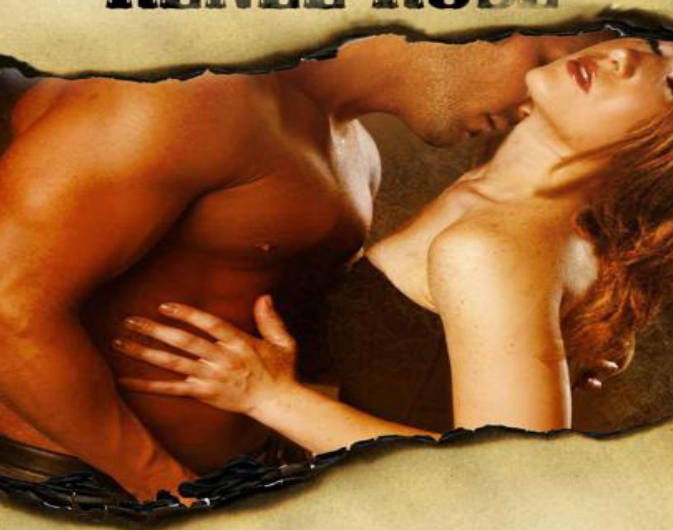


RENEE ROSE



The Devil
OF
WHISKEY ROW

The Devil of Whiskey Row

By

Renee Rose

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This book is intended for *adults only*.
Spanking and other sexual activities
represented in this book are fantasies
only, intended for adults.

Chapter One

“*Fire!*” a miner shouted, banging open the door of Daddy Diggs’ saloon. “Down at Smoochy’s!”

“Let’s go, Hank,” Jake barked, already on his feet and moving quickly toward the door. Even in a lawless, loose-morals kind of town like Dorado Hills, California, citizens came together under duress. “Olive, you’re in charge,” he instructed his top earning whore.

“I’ll take care of it, Daddy,” she said, and he knew she would. Olive knew the business inside and out, and was his right hand man, so to speak.

Hank might be considered his left

hand man, if there were such a thing. At eighteen, he was barely into his whiskers, but he was smart and well-disciplined and followed directions without fail.

“Fire at Smoochy's could spread to all of Whiskey Row,” Hank observed as they jogged down the wide road toward the blaze. Flames had devoured the building, and Hank was right—if they didn't extinguish the fire, it might burn every saloon right down to Daddy Diggs’.

They went around back to the front of the line of bucket wielders, taking the water passed up from the pump and tossing it on the inferno. A movement

from above caught his eye and he looked up. His heart stopped in his chest. There, on the second floor, leaning out of the window, was Smoochy's famous whore—Cora Underhill. The girl who made his breath catch every time he saw her face.

“Get me a blanket!” he barked at Hank, pointing to where men were trying to tamp down the flames with horse blankets.

Hank ran to fetch one and he pulled it taut, holding two sides and instructing Hank to hold the other two. “Jump!” he called to the girl.

He could tell that she heard him, but she looked dubious.

“Jump, lass. We'll catch you, I

promise! Jump into the blanket!”

She shook her head, peering down with wide, terrorized eyes. She was dressed in little more than a shift; she'd probably been interrupted with a customer, or had been asleep. Her long blond tresses fell over her shoulders and he found himself worrying they would catch fire. As if in response to his thought, the lintel above her head suddenly crashed down in flames. She screamed and leaped back from the window, disappearing from their view. He swore, softly.

Cora Underhill. She never should have ended up a whore at Smoochy's. She'd been a well-bred girl from an

upstanding family and fate had delivered her to the lowest hell hole in Dorado Hills. He sprinted to the back of the General Store where he took an ax and a ladder and hauled them back at a run. Leaning the ladder against the blazing building, he peeled off his dress shirt so it wouldn't burn, and snatched up the horse blanket and ax. He took the ladder rungs two at a time, beating down the flames in the window so he could climb through.

Cora was trapped in a corner, the blazing lintel blocking her escape. Heat scalded his face. He swung his ax against the flaming wood, knocking it out of the way.

“Go away!” she screamed at him, a

wild look in her eyes. “Leave me! Let me die!” she sobbed in a voice too hoarse to carry.

