skin, his gaze roamed down her body and up again to meet her stare. Wrapping one of her legs around his hips, he pulled her against his hard body, crushing his lips to hers. The kiss set her aflame, her heartbeat pumping fire through her. She grasped a handful of his silken hair and they tumbled to the floor.

He shoved her skirt over her hips, nestling himself between her thighs. With one savage tug, Logan ripped

open her blouse. Catching a breast in his mouth, he teased her nipple with his teeth. A wave of pleasure rippled through her. Running her hands down his hard abdomen, she pulled his shirt free of his trousers. The button on his pants fought with her, but she managed to pry it open.

Her lips pressed to his ear, she murmured, "I want you inside me, Brett. Now."

Her own gasp woke her, her heart thundering in her chest. Where was she? Kathryn looked around, the dim light of the embers

in the fireplace illuminating familiar surroundings. Creaky bed, sagging mattress, small dingy room. They were hers all right.

“Damn it,” she swore under her breath, gripping the bed sheets in her fists. The passion, the ship, it was all just a dream. She was still here, her own level of hell in Gulfland.

A clatter in the kitchen drew her attention. Wrapping a thin robe around her, she walked out of her bedroom to investigate. Logan sat at the kitchen table, two fingers of whiskey in front of him. She stared straight ahead, trying to ignore the

fact that he wasn't wearing a shirt.

He looked up at her. "Did I wake you?"

How to answer that question? *As a matter of fact, I was having a ridiculously hot dream about you and my throbbing pussy woke me, so yes, I suppose you did wake me.*

"No." She pulled her robe tighter around her and took a seat next to him. "What's keeping you up?"

He shook his head and took a drink of whiskey. "Ghosts of the past."

Kathryn poured herself a shot.

Sipping at it, she asked, "This godforsaken war?"

"That...and other things."

She ran a finger around the rim of her glass. "It's odd the way the war just becomes normal. Routine. All the violence. The pain. The loss."

"Is that what happened to your husband?" Logan's voice was soft, as if he were apologizing for the question.

Her mouth running dry, she dragged her tongue across her lips, but found it did little to help. Instead of wetting them, it only made them stick together more.

Finally, she pushed out one hissed word. "Yes."

"I'm sorry," he offered, but the words more panicked her than comforted her.

She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to admit the inevitable. And she didn't want to break down and go all blubbery and weepy. Long ago, she'd packed away the hurt because it did no good for Marcus to see her cry. She'd just as soon keep it that way.

"It's been hard on Marcus, growing up without a father." She waved away the concern in Logan's eyes.

“I think it’s been hard on you too.”

His statement once again took her closer to raw, untended wounds she didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Yeah, so we both know why I can’t sleep. What keeps you up at night?” Her voice sounded harsher than she’d meant it to, but if he’d caught her attempt at deflection, he didn’t comment on it.

After a couple minutes of unbearable silence, he said, “It’s not something I talk about.”

Her hand brushed past his. Her throat constricted, the memory of

the night he'd held her to his chest running through her mind. She could use comforting like that right about now. "I know what you mean."

Under the sleeve of tattoos on his right forearm, she could see the outlines of old scars. Given the shape and size, they were probably from cigarette burns. Reading his haunted expression, the emotion weighing down his brow, she said, "Someone used to hurt you."

Logan swallowed hard and she expected him to go quiet again, but he didn't. The story of his youth came pouring out of him, a

waterfall of words and anger. His father ran the household like he ran the ships he commanded. If Logan forgot to take out the garbage, he'd get a beating. If his grades dropped below a B average, he'd get a beating. If his bathroom floor wasn't clean enough to eat off, he'd be forced to eat off it and then get a beating. Better him than his mother or younger brother. Michael was too delicate to endure the admiral's wrath, so Logan took the brunt of the old man's rage.

At seventeen, Logan joined the U.S. Merchant Marines—no way in hell he was signing up for his

father's Navy – and sent his mother most of his paycheck. It wasn't much, but it helped her and his brother move from shelter to shelter. Brett Senior always hunted her down, but it was the best Logan could do at the time. If only he could convince himself of that now. A voice inside Logan's head – in the quiet of the night – would hiss at him that he should've killed the admiral.

Once the son of a bitch died of liver cirrhosis, Logan sold the old family house and turned all the money over to his mother. But he kept his father's boat – *The Yellow*

Rose. Sailing *The Rose*, he felt free. He always felt free of the old man's ghost on the open water.

"That's why you hate the name Brett. It was his name too," she murmured.

Nodding and tossing back the last of his drink, he gave her a humorless smile. "My father gave me only one valuable piece of advice—they don't respect what you don't inspect. Well, that and never bet to an inside straight. Fifteen years he's been gone and his memory still scares me to death."

She covered his trembling hand with hers. "He terrorized you. You

have a right to be afraid of him.”

“Not afraid *of* him.” He shook his head. “Afraid of *becoming* him.”

Kathryn’s mouth fell open, she sought out his gaze. “No. No, that’s not something you need to worry about.”

“I’ve done terrible, *terrible* things in my lifetime, Kate. Your friend Roy is right. I’ve got blood on my hands.”

Placing a hand on his chest, she felt his strong pulse against her palm. “You have a good heart, Brett. I’ll admit I didn’t see it at first, but underneath that tough guy exterior... You’re so good with

Marcus. You risk your life to help the Resistance. You're a good man."

"I'm really not." He clasped her hand, moving it from his chest to the seat of the chair.

"Why do you keep saying that?"

"Because here we are talking about the worst things that have happened to us and you're trying to comfort me," the lamplight flashed in his eyes, "and all I can think about is..."

Her pulse racing, she murmured, "Kissing me?"

His tone dusky, he replied, "More than that."

Again, Kathryn ran her tongue over her lips. The heat in his words set her body on fire. Ever since that first kiss, she'd craved more of him. She'd done her best to ignore it, but it was always there, like the background hum of an engine building up steam. Tonight, the roar was deafening.

Without another word from her, he stood, pulling her to her feet. Was he going to send her back to bed? Panic flared in the pit of her stomach. They couldn't leave it like this, she couldn't stand it—the aching, the unresolved need, her body burning for him. Not for one

more minute. She tightened her grip on his hand, pleading with him silently, the words refusing to form in her mouth.

One finger under her chin, he tilted her head up, grazing his nose along her cheek. Then he kissed her. Not like the first time, not in a heated rush, but slowly, gently, just tasting her lips. She melted against him. His arms around her and the heat of his torso pressed to hers felt like heaven. How long had she been left alone with her fantasies? Five years. Longer than that perhaps. Too long.

Running her hands over his

back, she could feel the ropes of muscle beneath his skin. Though she'd seen every inch of him at some point since he'd been here, she longed to rediscover his body as a lover.

Mouths pressed together, they stumbled through the house to her room. He stopped to lock the door and scooped her up, depositing her on the bed. A predatory grin on his face, he covered her body with his, hips settling between her thighs. A flurry of kisses drew out into one long exploration of each other's mouths. Like a woman on a hunger strike finally breaking her fast,

Kathryn couldn't get enough of him—the weight of his solid body, the sweet flavor of his tongue, the hint of whiskey on his breath, the rasp of his unshaven chin—she was lost, overwhelmed by him, and she liked it.

He shifted onto his back and pulled her on top of him, helping her out of her shirt. She straddled his hips and looked down at him. Fingers skimming over his torso, she took in the expanse of his broad shoulders and chest. She sneaked glances at his handsome face, too self-conscious to make direct eye contact. The sadness she'd seen in

him earlier was gone, replaced by ardor, his gaze seeming to drink her in.

Flushing from her neck up to the roots of her hair, she folded her arms over her bare breasts but gently he caught her hands, shaking his head.

“Don’t cover up. You’re beautiful,” he murmured.

Her reply caught in her throat, goose bumps rising on her flesh. Trading places with her again, he rolled her beneath him. Lips to her bare skin, he wedged a leg between hers and ran his tongue down her neck to her breasts. Pulling her

panties down her legs, he slipped a hand between her thighs. Kathryn struggled to catch her breath, dizzy with arousal. With two fingers, he stroked her labia, parting the folds of skin. She quivered at his touch, panting for more. Pushing a finger inside her, he drew her into a soulful kiss. Her mouth against his, a sigh escaped her.

His breath grazed her chin, hot and fragrant, and Kathryn lost herself in him again. As he slid his tongue into her mouth, he used his fingers to open her body. Long-forgotten sensations washed over her. It felt like too much pressure,

but in a good way. Brushing his thumb across her clitoris, he sent pleasure radiating through her. He fluttered his fingertips and a shock wave racked her. The technique felt at once too intense and so good she didn't want him to stop. And he didn't, not until she broke away from his mouth, panting for air. Withdrawing his fingers, he massaged her clit in earnest. Each stroke sent more pulses of ecstasy through her. Her heartbeat pounded as she writhed against the mattress.

Desperate for him, she yanked at the closure on his pants. It gave

way and she pushed his pants and underwear down his knees. He squirmed out of them and kicked them off the bed, settling himself between her legs. She ran a hand over his hard cock and guided it to her opening. Nuzzling her cheek with the tip of his nose, he pushed forward into her. She drew in a sharp breath, closing her eyes.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his lips against her cheek.

“No, but...it’s just been a long time.”

He seemed to understand what she meant and set a slow pace, sliding the length of his shaft inside

her then slipping it out to the tip. Bursts of heat swept through her along with the sensation that she'd lost possession of her body, that it now belonged to Brett. With each long stroke, she felt a little bolder until she worked up the courage to open her eyes. He gazed down at her and pressed his forehead to hers. Her hands strayed to his backside and she gripped his round ass. Spreading her legs wider, Kathryn pulled him deeper into her pussy and held him still as she thrust her pelvis upward. More excitement and fiery heat coursed through her. She arched her back

and wrapped a leg around him. Snaking an arm beneath her hips, he pulled her flush against him and rocked her back and forth.

Her thighs wet with her own juices, she slid against him, rubbing her clit against his pelvis. She trembled and whimpered, clutching his shoulders. Too much fire, too much tension, she could hardly stand it but at the same time she couldn't bear to let it slip away.

As he made love to her, he whispered to her. Sweet nothings really, but his deep voice in her ear narrating their passion kept her cemented in the moment. He

played her body with the skill of a virtuoso. Working the head of his cock against the spot inside her that turned her to jelly, he ground his hips against hers. She bit her lip to keep from calling out.

Tears gathered in her eyes and her whole body grew rigid. She held her breath, focused on her throbbing pussy. Tension and heat reached the breaking point and an orgasm shook her. Ecstasy rippled out from somewhere deep inside, shaking her entire body. A sharp intake of breath and he groaned too, hot spurts filling her.