He crossed the distance and hauled her to her feet, half-carrying, half-dragging her to the window. She felt small and fragile under his large hands—as if he might break her little bones if he squeezed too hard. He climbed out first, pulling her after him onto a smoldering wooden ladder. With each step down, he tugged her along, catching her when her feet missed the rungs, hauling her down to the ground where he hustled her away from the inferno.

She choked and coughed as he led her, an arm around her shoulders holding

her up. When they were a safe distance, he stopped and looked down. Even blackened with soot and wild-eyed, she was exquisite. And she looked so much his Eliza, it made his chest ache.

But Eliza was dead and he'd left his those memories back in Ireland long ago.

“Are you all right, lass?” he asked. “Are you burned?”

She shook her head. Then she suddenly stiffened and stopped. “*Joaquin!*” she screamed with panic, looking around wildly. “Joaquin?!”

“*Aquí estoy, Cora!*” a Mexican boy no more than seven or eight years old yelled from several hundred feet away.

Her body sagged in relief as she whirled to watch the boy running toward

her. He wondered what the child meant to her. He must be the son of one of Smoochy's whores. Maybe an orphan.

“Where's Smoochy?” she asked the boy.

“*Muerto.*”

Dead. He'd suspected as much. It seemed only a handful of people had emerged from the blazing building.

“Take her and the boy back to our place,” he instructed Hank, preparing to return to pail duty.

“What do you want with us?” she demanded in a croak that turned into another coughing fit.

He peered at her filthy face. Her lips trembled and her eyes still had that

crazed look she'd had since he pulled her out. He touched her cheek with the back of his fingers to calm her, but she jerked back, as if scalded by his touch.

It was odd how much her rejection bothered him.

“I don't want anything from you, Cora. I'm just seeing to your safety, that's all.”

Her eyes widened when he spoke her name, as if she were surprised he knew it. She stepped back, out of his reach, her blue eyes narrowed with mistrust.

“Go on, get Olive to tend to her,” he said to Hank and turned back to the fire.

Smoochy's was beyond saving, its

wooden structure already collapsing. All they could do now was minimize the spread of fire. Wielding the ax, he chopped the wood porch off the side of Smoochy's closest neighbor on Whiskey Row to keep the fire from jumping. Then, seeing there was nothing more to do but let it smolder out, he returned to Daddy Diggs'.

* * *

The Devil Diggory. The Irish-born owner of the other brothel in Dorado Hills. Of course he would be the one to pull her out of the fire. He'd be ready to snatch whatever or whoever was left after Smoochy's demise. For all she

knew, he set the fire to get rid of his only competitor.

But sweet Jesus, what a sight he had been, smashing into the burning room with his bared torso and warrior-like presence. Not that she'd wanted to be rescued. She'd been resigned to dying—praying to God she'd meet her parents again in heaven, but no—the devil himself had snatched her back and obviously planned on keeping her for himself.

She considered whether she could escape. She wasn't in debt to him, as she had been to Smoochy, but she also had no money to run with, not even clothes to wear that hadn't been burned. And she wouldn't get very far on her good looks

alone. Or if she did, it would be by whoring herself out to some other man, possibly even more dangerous than Diggory.

“*Estás bien?*” she asked Joaquin.

“Yes,” he said, stubbornly making a point of speaking his perfect English in front of the stranger. “I’m burnt here,” he twisted his arm to show her a burn on his forearm, “and here,” he indicated the back of his hand. She clucked sympathetically, inspecting the superficial wounds. A Mexican orphan, the eight-year-old worked for his keep doing chores at their brothel, and had been subjected to general abuse by its inhabitants. The two of them had

somehow become an odd pair, looking out for one another when they could.

They were led in the back door of Daddy Diggs' gambling hall, brothel, and saloon, which was the upscale haunt for miners who'd struck gold and had money they were eager to waste. Smoochy's had been low class. In a town where women, particularly white women, were so few and far between, Daddy Diggs' had four high class prostitutes, including two who'd come from the French bordellos and brought their dances and tricks of the trade. Men paid a premium for lighter skin, which was why Smoochy had held her as his prized property. She'd worked amongst Mexican and Chinese women who he

kept as indentured servants like her.

In the back kitchen, one of the high-class whores greeted them. She was dressed in fine clothing—her satin ruffled dress and petticoats cut out in front in the French style to reveal black stockings and garters. She was attractive, with soft brown hair piled up on her head and tendrils curling in front of her ears. A black choker set off her slender neck with a pale, elegant cameo at the throat. Her eyes were sharp and she looked confident and worldly.

“Come on upstairs, sugar,” she said, putting an arm around her shoulders and guiding her up the stairs and to a bedroom. “Where does it hurt?”

Her voice was kind, but no-nonsense as she peeled off Cora's charred clothing.

Cora doubled over, coughing, shaking her head. Tears leaked from her stinging eyes.

"I'm having a bath filled for you," the woman said. "We'll get you cleaned up. Name's Olive, by the way." She'd finished pulling the chemise off her and began unlacing her corset from the back.

"Cora," she choked, starting in on another coughing fit.

There was a knock and an older Mexican woman carried in a wooden tub, which she set in the middle of the room. Another Mexican women followed, emptying a bucket of water in the tub with a splash.

“It's not warm, but it'll wash off the soot, at least,” Olive said.

Cora stepped into it gratefully. Baths were few and far between in mining towns, and she'd be grateful for what she could get. There was only eight inches of water in it, but she sat right down, cupping her hands to splash her face.

“Are you burnt?” Olive asked gently, kneeling and helping to splash water over her shivering body. As it had been between the women at Smoochy's, there was no need for modesty.

“No,” she said, examining her arms. The hair had been singed right off them. She touched the hair on her head

fearfully.

Olive examined it with a critical eye. "It's still there—I don't think you lost much," she said, lifting and moving pieces around her face. "A bit in the front, along with some of your eyebrows. You're lucky to be alive, you know."

"Cursed is more like it," she muttered. "What about Joaquin?"

"The boy? He's fine. He's downstairs getting cleaned up and fed. Is he yours?"

Cora scoffed. "No. Does he look like mine?"

Olive gave an easy shrug. "I didn't think so. Don't worry, Daddy Diggs will find a place for him."

She eyed Olive. “Will he? What does he want with me?”

Olive made a condemning sort of noise. “You could try a little gratitude. I heard he risked his life to save you.”

“I didn't ask to be saved,” she muttered, just as another knock sounded and the two women returned, carrying more water. They poured it slowly over and around her, rinsing the horrible smoke smell out of her hair and pores. In a different situation, this might have been the most luxurious moment of her life, but considering she had no idea what the Devil Diggory planned to do with her, she couldn't relax into it. In the blink of an eye, her jailor had changed from

Smoochy to Daddy Diggs. She'd never even had a shot at freedom.

The murmur of a male voice in the doorway as the women left made her head jerk up, and she realized Diggory had been leaning in the door frame.

His shirt was hanging open as if he'd hurriedly pulled it on after her rescue. His black tousled hair, normally parted on the side and pomaded back into curls, fell in his face, softening the angular lines of his jaw. He'd washed the ashes from his face and hands, but there was evidence of it still on his neck and a dusting on his chest hair. She remembered the stunning visage of him coming through the fire, fearlessly wielding his ax, his chiseled torso naked

and glowing in the flame light. She was disturbed to feel a clenching of the muscles between her legs.

Damn him. Only the devil could stir her desire in a moment like this.

Olive gave her hand a squeeze and departed as Diggory entered the room. He drew a low stool up to the tub, settling into it with his forearms resting on his knees to study her, as if she were a horse at auction. She felt her face flush, but refused to show any shame at her nudity. Resisting the urge to cover her breasts, she lifted her chin and rested her elbows on the tub to give him a full view.

His mouth twitched in a smirk.



Cora's hair was unpinned, falling in soft blond curls down her long neck and over her shoulders. She had big blue eyes, but the innocence of her youth had long since left them. And yes, even up close, she looked just like *her*.

Used to seeing his girls in every stage of dress and undress, he hadn't given thought to her modesty, but a slight color had flushed her cheeks, belying discomfort. She'd lifted her chin though, and moved her arms to give him a full view. He did not allow himself to take in more than a glance, but with it, he saw that her breasts were perfection—moon-

pale and perky, as youthful and fresh as her dimpled face.

The day her parents had been murdered, Smoochy had produced proof that her father owed him everything. And it seemed irrefutable—John Underhill, the wealthy financier whom they thought owned notes on almost everyone in the valley, had not only sold all the notes to Smoochy, but he'd been borrowing against them, owing him more than his house and personal property would cover. Smoochy had played it real sweet, showed her how much she still owed him, and acted as if he was doing her an enormous favor taking her in and allowing her to work off her father's debt. Jake had been outraged—he'd gone

down and tried to buy her out, but Jake's interest in her only made Smoochy more stubborn and had frightened Cora. She'd clung to Smoochy's arm, demanding he get out or she'd call the sheriff. Smoochy had wrapped an arm around the girl and smirked, watching as Jake reluctantly left her to his care.