Arms and legs tangled with his,

she jerked and clutched at him, sure she'd lost all control of herself. Straining for air, she drew in a shaky breath. Finally, the intense pleasure receded. At first in pulses and bursts, just as it had begun, and then in warm waves of relaxation. She let out a sob and nestled her face against his chest. Logan buried himself inside her and held her until her quaking subsided.

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. The gentle expression on his face brought on a fresh bout of tears. He didn't shush her or ask why she was crying. Instead, he sheltered her as she gave in to a

long overdue release.

Jonas was gone and this—being with another man, letting Logan make love to her—was the final step in admitting that to herself. And the first step to moving on.

Though he didn't fully understand her tears, Logan knew better than to try to quiet her. This was her moment and he let her have it.

Once her cries quieted to a few faltering breaths, he brushed the teardrops from her cheeks and gave her a soft kiss. Withdrawing from her, he rolled onto his back. She

curled up around him, her breasts pressed against his ribs, and draped her body over his. With one finger, he traced random patterns on her back and stroked the length of her torso.

“You okay?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, for the first time in a very long time, I think I’m just fine... I’m sorry I broke down.”

“Don’t apologize. I just wanted to make sure, you know, that you don’t regret this already.”

“I don’t,” she chuckled quietly. “Not yet anyway.”

Smiling up at the ceiling, Logan smoothed her hair and kissed the

top of her head. He should've known she was made of tougher stuff but still, she looked so small nestled in his arms. And she'd been here for years on her own. Far be it for Logan to suggest that a woman couldn't survive without a man, but in this place, she had to be one tough lady. Or lucky as hell. Maybe a little of both. Wondering how much longer her little oasis of safety would last, he longed to protect her. He couldn't just leave her and Marcus behind.

“Kate,” he murmured. “We have to find a way out of here.”

He waited for a reply that didn't

come, worrying that he'd somehow upset her again. A soft snore eased his mind—she'd fallen asleep. Logan pulled the sheet over her, smoothing her hair across the pillow.

Though he didn't sleep, he held her until the light of dawn peeked around the edge of the blinds. He climbed out of bed, careful not to wake her, and slipped on his trousers, heading to the kitchen to start an early breakfast. Marcus would be up soon.

Chapter Nine

“Are you sure he’ll let me use it?” Logan asked as he pumped the day’s water supply from the well.

“Well, I’m not sure, but it can’t hurt to try.” Kathryn chewed at her thumbnail.

If Sampson let them use his hand-crank two-way radio, Logan might be able to contact his crew if they were close enough. It was a long shot, but like Kathryn said, it

couldn't hurt to try.

He caught her hand and kissed it, moving his mouth up her wrist to her elbow. A blush crept across her cheeks, stoking his desire to take her again. He folded her into his arms and brushed his lips over hers.

"Stop," she said, but he could tell by the tone of her voice she didn't really want him to stop. "Marcus might see us."

Certain parts of him couldn't care less if Marcus saw, but he knew she was right. With a growl, he nipped at her chin then released her. She laughed and took a swipe

at him, shaking her head. Black waves of hair spilled around her shoulders, framing her reddened cheeks. He imagined brushing that fragrant hair from her neck as he planted kisses there. Then, he'd slide her skirt over her hips, turn her around and bend her forward and... It was all Logan could do to restrain himself. His hard cock pressed against his zipper. He'd been gentle with her the night before—their first time and all, but he knew there was more to Kate than sweet lovemaking. With another grunt, he adjusted himself, trying to think unsexy thoughts.

Fish guts, fish guts, fish guts, he chanted to himself and picked up the buckets, walking with her to the house. Once he'd dropped the water in the kitchen, they headed over to the neighboring farm. Sampson sat on his porch, smoking a homemade pipe.

"Miss Kate," the old man called out, standing up.

"Hi, Sampson." She mounted the steps and motioned to Logan. "This is Brett. He's, um..."

Logan took Sampson's outstretched hand. "I'm a privateer for the Republic of Texas. I need to get in touch with my crew. Kate

tells me you have a radio we might be able to use.”

Sampson’s weathered face was a mask of indifference and Logan worried the man might say no. “You and your family are welcome to passage on my ship, as payment for your kindness.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I was born on this land and I’ll die on it.” Sampson stood and hobbled into the house, motioning for them to follow. Children ran through the living room, Sampson’s wife and three grown daughters bustled around the kitchen, already preparing lunch. The home teemed

with life and joy. While Sampson walked to the back rooms, the women pushed glasses of lemonade and plates of cookies on Logan and Kathryn.

“Y’all coming?” Sampson called.

Logan hurried after the old man. Easily three times the size of Kathryn’s dwelling, the rambling ranch-style home seemed to go on forever. He found Sampson in a back bedroom.

“Here.” Sampson gave the radio to Logan. “You can come over and use it when you like, but you bring trouble to my house and I’ll end you, boy.”

“Yes sir.” Logan nodded.
“Thank you.”

“It works best someplace up high. Bring it back to me when you’re done for the day. I use it to listen for trouble at night.” Sampson pushed past Logan and headed to the front of the house.

Back at Kathryn’s house, Logan climbed up to the roof, sending out carefully worded transmissions on the channels Jacques usually monitored. His efforts were met with only the crackle of radio silence.

* * * * *

Closing Marcus' bedroom door, Kathryn heaved a sigh of relief. He'd finally fallen asleep.

It'd been a long day. She'd vacillated between hope and despair so many times her head was spinning. She'd rejoiced at Logan's plan to contact his crew, but then reminded herself the odds were slim. When Sampson agreed to let them use his radio, another burst of hope had coursed through her, but Logan's efforts today had proven futile, as he'd expected they would. Not to mention the fact that they'd made love last night, an act that came with its own set of

worries.

Patience, she reminded herself. She'd waited this long for something—anything good to happen. She'd have to wait just a little longer for her current situation to sort itself out. Why then did time seem to grind to a halt? Hours felt like days and today like a year...except in Logan's arms. Then time passed all too quickly. Sooner or later she'd have to reveal her relationship with Logan to Marcus. If indeed she did have a relationship with Logan. Perhaps it was too early to label it. The swirl of thoughts and uncertainty

overwhelmed her. A hand to her temple, she sank onto the sofa next to Logan.

He rubbed her shoulders, “Headache?”

“No,” she replied, covering her face with her hands. “There’s just a lot going on.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?”

“Everything – you, me, contacting your crew. I hope you’re not wasting your time.”

Continuing the massage, he told her, “No time with you is wasted.”

She felt his mouth on her neck. Shivering, she turned to see his

smiling eyes peering back at her. "Is that your remedy for every situation?"

"Yes ma'am," he murmured, his lips still against her skin.

Warmth spread from her throat down to her toes, making some notable stops along the way. A familiar pulse started between her thighs and her nipples drew into tight buds. Good god, he'd barely touched her and she was ready to tear his clothes off.

He slipped a hand beneath her shirt, fingers pinching and rolling her nipples. She winced at the pain mixed with pleasure. Leaning back,

she nestled between his legs, his chest radiating heat through thin layers of cloth.

“I’ve been dying to do this to you all day,” he whispered in her ear, lips brushing over the lobe.

She pulled up her skirt and parted her legs. Pouncing on the invitation, he ran a hand over her thighs and up to the mound of flesh covered in a smattering of hair.

As much as she wanted to give in to him right here, right now, there was a very real chance Marcus would wake and catch them in the act. She righted her skirt, sitting up. Logan groaned his

disapproval.

A finger caught beneath his chin, she smiled. "Come with me."

He hurried after her into the bedroom, locking the door behind them. No more words, only a whirl of kisses and flying clothes. She couldn't get him undressed fast enough. She was dying to feel her bare skin pressed to his, the heat of his body warming hers, his cock filling her. Tongue toying with his, she held him as close as she could, his growing need for her making itself evident.

Encircling his shaft with her hand, she stroked him and traced

his throat with her tongue. As if it had a mind of its own, her mouth meandered down his body, marking every lean crease and swell of muscle. She sank to her knees, looking up at him. A wolfish smile twisted his lips and his erect cock twitched, begging to be kissed. She gave the velvety head a self-conscious swipe with her tongue. Logan's moan spurred her on.

Licking her lips, she leaned forward, nuzzling the tip with her cheek. To wet the shaft, she ran her tongue over it, laving his tightened sac as well. Kathryn took his cock into her mouth and held still for a

moment as she adjusted her jaw and tongue. It'd been awhile, but long-unused techniques came back to her. She covered her teeth with her lips, moving up and down the length of his cock.

Logan moaned and panted, his fingers tangled in her hair. His response sent chills down her spine. Backing him out of her mouth, she teased the head, suckling at drops of salty pre-cum. A gasp escaped him as he pulled free, helping her to her feet. His large hands under her ass, he picked her up, pressing her against the wall.

She gasped and clung to him.

“Don’t worry. I got you.” A smug grin parted his lips as he dipped in for a breathy kiss. His tongue toyed with hers, the musk of his skin flooding her nostrils. Supported by his strong arms and her legs wrapped around his hips, she was free to run her hands over his hard chest and back. She let her mouth meander down his neck, mixing kisses with gentle nips.

He bent his knees a little more, positioning her over his cock, and thrust into her. A shock of pleasure shook her and she bit down harder on his shoulder. Logan didn’t complain. Instead, he pushed

deeper into her, taking one breast into his mouth. The pressure of his teeth on her nipple and his cock filling her turned her to jelly. All conscious thought slipped away until only heat, ecstasy and his body against hers remained.

Thrusting at a steady pace, he pinned her against the wall. She let her head loll back, his mouth roaming over her throat. Her grip on him tightened, she dug her fingernails into his skin. Sucking in a sharp breath, he drove into her, his pelvis pressed to her mound. The heat and pressure between her legs intensified.

“Harder,” she whispered.

Apparently happy to oblige, Logan hastened the rhythm and force of his forward strokes. His pubic bone ground against her clit. She grappled with the overwhelming pleasure building inside her. Her breathing picked up speed, growing shaky and irregular. Kate lost the struggle to keep quiet, whimpering as a powerful orgasm claimed her.

“*Brett.*” Her breathy exhalation seemed to please him. A half-smile tugged at his upper lip. He pushed into her, trembling, and came with her. Writhing against the wall, she

let wave after wave of ecstasy sweep over her.

Once her body quieted, she slumped against him. He kissed her forehead and cheeks as he carried her to the bed. Collapsing in a tangle of arms and legs, they held each other in the silence of the night. Outside a few crickets commenced a love song of their own, lulling Kate to sleep, her worries from earlier forgotten.

* * * * *

The warmth of Logan's hand running over her breasts pulled

Kathryn from sleep.

“What time is it? Is Marcus up yet?” She jolted awake.

He glanced at the bedside clock. “It’s about two or so. We have plenty of time before dawn.”

Nudging her onto her belly, he swept her hair from her neck and ran his mouth over her throat. A slow burn spread over her skin, following the path down her body he created with his tongue. She propped herself up on all fours and he sucked on her clit. Picking up on her implicit request, he used broad swipes of his tongue to lave at her asshole and slit.

“That feels good,” she murmured, melting against the sheets.

“I’m just getting started.” With that declaration, he pinned her legs apart, alternating between feathery flicks over the head of her clitoris and deep penetration, his tongue buried inside her. Unable to cry out as she longed to, she panted and clenched her jaw. Pleasure swelled in her abdomen, her pussy soaking wet. She wiggled her hips, begging him to fuck her. In one deft move, he hopped up and pulled her to the edge of the bed. Positioning her ass in front of his hips, he pushed his

cock into her. A wave of pleasure coursed through her. His hand cupping her breasts, he drove into her hard and fast.

“*Yes.*” She sighed, gripping the bedspread. This was what she wanted from him—to be taken, to be the object of his lust and desire. Spreading her legs wider, she moved his hands to her hips and laid her torso across the mattress. Splayed out for him, she bucked against him as he pounded into her, a bit of pain lacing the pleasure washing through her. She pushed back more, allowing him to plunge deeper, her back arched, nipples

brushing over smooth, cool cotton bedding. Panting and writhing, she bit the bedspread to contain the cries of ecstasy building in her throat. He slid a hand over her buttocks, pushing a wet finger inside her ass. She yelped, the pain of being stretched so completely taking her higher.

“Can you take it?” He leaned forward, his lips brushing past her ear.

“Yes. It feels so good.” She gulped in air, her chest straining at her shortness of breath.

Gone was the gentle lover she'd known last night and she delighted

at the change. More than just controlling her body, he owned it. A hand tangled in her hair, he pulled her head back, giving her neck gentle bites. Clenching her teeth, Kathryn's head spun. No one had ever taken her to such heights. Her own juices dripped down her thighs, her pussy growing slicker with every thrust. Her lips numb and tingling, she could hardly form words, but she managed to growl out his name.

He worked the finger inside her asshole, driving his cock hard into her pussy. The muscles inside her gripped him as pure ecstasy racked

her body. Waves of sensation surged higher and higher until they reached a crescendo. A powerful orgasm rocked her and she thrust upward until her ass met his thighs, his cock buried inside her. She shook, drawing up handfuls of the comforter in her fists. Ragged breaths seared her lungs, but she couldn't give in to the need to call out. A few more strokes and he exploded inside her.

Little by little, the waves subsided, leaving her limp across the mattress. Logan withdrew from her and helped her crawl into bed. Rolling onto her back, she put a

hand to her head and tried to slow her breathing.

“My lord,” she said between gulps of air.

He snuggled up beside her. “You called?”

“Ha ha.” She turned onto her side to face him. His expression was that of the cat who ate the canary. Well, he deserved his smug grin. She felt all woman, as though she had a garden sprouting between her legs, as if her kisses were made of sugar and her pussy dripped honey. She was high, drunk on him and the way he looked at her.

His hand to her cheek, he

brushed a lock of hair from her forehead and kissed her softly. "Feel better?"

A sleepy smile tugging at her lips she replied, "Brett, I've *never* felt better than this."

The last thing she remembered before fading off to sleep was his warm embrace.

Watching her sleep, Logan passed a hand over the swell of her hips. God, the way she'd come for him. The silken heat that drenched his cock, the ecstasy on her face. He wanted to take her again right now, but his aching shaft dictated

otherwise.

A fine sheen of sweat clung to his skin, but a different kind of warmth moved through him. He felt agitated, his thoughts consumed by her, but at the same time a sense of peacefulness gripped him. He felt euphoric...and a little nauseous. Was he sick? No, he decided. That wasn't it. Hand to his temple, he grappled with the realization.

"I think I'm falling for you, Kate." Thank God his words had fallen on deaf ears.

* * * * *

Kathryn rose early. As she moved, her thighs cramped. Her vagina felt raw, but in a good way. Logan had sexed her up once more before heading to the sofa at four a.m. The feel of his cock inside, taking her every way he could, sent a jolt of electricity through her. Longing to crawl back in bed, she pushed herself to dress and head for the kitchen. So much to prepare before Marcus woke up. As she kneaded the dough for cinnamon rolls, Logan padded into the kitchen in boxer shorts and t-shirt.

Arms around her, he pressed a kiss onto her shoulder, his hands

roaming over her breasts. “Good morning, darlin’.”

“Mm...good morning.” She tilted her head against his cheek. “Don’t distract me. I have to get this dough rising and the frosting made.”

“But then I can ravish you?”

Heat building between her legs, she gave him a playful hip bump. “Not likely. C’mon, I’ve got to get ready for Marcus’ birthday.”

Giving her a gentle kiss, Logan smoothed her hair over her shoulders. “Speaking of which...”

He retreated into the bedroom and came back holding a

pocketknife with a wooden handle. "Would it be all right if I gave him this? I've had it as long as I can remember. Every boy should have a pocketknife."

"I think he'll love it." She pushed and pulled the dough across the floured counter, trying to ignore the weight of emotion pressing against her chest.

No such luck. Tears flooded her eyes. Good god, she'd cried more in the past couple of weeks than she had in years. Blinking furiously, she wiped a stray teardrop with her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" Logan's hand

in the small of her back spurred on the wave of emotion.

“My baby’s not a baby anymore.” She sniffled.

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and held her as if he understood the fear gnawing at the pit of her stomach. Boys younger than Marcus had been captured in Reformer sweeps and pressed into service—babies turned into killers. The day before Jonas left came flooding back to her. She’d had to hide under the bed with her five-year-old son while Jonas was hunting. The Reformers were rounding up all boys over the age

of four for “schooling”, they called it. Desperate to protect his family, Jonas set out the next day and never returned. Kathryn had been lucky thus far, Roy and Sampson always had an ear to the ground, giving her time to hide Marcus when necessary, but how much longer would her luck hold out?

“Hey, while you’re getting things together here, I’m gonna head over to Sampson’s and see if I can raise my crew, all right?” he asked.

Craning her neck, she gave him a peck and nodded. “The rolls should be ready in a couple hours. I

think Marcus would really like you to be here when he blows out his candles.”

“Of course.” He gave her one more squeeze then headed off to dress.

Kathryn funneled all her fear and anxiety into furiously kneading the dough.

* * * * *

The scent of cinnamon and brown sugar permeated the house. Logan entered the kitchen to find Kathryn slathering frosting on a pan of plump sticky buns. Marcus

sat at the table gesturing animatedly, across from him sat Roy. Logan's upper lip curled with disdain, but he'd be civil for Marcus' sake.

"Hello, Roy." Logan took off his hat, sitting next to Marcus. "Hey, I hear someone has a birthday today."

"It's me. Look." The boy beamed, thrusting a football at Logan. "Mr. Jackson got it for me."

"That's great. I think I might have a little something for you myself." Logan dug in his pocket and handed Marcus his gift, wrapped in a blue paisley bandana.

Marcus' eyes grew wide as he shook the knife out of the cloth. "Whoa."

"Tell Captain Logan and Mr. Jackson 'thank you'," Kathryn reminded him.

"Thanks!" He pried open the knife, turning it over in his hands.

"You be careful with that," said Logan.

A sour look crossed Roy's face, but he didn't say what he was clearly thinking.

With only one half-burnt candle flickering atop the cinnamon buns, they hurried to sing *Happy Birthday*

before the flame went out. After Marcus blew out the candle, Kathryn served up plates of warm, gooey rolls. Marcus devoured three.

“Can I go show Billy and Sam my presents?” he asked.

“Yes, you *may*, but be home for supper.”

The boy ran off, tossing the football in the air.

“Really, thank you both. It’s nice to see him so happy,” she said to the men.

“My pleasure.” Roy shook his head.

“Me too,” added Logan.

Roy turned to Logan, his eyes narrow slits. "I thought you'd be moving along by now."

"We will." Logan met the man's gaze with equal animosity. "As soon as I can make arrangements."

"What do you mean, 'we'?" asked Roy.

Heat rose under Logan's collar. "I don't know that that's any of your business."

The other man turned to Kathryn, his mouth agape. "What's he mean, 'we'?"

She bristled, knocking over a glass of water. It clattered to the ground and shattered on the floor.

She started to get up, but Logan held up a hand. "I got it, Kate."

His gaze still fixed on Roy, he walked over to the corner to collect the broom and dustpan. All the color had left Kathryn's face and she fidgeted with the hem of her blouse.

"Kathryn?" Roy prodded her again, his lips drawn tight.

"Captain Logan was kind enough to offer me and Marcus passage to Texas on his ship," she said.

"Oh, out of the kindness of his heart. Right." Roy spat and shifted his glare to Logan. "It didn't take

him long to climb into your bed. Shit, I been trying for what...? *Years* now just to get you to look at me. I take care of you and your boy, not because Jonas asked me to, but truly out of the kindness of my heart. And this is the thanks I get?"

She shook her head, the distress on her face inciting Logan even more. "Roy, I told you not to do those things if you thought—"

Roy slammed his fist on the table. "Goddamn it, Kathryn, we had an agreement."

"You should leave now." She clambered to her feet and walked to the washbasin.

The man rounded the table and reached for Kathryn, but Logan stepped in front of her, grabbing Roy's wrist. "She asked you to leave."

Just give me reason, Logan funneled all the anger he could into his glare.

"Kate, is this what you want?" Roy tried to sidestep Logan, but Logan held him fast.

"I think you should go cool off," she said.

Logan released his grip and shooed Roy away. "You heard her."

Roy looked up at Logan, disgust pinching his features. "You should

watch yourself. The bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“Yeah, well let’s make sure I don’t fall over on *you* then.”

One more hateful look and then Roy spun on his heel and left.

Chapter Ten

Kathryn watched Logan sweep up the broken glass, his demeanor as casual as though nothing had happened. Chewing at the inside of her cheek, she struggled to find a way to explain Roy's outburst. But she had no good explanation for it other than the fact that she was a great big whore. Well, not a whore. Not yet. A prick tease...a gold digger. None of the labels for what

she'd done sounded at all flattering. Why should they? It was shameful.

Logan took the shards outside to the trash heap—returning several minutes later. With care, he replaced the broom and dustpan. Only then did he fold his arms over his chest and ask, “What’s going on with you and Roy?”

Despite the fact that she fully expected the question, panic gripped her. She took a seat at the table, the words bubbling up in her throat, but she didn’t want to speak them. Pressing her lips together, she looked up at him.

He set his jaw. “Is there

something between you two?"

"No, nothing like that. Roy and I are just friends. Not even friends, just neighbors." She sighed. "H-he's just taken care of us since Jonas left and the other night he asked if...if he paid for our passage, if Marcus and I would go with him across the border."