“Did you set the fire?” she demanded now, her voice so hoarse from the smoke it came out in a raspy croak. Though she looked at him boldly, he saw fear in the slight tremor of her strawberry lips.

His eyebrows shot up. “Is that what you think?” No wonder she'd been so reluctant to come here. He shook his

head. “No, lass, I didn't. Not that I haven't been tempted to put my competition out of business at times.”

She gave him a sharp look, and he guessed she'd heard the story of how he came to own Daddy Diggs’.

“No, that fire at Smoochy's could have set all of Whiskey Row aflame, so even if I had wanted Smoochy dead, I'd have chosen a neater method.”

He noticed her lower lip was swollen and bloody, as if a tooth had gone through it. He reached out to touch it, carefully. “Who did that?”

She jerked her face away and gave him an insolent shrug. “What do you want?” she demanded, but her voice cracked, ruining the effect.

He sat back on the stool to give her a little space. “Nothing. You have no cause to fear me, Cora. You can stay here, if you want. Or you can go. You're not my prisoner.”

She looked at him dubiously.

“If you stay, you can work the floor and I'll pay you fifty percent of the take, minus your room and board. Or you can help with the cooking and cleaning for room and board only.”

She stared at him. “Fifty percent of the take?”

“Minus your room and board.”

“So what's that work out to?”

“I would charge twenty dollars a night for you, so your take would be ten

dollars, minus two for your expenses—eight dollars a night.”

He saw her breath quicken and she licked her cracked lips eagerly. “That's what you pay your girls?”

“Aye, that's what I pay them. And in exchange, my girls obey me and my rules.” He let that sink in for a moment. “Can you do that, Cora?”

He waited, unnerved by how much he wanted her to say yes—how much he wanted her as part of his odd little family.

She hesitated, then nodded slowly. “Yes, sir.”

Satisfaction eased his shoulders. “Good girl. I promise I'll keep you safe. No customer of mine will leave a mark

like that on you without paying dearly for it,” he assured her.

Cora's eyes rounded and her fingers touched her injured lip. “I guess the son-of-a-bitch got what he deserved tonight, anyhow,” she croaked.

He quirked his head. “Aye, I'm sure he did. But I'll ask you not to swear again. I run a high-class operation here, and I expect my girls to act like ladies. You were raised well, so I know you know how. If I hear you curse again, I'll take you over my knee for a spanking. Understand?”

She stared at him, looking dumbfounded.

“What do you think your parents

would think to hear you use language like that?”

At the mention of her parents, she recoiled as if he'd slapped her. Her face flushed in anger and she stood up in the water, hands balled into fists. “Go to hell!”

He groaned inwardly, but reached for her wrist and tugged her toward him, out of the tub. He never made a threat without following through. He pulled her across his lap and without preamble, began to spank her wet bottom soundly. The water sprayed in tiny droplets with each loud smack of his palm, increasing the sting for both of them. She kicked and listed to the side to escape, but he held her firmly around the waist, pinning

her legs with one of his and paddling her round cheeks. He spanked and spanked, hoping her struggles would cease and he could let her up, but she seemed determined to fight him. He continued to spank until her pale skin held the pink and then began to turn a deeper shade of red. Striated pucker marks stood up in places and she was still fighting him when he gave up on her submission and applied several last hard swats to the backs of her thighs. He rested his tingling hand on her heated flesh.

He could hear her ragged breathing, but she hadn't uttered any cries or whimpers, nor had she pleaded for him to stop. He rubbed her bottom lightly. It

was perfectly shaped, like two round orbs—the firm muscle offering a satisfying, springy target. He didn't know how Smoochy had disciplined Cora, but he imagined it was far more brutal than spanking.

Jake loved to spank. He loved the act of spanking and he loved that his girls submitted willingly to his discipline—even seemed to crave it as attention from him. Spanking was not overly painful, but it was humbling for the recipient. For the disciplinarian, it was an act of dominance, a declaration of power.