"And what did you say?" His gaze searched hers.

"I didn't say anything. I told him I'd think about it." Tears flooded her eyes. "But I was going to say yes."

Logan nodded, giving no reaction, which was worse than if

he'd hurled insults at her. She could only guess what he was thinking.

"Do you want to be with him?" he asked.

Her stomach in knots, heartbeat falling to her toes, she whispered, "I didn't have a choice."

"You could've told me instead of letting me get blindsided like this."

"I didn't know he was going to be here today. It's not like I invited him."

He raked a hand through his hair, his mouth a flat line. "You still could've mentioned that you were

in *negotiations* with another man.”

His words stung as much as if he'd slapped her. Shoulders sagging, a stabbing pain in her chest, she struggled to get a handle on what she was feeling. Maybe he was right. She probably should've mentioned it the first time Roy showed up, but she didn't owe Logan that kind of explanation then. Did she even owe him an explanation now? And how had everything gotten so complicated so quickly? A month ago she was a single mother eking out subsistence for herself and her child and today she was caught up in some love

triangle she hadn't asked to be a part of. More teardrops raced down her cheeks, sobs of frustration breaking loose from her chest. She buried her face in her hands.

Logan's footsteps shuffled across the floor and he folded her into his arms, stroking her hair. "Shh, now don't cry like that."

She pushed him away. "Don't."

"Stop being silly."

A flush heated her cheeks and she turned her gaze on him. Narrowing her eyes, she shook her head. "I don't owe you an explanation. What was I supposed to do? When I introduced myself,

should I have said, 'Hi, I'm Kathryn. I'm considering shacking up with my neighbor because I'm tired of living in this hellhole'? Or maybe when we were doing it the other night I should've told you how relieved I was that I didn't have to fuck Roy."

A smirk cracked Logan's facade of consternation, then the smirk turned into a chuckle.

Against her will, Kathryn found herself mirroring his smile. "Now stop it. I'm serious."

The chuckle turned into a giggle until they were both overcome with fits of laughter.

Logan sat down next to her and wiped his eyes. "I'm really glad you didn't break the news to me like that."

She sighed. "You must think I'm awful."

"Honestly, Kate, I don't think anything." He pursed his lips. "I was just shocked. But if I'm mad at anyone, it's him. He put you in a bad situation."

"If we're going to be honest, let's just say it – it's just as much my fault. I led him on because I needed him. He even said he didn't expect anything from me."

"Yeah, and as a man I can tell

you that's bullshit. He expected plenty. Look how he's acting like a jealous lover. It was a done deal in his mind."

The humor of the moment having passed, she hung her head, all the guilt and shame flooding back to her. "If he's the one to blame, why do I feel so horrible?"

Dipping his head, Logan forced her to look at him. "It's not the worst thing anyone's ever done. Don't be so hard on yourself. Hell, I do three things worse than that on a daily basis."

She gave him a halfhearted smile. "Now *that* I believe."

A grin crinkled the edges of his eyes. He picked up a dishcloth and blotted her eyes. "There. No more crying."

She took the cloth from him and wiped her nose. Logan's kindness amplified the ache in her heart. Did she even deserve his understanding? If he'd never shown up, would she be in Roy's arms by now? The thought let loose a wave of nausea.

Under his breath, Logan began to hum an old sea shanty as he stood. Bowing, he stopped humming to ask, "May I have this dance?"

“What dance?” she furrowed her brow. “What’s wrong with you?”

“This is a party, you should be celebrating, not beating yourself up because you were between a rock and a hard place.” Humming again, he took her into his arms and started to two-step.

“Stop,” she said, but didn’t put up much of a struggle. “Marcus will be back soon.”

“We’re just dancing,” he murmured in her ear. “Besides, he’s got a new football and a pocketknife to lord over his friends. We’ll be lucky if we see him by

dinnertime.”

She dipped her head to one side, acknowledging that Logan had a point. His breath on her neck chased away the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her body warmed at his touch. Drawing her closer, he rested his cheek against her hair. His scent enveloped her — musky and rich, his natural smell set her heart to pounding.

He stopped humming and they moved together in silence. Brushing her lips over his throat, she moved her hands up his back. Without warning, he scooped her up and carried her to the bed. His strong

arms supporting her stoked the fire between her thighs. As he lowered her to the mattress, she tugged at her skirt and blouse.

“Wait.” He stayed her hand and kissed her forehead, then her eyelids. “Let’s slow down.”

“What’s wrong?” *Don’t you want me anymore? Don’t let Roy ruin what we had,* she pleaded with him silently.

“Nothing.” He kissed her nose, fingertips tripping down her torso. “I just don’t want to rush like last time. I want to take our time together.”

Tucking a lock of hair behind

her ear, she sat on her bed and peered up at him. He sank to his knees in front of her, unlaced her boots, and pulled them off her feet. Wiggling her toes, she relaxed back onto the bed. Sliding his hand up her skirt, he leaned forward and kissed her knees then worked his lips up her thighs. She drew in an unsteady breath. He still wanted her. Relief blossomed in her chest.

She watched him pull off his boots and socks, his big hands capable of such power and such delicate tenderness. Her gaze moved to the growing bulge in his pants. Every inch of her skin

tingled, her pussy throbbing.

With a couple catlike movements, he crawled onto the bed next to her, brushed his mouth over her blouse and planted a kiss at the base of her throat. Emboldened, she wrapped her arms around his neck, stroking the base of his hairline. He meandered up to her lips again, his tongue teasing them open. His hot breath skimmed over her cheeks and he tasted like cinnamon.

One at a time, he popped open the buttons on her blouse, walking his fingers down her bare skin. Goose bumps rose on her skin, her

nipples drawing tight. Following his lead, she unbuttoned his shirt. His tanned skin seemed to glow in the midday sunlight. His body, with its many tattoos and scars—some new, some old—spoke of a life lived fully. Clearly he didn't seek out safety and he didn't run from a fight.

Gently she pushed him onto his back, eager to explore his body. Leaning down, she planted little pecks on his collarbone, stopping at a faded patch close to his neck. "How'd you get this scar?"

He ran his fingers over it. "A broken mast hit me."

Her fingers moved down to a jagged line on the swell of his biceps. "What about this?"

"Bar fight."

She moved her mouth down his body to a raised circular spot on his abdomen. "What's this one?"

"Reformer AK-47 round."

Looking up at him, she asked, "You've been shot?"

He shrugged. "Only once."

She shook her head, chuckling, and kissed a small line on his chin. "And this one?"

"Cut myself shaving." He grinned.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. It’s why I know I can’t use a straight razor.” Wrapping an arm around her, he scooped her up and flipped her onto her back.

Her olive skin was nearly flawless. A few well-placed freckles and a couple of stretch marks on her abdomen from her pregnancy, but other than that she didn’t have any scars. Not like him, all beaten up – ridden hard and put away wet.

He loved her body, the way her nipples hardened at the slightest touch, the dimples over each ass

cheek and most of all the way she melted into him every time they touched.

With two fingers, he opened her slit, easing his cock into her. She trembled and gasped, her gaze locked with his. His heart pounded in his chest, he wanted to tell her how much he felt for her, but he'd never been a man of words.

Instead, he moved inside her, rocking his pelvis against hers, watching the pleasure she felt play out in her expression. Her breasts crushed against his chest, hot and soft, he scooped one in his hand, kissing and licking it. She sighed,

clenching her eyes shut.

Velvet heat gripped his cock. The swell of her abdomen, the tension inside her, her dripping pussy all told him she would come soon, but still, he took his time, controlling his strokes. Flushed by her groans and whimpers, he felt his sac grow tight as he edged closer to orgasm.

Her opening was wetter and wetter and he pushed his cock deeper into her. She arched her back, spreading her legs wider. His hips pinned her to the mattress as he thrust a little harder, a little faster. Her exhalations came harder

and faster too. He almost had her there.

"Brett," she moaned, her fingernails sinking into his back, but the pain didn't faze him.

Tremors and a burst of liquid fire broke around his shaft. The ecstasy moving through her spurred his own climax. His cock contracting, pleasure shook him, hot spurts pushed out of him, filling her. He buried himself inside her and held still until they both came down from the heights of orgasm. Together they relaxed against the bed as he withdrew and moved beside her. Encircling her

waist with one arm, he pulled her body against him.

The peaceful moment stretched on in silence and Kathryn almost dozed off, but caught herself. She shook her head and rubbed her eyes.

“Go ahead and take a nap. I’ll wake you in twenty minutes.” He placed a kiss on the top of her head.

“What if you fall asleep and Marcus finds us like this?”

“I won’t fall asleep.”

She stretched, settling against him again. “It’s okay. I don’t need to ruin my sleep tonight.”

“I’m sure I can find a way to get you in bed on time.”

She interlaced her fingers with his. Her hand disappeared in his. Everything about her was so small, so dainty, he felt as if he had to be careful with her. How had one tiny woman endured so much, not giving in sooner to that son of a bitch Roy? The need to protect her billowed in his chest until he felt as though he couldn’t breathe.

“Kate,” he murmured, “I want you and Marcus to stay with me when we get to Texas.”

She stayed silent, her body less relaxed than it’d been a minute ago.

He waited for her to say something...anything. But she didn't.

"Did I upset you?" he asked.

"No."

"Why so quiet then?"

She exhaled and turned her face against his chest. "Brett, I don't want you to think—because of everything with Roy... I didn't sleep with you because I need your help."

"I wasn't thinking that. Well, *now* I'm thinking it." He jostled her a little and she pinched him. "Ow, hey."

“Don’t make fun. I’m serious.”

“I’m serious too. Just like you told me, you can’t just pick up and go without a plan. If you’ll let me, I’d like to be part of that plan, all the way.”

“You’d do that for us?”

“Yeah...I’d do it for anybody, but especially you and Marcus. He’s a great kid.” It wasn’t what he meant to say. He wanted to tell her that when she was around, all the oxygen was sucked out of the room. He wanted to tell her that he could imagine a future with her, that she made him want to be the best man he could. He wanted to pull down

the moon and the stars and give them to her. But he didn't tell her any of those things.

Chickenshit, he scolded himself.

She drew in an unsteady breath. "I don't know what to say."

"Say yes."

She propped her head up on one hand and looked down at him with a faint smile. "Yes."

He kissed her, settling her on his chest again. There'd be time to tell her everything he felt.

Covering her mouth with the back of her hand, she yawned. "I think maybe I will take a nap," she

said.

“I promise, I’m on guard duty.”

“You’d better be. If Marcus comes in and finds us like this, I will kill you.”

Logan took his orders to heart, no doubt in his mind that she would.

After a few minutes, she asked, “Are there still restaurants that sell cheeseburgers in Texas?”

He chuckled. “Yeah. Lots of them.”

“I’ve forgotten what one’s like.” She held his hand. “Mmm... Tell me about the cheeseburgers.”

Stroking her hair, Logan flipped through his mental list of burger joints. He decided to start with the mom-and-pop place right up the road from his house. They had a third-pounder topped with onion rings and barbeque sauce. Once he'd reached as far west as the new In-N-Out Burger in Dallas, her breathing had grown steady and even.

Chapter Eleven

Day after day, Logan made the trip to Sampson's farm to try to contact his crew and day after day, he picked up nothing but static or random radio operators who happened to be on the same frequency. But the nights with Kate gave him the inspiration to keep trying. During the endless hours of channel hopping, he'd relive their lovemaking. He'd gotten to know

every inch of her body—the way she'd moan as he sucked at her clit, the slick heat of her pussy. The way she came hard when he took her from behind, teasing her at first with just the head of his cock then thrusting hard and fast, his pelvis slapping against her ass. Oh and when she came—well, Logan didn't have words. She was just beautiful. And one day he'd make her moan in his own bed.

Adjusting his hard cock, he switched from channel to channel broadcasting a call out to *The Yellow Rose*. It was four in the afternoon. He was close to giving up, another

failed attempt, but a familiar Cajun accent crackled over the radio receiver.

“Captain Logan, is that you? Over,” the voice said.

Logan grabbed the transmitter. “Jacques? It’s Logan, over.”

“*Mon capitaine*. But how? We all thought you were dead.”

“You know I’m too mean to die.”

Jacques continued to gush, but finally Logan calmed his first mate enough to arrange a place to meet. The crew had just finished a drop farther south and in a few days’ time, Jacques could make anchor in

Portersville Bay.

“Just listen for Reformer activity in the area. Ever since that last raid, they’ve stepped up patrols,” said Jacques.

“You do the same, my friend. Logan out.”

As Logan collected the gear to return to Sampson, his thoughts raced a mile a minute. In less than a week, he’d be onboard his own ship with the woman and child he’d grown to love— Love? The word filled his chest with a sweet ache he’d never felt before. Not like this. Yes, for the first time in his life Captain Brett Logan, Jr. was in *love*.

Settling himself between Kate's thighs, Logan brushed her hair across the pillow. Her eyes closed, a lazy smile spread across her face.

"I can't believe it." She squeezed her eyes shut tighter "Honestly, I can't believe it. We're really leaving here in five days?"

He swiped his lips against her forehead. "We are."

She wrapped her arms around him, opening her eyes, her gaze capturing his. "I feel as though I need to stay perfectly still. Don't move, don't jar myself, don't even

breathe because I might wake up and realize this is nothing but a dream.”

“You aren’t dreaming.”

“Oh yeah? Prove it.” She wiggled her hips. The vibration against his cock sent a shudder through him.

Kissing his way down her body, he nuzzled her bare skin. Tiny bumps rose on her flesh as he settled his lips on her pussy, inhaling her musky scent. He licked from the base of her slit up to her clitoris. She groaned in response.

He plunged his tongue into her then slowly drew it out, savoring

the hint of her juices just starting to flow.

Logan took his time going down on her. She squirmed beneath him, dying to have him inside her, but he continued to focus on her labia and clit until both parts were swollen and throbbing.

“Brett.” She tried to push him onto his back, but his strength won out. Not to be outdone, she wriggled onto her belly, cutting off his ability to torture her more.

He chuckled, though the laugh sounded more like a growl as he pressed his cock into the cleft of her

ass. With an adjustment of her hips, she positioned him at her opening, slick lips enveloping his cock head. Arousal pulsed through her as she teased him, moving away each time he tried to push into her.

Grumbling with halfhearted frustration, Logan hooked an arm around her shoulders and shoved himself into her. She drew in a sharp breath at the sensation of being filled. His lips to the back of her neck, he pushed deeper, slipping a hand beneath her. One finger toying with her clit, he rocked back and forth. She shook, already sensitive from his earlier

attentions. Muscles inside her contracted, a quick but massive orgasm surging over her. But he didn't stop making love to her.

Even as she quaked, he pulled her against him, onto her knees so that she sat on his lap, still riding his shaft. Hands on her hips, he worked her up and down his wet cock, the tension building in her again. She reached behind her, her forearms around his neck, letting her head loll against his shoulder.

He drove into her harder, his rhythm steady. As the vestiges of her first climax receded, exquisite pressure blossomed again between

her legs. Panting through the unbearable flood of sensations, she gripped his shoulders. He arched his back, thrusting upward, one hand coming to rest between her legs. His fingertips strummed her clit and she strangled back a cry. Pleasure burst through her, exploding like fireworks. Her body shuddered violently. His cock twitching inside her, Logan grunted, coming as quietly as he could.

They slumped forward together. He moved out of her, pulling her to spoon with him. Aftershocks still rocked her and he held her until

her body quieted. She let out a long, cleansing sigh.

“Kate.” He kissed her neck. “I...”

She waited for him to finish his thought, but no more words came. Turning to face him, she cupped his face in her hands. His expression read as serious, almost in pain, but somehow amorous at the same time.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong. I-I want to tell you...”

A sound at the back of the house drew his attention. They both sat up, listening. More rustling came

from the yard and then a crash. Logan jumped out of bed, stepping into his trousers.

“Stay here,” he said.

She stripped the gun safe key from her neck and held it out to him. “Let me get dressed. I’ll come with you.”

“Stay here, Kate. Stay with Marcus.”

But that’s exactly what worried her. She’d gotten used to confronting trouble head-on, protecting her cub herself, and she wasn’t prepared to sit in the house when she’d rather be wielding a shotgun. Before she could object

any further, Logan shot out of the room.

Kathryn pulled on her skirt and blouse, hurrying to check on Marcus. A peek into his room showed he still slept, unaware of anything that was going on. But what was going on? She heard the back door slam and Logan barking at someone.

Stopping by the gun safe on her way out, she saw he'd taken his .45. She loaded the shotgun and hurried to catch up with him.

Flinging open the door, she saw Logan grappling with a smaller man. In the dim light, it was hard

to make out the man's face. Then she heard his voice.

"Take your fucking hands off me," the man yelled.

"Roy?" she called out, running to the garden entrance.

As she approached the shed, she saw the still broken apart, the copper pipes broken and the cauldron overturned.

"It's mine." Roy struggled to break loose. "I can destroy it if I want to. I gave her the supplies to build it and taught her how to make whiskey."

"Jonas taught me how to make whiskey," she said.

“And who do you think taught *him?*”

“I don’t care who taught who what or who built the still. You need to go home and sleep it off, Roy.” Logan shoved the smaller man away, popping him in the mouth.

Roy tumbled to the ground. At first he appeared to be unconscious or hurt, but soon enough he jumped to his feet, drawing a pistol from his waistband. Before Roy fully extended his arm, Logan had already drawn his gun. Sights still trained on Logan, Roy struggled to his feet.

Kathryn cocked the shotgun.
“Roy, stop this nonsense.”

“You’re going to shoot me now, Kate?” asked Roy, turning the gun on her.

“If I have to.” She shook, praying she wouldn’t have to.

He huffed and spat. His lip was oozing blood.

“Roy, please just go home. I’m sorry you’re hurting so much. It’s all my fault. I understand that. I hurt you and I’m sorry,” she said, hoping to disarm him with her words. The man’s shoulders sagged and he looked as if he might drop the gun.

Logan didn't exhibit as much faith in the power of persuasion. While Roy focused on Kathryn, he edged closer. Close enough to take advantage of his superior reach. In the blink of an eye, Logan discarded his own weapon, grabbed Roy's gun and wrested it from the man's hands. Clocking him in the face with the butt of the gun, Logan knocked Roy to the ground. A sigh of relief washed over Kathryn, but Logan didn't stop there. He fell on the smaller man, pummeling him.

"Logan," she cried, rushing to pull him off Roy. "Logan, stop!"

Knuckles bloodied, a savage

look on his face, Logan looked up at her. "Kate, he pulled a gun on us... on *you*. He doesn't get to walk away from that."

"Brett," she said, her voice as even as she could make it, a hand on his shoulder, "it's all right. You took away his gun. I'm safe. You're safe...Marcus is safe. Just let him crawl home."

Logan looked down, chest heaving, nostrils flared at the man cowering beneath him. As if deciding whether or not to heed her request, Logan clenched and released his fists. Finally he dragged himself to his feet, telling

Roy, "If I see you again, I'll kill you. You hear me?"

Roy struggled to pull himself upright and limped away as Logan collected the guns from the yard.

Shaking with anger, Logan wiped his face. His gaze followed Roy out of the yard and he remained moored to that spot even once the weaker man had disappeared. Kathryn approached him and put the back of her hand to his cheek.

"Let's go inside," she murmured.

His face a stony mask, Logan took his time to reply. Swallowing

hard, he turned to look at her. Little by little, a more human expression came back to him. Hands on his hips, he nodded. "Yeah. Let's go inside."

Once in the kitchen, she pulled a rag from a cabinet. "Let me see your knuckles."

"They're fine." He grabbed the bottle of whiskey, pouring himself a shot.

Ignoring his bravado, she took one of his hands and dabbed at the split skin. Drops of perspiration glistened on his forehead. "Are you all right?"

He tossed back the shot and

nodded. "I'm fine."

The surge of adrenaline that had carried her through the confrontation waned, her hands trembling as she cleaned his.

Logan stared straight ahead at the wall. "You okay?"

"Sure," she lied. "I'm fine."

His posture softened but he still wouldn't look at her. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

He hung his head, pulling his hand away. "I lost control."

"You were protecting us." She folded her arms over her chest.

Blinking hard, he looked up at

the ceiling. "Yeah."

After pouring another shot, he took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Is your hand okay?" she asked again, though she didn't know why.

"Yeah, thanks." He sipped at his whiskey this time. His gaze met hers for a second but then he turned away again. "You look tired. You should go back to bed. I'll stay up, make sure he doesn't come back."

"Roy's really losing it. I've never seen him act like this."

He seemed to bite back the response he wanted to give. "I

promise, everything will be fine. We'll be gone in five days."

"Right." She leaned down and gave him a peck on the cheek, but he stiffened at the contact instead of warming to her like he usually did. Smoothing her skirt, she shuffled toward the bedroom.

"Good night, Kate."

"Night."

Once in the room, she let herself deflate, collapsing on the bed. Fear and anxiety attacked her, wrapped in a cloak of exhaustion. She'd never seen that side of Roy, not once the entire time she'd known him. Or Logan. Would he have

killed Roy if she hadn't stopped him? As he'd said, he'd lost control, given in to blind rage. But he was protecting her and Marcus so that made it okay...didn't it? Logan's warnings that he wasn't a good man replayed in her mind. With a heavy sigh, she dismissed her doubts about the man. Logan was just protecting her, end of story. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get any rest and Logan never joined her in bed. No one but Marcus slept at all the rest of the night.

* * * * *

“Kate’s farm is all yours in two days, she’ll sign over the deed before we leave,” Logan told Sampson. This, Logan and Kathryn had discussed. What to do with the farm, what to take with them, what to leave behind. When they’d head out for the shore and where they’d wait for the dinghy to show. All of that they’d talked about at length. The fight with Roy, however, they avoided like the plague. She said she understood. She said Logan hadn’t frightened her. And that was the end of that conversation no matter how many times Logan thought he should give her an

explanation. Hell, assuming he understood what had happened himself. When he lost his temper like that, all he could remember were flashes. The blood, Roy's expression like that of a wild animal, Kate's voice—calm and reasonable. It hadn't, however, escaped his attention that she'd hardly touched him since the fight.

Sampson grunted, snapping Logan to the present. But the old man didn't look particularly happy to hear Kate's decision about the farm. "Come with me."

He motioned for Logan to follow and Logan did as instructed.

Out back of the house, Sampson produced a piece of paper with what appeared to be random words written on it. "Someone's turned you in, Captain."

Logan shook his head, sure he'd heard wrong. "What makes you say that?"

A heavy expression weighing down his already sagging features, Sampson explained his nightly scan of Reformer channels. He'd pieced together the codes they used over the past decade, aligning words with locations, times and distances from attacks that followed certain transmissions.

He pointed out portions of gibberish and translated. ““Source reports...privateer...twenty-five clicks southeast...intercept nightfall.”

A jolt of adrenaline surged through Logan. “They’re coming for me tonight at Kate’s farm.”

“That’s what I figure. She and the boy are welcome to lay low here, but I can’t have you around. You get me?”

“I get you.” Logan didn’t blame the old man. He had a large family to protect. Kate and Marcus were innocent, Logan had brought this trouble into their lives. “What time

is it, sir?"

"Almost ten. What you thinking, son?"

Twenty-five clicks. That was about sixteen miles—four hours or so by foot, maybe less if he hightailed it. That's what Logan was thinking. "Can I borrow a piece of paper and something to write with?"

When Sampson returned with paper and a makeshift charcoal pencil, Logan scribbled a note and gave it to the old man. "She's at the fishing hole with Marcus. She didn't want him to go alone with the way Roy's been acting."

Shaking his head, Sampson replied, “Roy fixed you good, but you doing the right thing.”

Logan nodded. Sick to his stomach and temple aching—he felt miserable so, yeah, he was definitely doing the right thing. After asking Sampson directions, he set off on his trek.

* * * * *

She read the note, tears flooding her eyes. “Sampson, where did he go?”

“Don’t know, Miss Kate, but he was clear. You’re to go with me.”

Narrowing her eyes, she scrutinized the man's expression. He was lying. He knew very well where Logan had gone.

As if he saw her wheels turning, Sampson added, "He's been gone over an hour, there's no running him down."

Well, she wasn't seriously considering abandoning her son and chasing after Logan, but it was so thoughtful of him to take away her choice to do so. So thoughtful of him not to consult her at all before making some snap decision about what to do.

Someone reported to the Reformers

who I am and that I'm staying with you. I have to go, I'll tell them I forced you to help me. I'm sorry. Tell Marcus I'm sorry too, the note read.

She knew exactly who that “someone” was. Scanning the people gathered around the lake to fish, she didn't see Roy's greasy head and slicked-back hair among the fishermen.

Damn Roy to hell. She should've let Logan beat him to death two nights ago. And damn Logan for thinking he knew best. Anger surged through her. Arrogant, stubborn—the both of them. If she ever saw Roy again...

She turned to her friend. “Logan can’t be gone...he just can’t. We’ve got to find a way to fix this.”

Sampson touched her shoulder. “Come on, Miss Kate. We can talk more at the house.”

She brushed off his hand, wiping her forehead. Had to think. Had to catch her breath. Logan couldn’t be gone. He couldn’t just disappear on her, not like Jonas. Two days ago she’d had hope for the first time in so long—hope to be happy, for a better future, that she’d been lucky enough to find love again. Roy had stolen that from her. And Logan with his ill-

conceived chivalrous gesture. Gun-running, contraband-smuggling, womanizing pirate Captain Brett Logan. He picked now to grow a conscience?

Head spinning, she collected Marcus and their catch. On the walk to Sampson's farm, the rush of anger ebbed, leaving her with only panic. She knew full well where Logan had gone—the Reformer encampment. Nothing good would happen to him there. He'd be tortured or killed or tortured then killed. Bile searing her throat, she asked Sampson to borrow his radio again.

Chapter Twelve

The walk had given Logan time to work out his story. He'd tell the Reformers he'd held Kate captive, using the boy to keep her complicit. If he turned himself in, surely they'd cancel the raid. He couldn't let anything happen to Kate and Marcus. Every time he thought of them a dagger pierced his heart. Everything he was giving up, everything that could've been. He

set his jaw against the hurt and remorse. Those emotions wouldn't do him a damn bit of good now. He had to turn himself in to protect them.

Over a small rise, he could see the encampment. Only a few more minutes and life as he'd known it would be over. Stomach tied in knots, he pushed himself to keep going.

"Captain!" Logan thought he heard a shout behind him. Turning to look, the world around him erupted into flame. A wave of heat and fire pushed him facedown into a muddy sinkhole. Another

explosion went off as Logan struggled to stand, searing his lungs.

Red lights flashed and sirens wailed—death came cloaked in garish, noisy trappings. At least it should have appeared so, but Logan didn't much notice. He was splayed across the ground, his gaze had already fixed upon some imaginary plane. In this, his final minutes, he remembered the warmth of her body when she curled herself around him. And the coconut scent of her hair, her honey-flavored lips. Was it lip gloss or lip balm she used? He couldn't remember. She'd

told him once, but he couldn't keep straight her few cosmetics. As if her beauty needed any enhancement to begin with. He should have told her that, but he hadn't. He should have told her he'd fallen in love with her, but he hadn't.

I hope you're not wasting your time, a disembodied voice murmured. Kate's voice.

It occurred to him that *all* his time had been wasted. Foolish self-aggrandizement and greed wrapped in a veneer of lofty ideals. Violence inherent in his lifestyle and daredevil tactics, they fed the part of him he hated most. But Kate

showed him something else, she'd shown him he still knew how to be soft. And he hadn't explained in his letter why he'd left. That he loved her and Marcus more than he loved himself. Did she know? She had to know. She seemed to know his every thought. Still, he should have told her.

But he hadn't.

He fought against the unwelcome teardrops that flooded his eyes. He would not allow himself to die as a blubbering coward. Dying well, that was all he had left to hold on to, the last shred of his pride. The coming darkness

brought no pain and to his surprise, he was not afraid. Regret. Therein lay the anguish. So many regrets.

A wet cough brought up a bitter mouthful of sputum and blood. It wouldn't be long now. Logan pressed his face against the muddy ground, fingers digging into the muck. He wished it were warmer.

Flash – screech. Flash – wail.

Flash, screech. Flash, wail. Yes, death had come for him cloaked in garish, noisy trappings.

Shut it out, he told himself, focusing on the coconut scent of her hair.

He wished he'd told her
goodbye.

* * * * *

A thin line of gray broke through the darkness. Then the line turned into a swath of dim light. A shadowy figure stood over him, a lantern in his hand.

“Welcome back, *mon capitaine*.”

“Aw Christ, Jacques,” Logan croaked. “Now I know I’m in hell.”

A smile broke over his first mate’s face. “You didn’t think we’d let you go and do something noble, did ya?”

Logan struggled to sit up, his surroundings swimming before his eyes. His head felt as if it'd been cleaved in two.

“Easy now, Captain. You got a pretty big bump on your head.”

With a trembling hand, he touched the back of his skull, probing the lump there. “How did you find me?”

“Your lady friend, Kathryn.”

He went on to tell Logan how she'd hailed them on the radio. In turn, Jacques got hold of Lieutenant Wiggins and the Resistance raided the encampment.

“The lieutenant found you,

threw you on a truck. You been here for two days.”

“Where’s here?”

“A Resistance base camp.”

“Where’s Kate?”

“Safe where you left her.”

Relief rolled through Logan. Keeping her and Marcus safe had been his sole motivation for leaving in the first place. “I can’t believe you guys came for me. What happened to no heroic measures?”

Jacques smiled. “That’s your policy, not mine.”

They chatted awhile more until Logan decided it was time to hit the

head. The latrine was a good distance from the tent, so Logan figured he'd just slip into the woods. He agreed to meet his first mate at the mess tent in a few minutes.

Wandering away from the camp, Logan staked out a spot in the forest where no one would see him. Just as he unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, something hard jabbed him in the shoulder.

"You're like a bad fucking penny, you know that?" a familiar voice growled. "Don't call out or run or I'll shoot you."

Logan placed the voice

immediately. "I'm the bad penny, Roy? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Start walking."

"Give me a second." Fastening his pants, Logan craned his neck trying to get a look at the weapon. A Tec-9. Roy wasn't screwing around, but he hadn't picked the most reliable gun. Wheels turning, Logan clicked through the ways he could get the machine gun to jam or misfire.

Roy pushed him. "Let's go."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Logan, holding his ground. No way in hell he was going

anywhere.

“To a shallow grave.”

Christ. This asshole was crazier than Logan had thought. “Listen, I’m not moving. If you’re going to kill me you’re going to do it here. Good luck slipping past an entire battalion on your way out.”

“Don’t fuck with me—”

“I know you’re the one that turned me in.”

“Gee, nothing gets by you.”

“Now you’re going to shoot me?”

“Well, you didn’t make it to the base like you were supposed to.

That's why I followed you. I knew I couldn't count on your slippery ass to disappear."

Logan held up his hands. "I had nothing to do with the explosion."

"Whatever. Don't matter now, do it?"

Logan turned around slowly to talk to the man. Convincing Roy he didn't want to be a killer was Logan's only hope. "Listen, whatever you feel about me—and I get that you hate me, a lot of people do—but there's a big difference between wanting a man dead and doing the deed. Right now you haven't spilled any blood. But let

me tell you, son, no matter how justified you are in taking a life, it will haunt you for the rest of yours."

"Aw, Captain Loco Logan's concerned about how well I'll sleep at night."

"Go ahead and laugh at me, but killing someone ain't a joke."

Roy grabbed him by the collar, hissing in Logan's ear. "I'll tell you a little secret. The day Jonas left, I followed him and cut his throat about a mile out of town. And he weren't my first neither so you don't worry none about me pulling the trigger."

Well, there went that strategy, but Logan knew he had to keep Roy talking. “What kept you from sealing the deal with Kathryn then? You knew Jonas was out of the way.”

“Who says I ain’t had her?” the other man asked with a sneer.

Leveling his gaze at Roy, Logan replied, “How you gonna bullshit a bullshitter? I know you were never with her.”

With a shove, Roy released Logan. “Who knew she’d hold out hope for five fucking years? But she’s loyal like that. And I could wait. Had her all to myself, didn’t

I? Little by little I got her to let me in, made her see everything I could offer her.”

“But she wasn’t loyal to you like that, was she? She took up with me right quick.”

Agony shot through Logan’s temple. Roy had him by the hair, the gun in Logan’s face. “I blame you for that. But that’s easy enough to fix.”

Wrangling out of Roy’s grip, Logan pushed the man away. “And you think she’s just gonna run back into your arms? She’s not stupid. She knows you turned me in.”

“Now you listen here.” Roy

tightened his grip on the gun. "She's my woman. *Mine*. She'll forget about you once I get your stink off her."

"When? Five more years from now?"

"Shut up and walk!" Roy snarled.

"Why? Just kill me here."

"I don't need no trouble with your friends. Let's go."

"No, if you're going to kill me, do it now. You said it yourself – you done it before so shut up and do it."

Sheer hate twisting his features, Roy took aim. Instead of giving in

to the panic inherent in being in the sights of a gun, Logan took a calming breath, assessing the situation in a split second. He knocked the gun back, smashed the smaller man in the face with it, then kicked Roy in the knee. A few shots rang out, bullets whizzing through the night air as Roy crumpled to the ground. Logan stepped on the Tec-9, booting it out of reach—his larger size an advantage just as it had been the last time he'd fought Roy. And this time, Kate wasn't here to plead for the scumbag's life.

Ignoring the pain in his head,

Logan fell on Roy, embracing the murderous rage. Punches thrown wild, he pummeled the smaller man—bone crunching against bone, blood spatter flying wild—until Roy ceased to struggle. Or move at all.

Chapter Thirteen

The scene warmed Logan's heart. Sampson's huge family gathered together for supper, children and grandchildren filling every open lap. Marcus and Kathryn smiled at him from an oversized chair in the living room. It was the happiest he'd felt in a long time...maybe ever. Logan fetched their plates and settled onto the floor next to them.

They ate and laughed, Kathryn's face relaxed as if she didn't have a care in the world. Logan had never seen her like this—all aglow and giddy, but if he had anything to say about it, she would stay this happy for the rest of her life.

As she settled Marcus in for the night, Logan thought about the conversation they'd had when he'd first returned from the Resistance base camp. She'd wept when she found out Jonas was indeed dead, angry with herself that she'd almost taken up with the man who'd murdered him.

“You couldn't have known.”

Logan smoothed her hair, cupping one hand under her jaw. “Roy won’t be harming anyone ever again.”

Somehow Logan had found the strength to rein in his temper. He’d beaten Roy unconscious but then handed him over to the Resistance troops. Not an act of kindness by a long shot – the soldiers would bleed Roy for information and then he’d mysteriously come up missing. At least the blood wasn’t on Logan’s hands. That son of a bitch Roy had made his bed, now he could lie in it.

Hands clean and mind at ease,

Logan could feel the ghosts of the past losing their grip on him. He was free to set a course for the future. A future he'd once thought he didn't deserve. A future with Kate and Marcus.

Kathryn slipped into the guest bedroom to find Logan half undressed, lying on top of the sheets, leafing through the book she'd brought with her. He still had a bandage around his ribs, some bruising from the most recent bombing, but to her, he couldn't have looked better.

Ruffling his hair, she sat next to

him. "You have to stop getting yourself concussed. It can't be good for your brain."

He smiled up at her, putting the book aside. "At least I don't keep injuring something I use."

"Ain't that the truth?" She ran a hand over his already stiffening cock.

"C'mere, you." Pulling her to him, he gave her a soft kiss.

"Are you in shape for this?"

Wrapping his arms around her, he replied, "I don't care if I am or not."

"I'll take it easy with you then."

She pushed him back onto the bed.

“Usually I’d object, but tonight, I think that’s wise.”

She kissed his new bruise gently and worked her way down to the waistband of his underwear. Peeling the garment off one leg at a time, she exposed his rigid cock.

“Mmm, I think someone’s happy to see me.” She ran her tongue over the head.

Logan sucked in a sharp breath. Spreading her legs, she hiked up her skirt and climbed onto his lap all in one fluid motion. Handfuls of her blouse clenched in his fists, he pulled her into a fiery kiss. His

tongue moved over hers, exploring her mouth. Adrenaline coursed through her the way it always did when he touched her, setting her whole body on fire. She moved to slip him inside her, but he wrapped his arms around her, rolling her beneath him.

“I thought you needed to take it easy.” She chuckled, laughter fading on her lips when she saw the look in his eyes. “Brett, what is it?”

He captured her gaze, his eyes glittering as if he might break down and cry. But he didn't. Instead, he said, “I'm not a monster and I'm sorry I scared you that night...”

“You didn’t scare me —”

“I did, but I can control my temper. I can, and I’d never turn it on you or Marcus.”

“I know that.” She touched his face with the back of her hand.

“Well, *I* didn’t, not until the last time I fought Roy. I’m not a monster — I’m not my dad.”

Kissing his brow, she gave him a gentle smile, but Logan’s expression didn’t lighten.

Shaking his head, he went on, “At one point, when the bombs went off, I thought I was going to die. And I was okay with that except I-I realized I’ve never told

you how I feel about you.”

Her fingers threaded in his hair, she replied, “I know how you feel about me. You were going to turn yourself in to keep me safe. I get that.”

“It’s not enough that you ‘get’ it. I couldn’t deal with the thought of dying without saying...I love you, Kate.”

Her throat tight, tears stinging her eyes, she murmured, “I love you too, Brett.”

Lips to hers, clearly he’d decided enough said. He slid a hand between her thighs, teasing her open with gentle pressure. As

he slipped his cock inside her, she threw her arms around his neck, bridging the distance between their mouths. Waves of pleasure rippled through her.

Holding her knees apart, he slid himself into her up to the base of his shaft, then out to the very tip. Logan continued to rise and fall, thrusting in time with some unheard beat. Capturing a nipple in his mouth, he rolled it between his teeth, dialing up the heat and tension between her legs.

Kathryn gasped, hooking a leg over his arm to open herself wider. Juices wet her thighs the deeper

Logan plunged. With each forward stroke, he rubbed his pelvis to her clit. Her body shook, but she wasn't ready to climax yet. She craved more of him, to be joined with him like this as long as they could hold out.

“Roll over, I want to be on top,” she told him. With a grin on his face, Logan acquiesced.

Lowering herself onto his cock, she took his full length inside. For a few moments, she sat still, enjoying the heat and the feeling of being filled. He groaned, squirming beneath her.

“I can't take it, Kate,” he panted.

A wicked smile on her lips, she started to ride him—very small movements at first, just rocking him against her inner walls, her clit pressed to the base of his shaft. As her sheath grew tighter, muscles contracting on their own, she picked up the pace. Her ass grinding against his hips, she kept most of him inside her. Pushing forward, she rode him harder, the bite of pain adding to her excitement.

Logan bucked beneath her, hands on her hips, watching her every move. Her fingers on her nipples, she toyed with them,

pinching and tugging until finally she crested the peak of sensation. Wild spasms tore through her. She braced herself, one hand pushing at his chest, and bit her lip to keep from calling out. Only a few seconds behind her, he arched his back, burying himself in her. Hot cum spilled from her slit, leaking down her thighs.

She collapsed forward, her torso flat against his, her cheek against the soft patch of hair on his chest. For what seemed like ages, they breathed together—Logan still inside her, one hand stroking her unruly locks. Only once a cool draft

passed over her, giving her goose bumps, did she dismount, snuggling up beside him.

“Say it again,” she whispered. “I like hearing you say it.”

“I love you, Kate.”

A shiver passed through her at the sound of the words in his baritone voice. With a kiss, she replied, “I love you too.”

Tracing his tattoos with one finger, she giggled. “You’re getting Blanca’s name removed when we get back to civilization.”

“I promise. I’m sure she’ll be glad to be rid of me.

“Now for the really important question—” He pulled her closer to him, nuzzling her mouth and jawline. In a dusky tone, he asked, “Where’s my hat?”

Kathryn shook with laughter and pointed to the dresser.

* * * * *

Sampson woke them before dawn. With the few things they’d decided to take with them in a duffel bag, Kate and Marcus followed Logan. The trip down to the shore proved uneventful as planned.

Jacques met them in a small motorized boat and ferried them to the ship. As soon as Logan boarded his ship a sense of peace settled over him. His boots struck the teak of the deck on *The Yellow Rose* with a comfortable cadence. It was time for Logan to introduce his old baby to his new one. “Kate—*The Yellow Rose*. Rose, this is Kate.”

“She’s beautiful.” Kathryn ran a hand over the polished railings and gleaming brass fixtures.

“First Mate DuBois, get Kate and Marcus settled below deck.” Logan kissed Kate’s cheek. “I’ll be down in a few minutes. Gotta do my

rounds first.”

“They don’t respect what you don’t inspect,” said Marcus.

“Exactly.” Logan nodded, patting the boy on the shoulder. He watched them disappear into the belly of the ship. “Now let’s see what you dogs been doing to my boat.”

Hands on his hips, gun belt slung low, the smell of gasoline and salt water in his nostrils, Captain Brett Logan, Jr. broke out in a grin from ear to ear.

* * * * *

On the fifth day of their journey, Logan pulled the night shift. He'd had a bad feeling since shoving off, the same unease echoed in the expression of his first mate. Reports had come in from various sources around the Gulf that Reformer boats were stopping random vessels, including fishing and commercial ships.

Before he went abovedeck, Logan had kissed Kate good night and shown her the secret panel along one side of his cabin.

"If the alarm sounds, you hide in here with Marcus."

"Is everything okay?" she'd

asked, her brow furrowed.

“Of course. But just in case.”

When the searchlight blazed into the pilothouse, Logan steeled himself for the confrontation. Checking the magazine on his .45 and sliding one bullet into the chamber, he readied himself to tell the same tale he always offered patrols—he and his crew ran a simple fishing vessel in the Gulf and they were returning to Port Galveston. Logan flipped the switches, alerting the crew that they would soon be boarded.

Please remember what to do, Kate,
he prayed as if he could will her

into the hiding place with his thoughts.

“Heave to and prepare to be boarded,” a heavily accented voice ordered Logan to cut the engine and drop anchor.

His crew had already begun to gather on deck. Logan settled his hat on his head and slipped on a wool coat, taking his time to join them. Best to appear relaxed and maybe a little befuddled by the intrusion.

A swarthy young man with curly black hair led the group of three sailors who climbed onto Logan's ship.

“Good evening, Ensign,” Logan addressed the young man. “How can my crew and I help you?”

“Is this everyone on the ship?” asked the ensign.

Making a quick visual inspection, Logan indicated that it was.

“Permits and papers, please.” The ensign held out a hand as his men patted down Logan’s crew.

Logan handed over his fishing permit, travel documents and various other licenses.

The ensign leafed through the papers. “Do you have a weapon, Captain?”

Drawing back his peacoat, Logan exposed his sidearm. "I do."

"Please surrender your pistol."

Easing the gun from its holster, Logan placed it on the deck.

In a guttural language, the ensign read from Logan's documents into a walkie talkie. When a reply came over the radio, the young man's expression hardened. He barked at his men, who promptly surrounded Logan, their automatic weapons pointed at him.

"Something wrong?" Logan asked, hands held up in surrender.

"On the ground, hands behind

your head," said the ensign.

"What am I being arrested for?"

"On the ground, hands behind your head." The young man's face reddened.

Logan's mind ran at a mile a minute, but he struggled to remain calm. The Reformers must've sworn out a warrant on him. He was pretty sure he could grab his pistol and drop the ensign before the kid knew what had happened, but that would give the other sailors the perfect excuse to riddle Logan with bullets. Not that they needed one.

If he had to, he'd go peacefully with the ensign...but only if he had

to. Studying the hint of fear in the young man's expression, Logan asked, "You in charge of that vessel, Ensign?"

"I don't see how that's relevant. On the ground, hands behind your head. I'm not going to ask you to comply again."

"I fully intend to surrender, but only to another commanding officer." Logan cast a glance at his crew. "Allow me that much dignity. One sailor to another?"

Holding his breath, Logan watched the ensign chew over the decision. Finally the young man spoke into his radio again. Logan

exhaled, thankful his stall tactic had worked, but now what? He surveyed his crew, looking for options, but came up with none. Unless a small miracle occurred, Logan would have to turn himself over to the ensign's commanding officer.

From the Reformer ship, a small Zodiac carried a large older man, one with a thick mustache and an unmistakable scar over his left eye. Relief washed over Logan. His minor miracle came in the form of Captain Drago, a man with morals as flexible as Logan's. Drago could be bought off, Logan had done it

before.

Boarding *The Rose*, Drago shook his head, his lips pursed in annoyance. “Captain Logan. You are a pain in my ass.”

“My apologies, Captain, but as you see, I’m in a bit of a bind.”

Drago motioned for his men to lower their weapons. “Yes, it seems you are. We’re supposed to detain you and hand you over to our army.”

“I hear ya. You’ve got your orders.” Logan nodded. “But what good would that do either of us?”

Arching an eyebrow, Drago drew closer to Logan. “What good

would it do me to let you go?"

With a smile, Logan motioned to the stern. "Why don't we adjourn to the pilothouse and discuss this over a drink like civilized men?"

Drago muttered something to his men and then followed Logan to the back of the ship.

Over some of Logan's finest tequila *reposado*, the two men negotiated a deal they could both live with—ten thousand in Reformer coin to log this stop as that of a routine fishing vessel.

"How much more to make that warrant disappear?" asked Logan.

The man gave a tobacco-stained

grin and held up nine fingers. “Republic credits. They spend better in Mexico.”

Logan laughed and peeled off several more bills from his stash. Nearly twenty grand all said and done. A small price to pay for freedom and peace of mind. Drago punched a few buttons on his satellite comm-link and held the screen up for Logan’s inspection. Search results for Logan, Brett, Jr. — null.

“I’m in your debt, I won’t forget that.” Logan clapped the man on his shoulder.

“Neither will I.” Drago downed

his drink.

Logan escorted him to the deck where Drago gave the order for his men to return to their ship.

When the Reformer sailors and their captain had left, Logan returned his .45 to its proper place – his right hip. Tipping his hat to Jacques, he relinquished control of his ship to his first mate.

Logan ran down to his cabin and called to Kate. “All’s safe.”

He helped her and Marcus climb out of the crawl space. The boy was sleepy, only half awake, but Kathryn’s eyes were rimmed with red, her face pale.

Once they'd settled Marcus into his makeshift bunk on the floor, Logan climbed into bed with Kate.

"What happened?" she asked, tears welling in her eyes.

He brushed away the teardrops with his thumb and kissed her. "Nothing. False alarm."

"I don't think it was." She searched his face for an explanation. "You're really not going to tell me, are you?"

"Nope. We're all safe now and that's all that matters." He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her hair. Finally, she fell asleep in his arms.

On day fifteen, Kathryn woke to the gentle rocking of the ship...and Logan's lips to her throat, his warm body pressed to hers.

"Good morning, baby," he murmured.

"Good morning." She turned onto her side, nuzzling his cheek. "Today's the day?"

He nodded. "Excited?"

"Relieved."

Two weeks onboard Logan's boat was about all she could take. At first, she'd been a little seasick, but even once the constant nausea

passed, she'd discovered the meaning of cabin fever. Not that waking each morning in Logan's arms or drifting to sleep each night with her head on his chest had been a hardship, but she couldn't wait to do that on dry land.

"Where's Marcus?" she asked.

"At breakfast. All the way on the other side of the ship." Logan darted to the cabin door to lock it then slipped into bed again.

She turned onto her belly, exposing her bare buttocks, giving him the invitation he wanted. No time to waste, he moved behind her, pressing his mouth against her

moist opening. His tongue ran the length of her slit, from clitoris to asshole and then back again. She groaned, shuddering.

The sound of his zipper the only prelude, he pushed his hard cock into her up to the base. She replied with a low, rumbling moan. Heat rippled out in waves from her mound through the rest of her body. As he took her hard and fast, she massaged her clit. Had to climax before someone interrupted them.

“Harder.” The word escaped her more like a yelp than a command, but Logan happily did as she

requested. His pelvis crashed against her backside with savage force. He grunted, his shaft growing more rigid.

Her insides turned liquid, sweat forming on her brow. With every thrust, he reminded her that she belonged to him. Grinding her hips against him, she spread her legs wider. Yes, her body belonged to him. He pushed forward, the tip of his cock hitting just the right spot.

“Yes. Make me come, Brett.” She reached behind her, grasping a handful of his hair.

Knowing how to get her there in a hurry, he licked a finger and

pushed it into her ass. Working both of her openings, he drove into her. Kathryn whimpered and shook, panting to bring on the release she craved. His lips to the back of her neck, he snaked his free arm beneath her, drawing her pelvis upward. Gripping the sheets, she flexed and writhed. She was so close...so close...the pressure and heat almost too much to bear. Finally she rocketed over the edge. She came hard, moaning through the pleasure racking her body.

Now wet with her cum, Logan picked up the pace even more. He pumped his shaft in and out of her.

“One more time, Kate.” He flexed the finger in her asshole.

Her eyes watered, the intense sensation blinding her to her surroundings. Begging him to slow down—just to let her catch her breath—she clutched at his hips, but Logan ignored her. He hammered his cock into her pussy, rhythm steady. As her first orgasm receded, a second wave of ecstasy surged through her. She squirmed, panting and crying. The crew be damned, she didn't care who heard. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

His body jerked and he swore under his breath. One last powerful

stroke and he too came, pressing his hips flush against her buttocks.

After the last throes of pleasure receded, they collapsed against his bunk, laughing. He withdrew and wrapped his arms around her.

“I think it’s going to be a good day.” Logan wiped his forehead on his shoulder.

Kate craned her neck to kiss him. “I think you’re right.”

* * * * *

The ocean spray rose up from the ship’s bow and misted Kathryn’s face. She’d come out on

deck to watch the expanse of water roll by, Port Galveston looming large on the horizon. She put a pair of binoculars to her eyes, marveling at the island ahead of them. She saw houses, cars, boat slips, bridges — *pavement*. Long stretches of unmarred blacktop. Anticipation roiled in her belly, the markers of civilization bringing on a flood of memories.

Marcus trotted up to her, a fire in his eyes as well. He pushed between her and the railing, grinning up at her. She handed him the binoculars. “Isn’t it beautiful, baby?”

“If you say so.” He shrugged.

That was okay. Marcus didn't understand, but he would soon.

The closer they came to making port, the busier the deck became. Kate and Marcus begrudgingly went below and watched out a porthole in the galley as Logan steered the ship around the island to the docks. With a gentle bump against the slip's rub rails, their voyage came to a rather anticlimactic end.

With a heavy sigh, Kathryn hugged her son, waiting for Logan to take them ashore. After a few minutes, his smiling face peeked

into the galley. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be." She wiped her moist hands on her skirt.

Abovedeck, he gave Marcus and her a hand onto the docks. The sway of the floating pier didn't give Kate too much trouble, it was the sudden solidity of terra firma beneath her feet that threw her. She'd have to get rid of her sea legs.

Logan escorted them to his large black pickup truck, which had sat idle for two months. The engine sputtered and protested, but eventually turned over. A blast of warm air from the console vents gradually turned cooler until it

blew frosty cold—*air-conditioning*. Kathryn nearly wept.

She struggled to help Marcus with his seat belt while Logan loaded their things into the bed. The boy leaned forward, testing the many buttons and levers around the steering column.

Spurred on by Marcus' infatuation with the car horn, Logan hurried into the driver's side, tossing his hat onto the bench seat. The boy scooped up the Stetson and plopped it onto his head.

As they exited the main area of the port, the squat concrete

buildings became fewer and fewer until the road was surrounded by only water and sand. Kate watched the scenery fly past outside her window.

“Stop,” she murmured at first, but then cleared her throat and said more loudly, “Pull over. Please.”

Easing the truck onto the shoulder of the road, Logan gave her a quizzical look. With no explanation, she stripped off her seat belt, instructing Marcus to do the same. She took her son’s hand and they ran out to the pristine beach where a few waves lapped at shoreline.

“See, I told you it’s beautiful,” she said. This time Marcus nodded, flopping onto his back to make a sand angel.

Kathryn sank to her knees, scooping up the pearly white sand and letting it run through her fingers. Nowhere to be, no chores to be done, she could spend the day just admiring the world around her. And it felt like a great big world full of hope and possibilities again.

“Welcome to your new home, darlin’.” Logan knelt beside her, brushing his lips over hers. With a sigh, she put her head on his shoulder, watching the gentle

rhythm of the surf.

For the first time in ten years—
ten long, arduous years spent in No
Man's Land, five all on her own—
Kathryn knew she was indeed
home.

About the Author

Prior to becoming a multi-published writer of romantic and erotic fiction, Cindy went to college at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and graduated with a BFA in Art. After a brief attempt at an art career, she decided the “starving artist” life wasn’t for her. She worked for ten years in the corporate arena, but now spends her days as a full-time author.

When not chained to her laptop, she enjoys hanging with her family, belly dancing and exploring the culinary arts.

Cindy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascape.com.

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