Since he hadn't achieved her submission, he worked the dominance angle with Cora, spreading her cheeks

and pressing his middle finger to the entrance of her anus. She stiffened like a board, squeezing her cheeks together tightly and lifting her torso horizontal to the floor. He applied several hard slaps to the back of her thighs, this time eliciting a tiny squeak.

“Cora,” he said gently, “you agreed to my rules, you agreed to my discipline.”

She shook her head rapidly. “No!” she gasped.

He ignored her protest, parting her cheeks again and pressing his finger more insistently, until he breached the entryway to her tight hole. She gave a wavering moan. He applied a few more

spanks to her blushing bottom and then slowly guided her torso upright, careful not to let his finger pull too much at the delicate hole. He used his embedded finger to draw her closer, so she stood between his knees. He squeezed her tightened bottom with his other hand, kneading the firm muscle and admiring the heat still radiating from it. Her breasts were eye level, as magnificent as he'd suspected earlier—twin peaches with rosy nipples pointing cheerfully toward the ceiling. Already highly aroused from spanking her, he had to resolutely lift his chin to gaze into her face, shifting in his seat to accommodate his hardened cock.

He had a firm rule against sleeping

with his girls. He couldn't be their daddy if he let things get confused with sex.

He stroked her flank, keeping his finger firmly pressed within her, feeling her muscles tightening spasmodically around it. When her lips began to tremble and he sensed her resistance crumbling, he slipped his finger out of her bottom, continuing to hold her hips.

“I remember your parents,” he said with true sympathy. “They were good people.”

At that, her face contorted. He pulled her into his lap before the first sob erupted.

Chapter Two

Cora was blinded by her tears, but Diggory's strong arms pulled her against his chest as he deftly wrapped a blanket around her. She curled into him, sobbing into his collar while he rocked gently.

“I'm sure you miss them very much,” he murmured in his deep voice, his Irish accent only adding to his cursed intrigue. His words sparked a renewed wave of sobbing. He stroked her back and kissed her wet hair. Confusion swirled through her mind. One minute, the Devil Diggory was the enemy, claiming her from the fire, walking in on her naked in the bath, spanking her raw.

The next, he was comforting her and making her feel safer than she had since she was a child in her mother's arms.

“What would you know?” she sobbed bitterly, then coughed, her lungs still irritated by the smoke.

“Mmm. I know you didn't deserve the fate you landed, working for Smoochy as a two-bit whore. I know you think your parents would roll over in their graves if they saw you now, and it breaks your heart. But you know what?”

He cupped her face, holding her jaw and pulling her away from him so she was forced to look into his eyes. They were dark brown, and warmer than she might have imagined. “It's not your

fault.”

The certainty with which he made that pronouncement took her breath away. She stared at him, disbelieving, but desperate to hear his reasoning.

“I’ve learned, life is a like a raging river. You get tossed into it, and the most you can do is just keep your head above water. If you’re lucky enough to find firm ground, you climb out and make what you can of it. That’s all there is to it, Cora. You’ve done the best you could with what you were given. Your father shouldn’t have bargained with your future, but he did, and he lost. And so you lost.”

Her eyes smarted with tears again. How did the Devil Diggory know so

much about her?

“I thought it was a terrible travesty when Smoochy took you down there. That was why I tried to buy you out of that fate—it wasn't to force you to work for me.”

He had tried to buy her. She remembered that night clearly—the same evening Smoochy had gently led her from her parents' dead bodies to his brothel. Diggory had shown up and tried to purchase her like a cow at auction, which had been even more terrifying than realizing she had no choice but to work for Smoochy. It was part of the reason she couldn't trust him now. Except that he seemed completely

sincere.

“What would you have done with me?” she probed suspiciously.

He cocked his head and looked at her thoughtfully, then shrugged. “I don't know, honestly. Sent for your kin, if you had any. Paid for your travel out of Dorado Hills. Anything but let an innocent lass be corrupted by *this*.” His upper lip curled as he waved a hand to indicate his establishment. She frowned, surprised to realize he might not relish his success as a brothel and gambling hall owner.

“But why would you care what happened to me?” she demanded.

His expression turned to stone. “You remind me of someone I once

knew,” he said.

As if to preempt any further questions in that direction, he stood, lifting her into his arms and laying her on the bed. “You can sleep in this bed tonight, but you’ll have a bunk at the end of the hall where you’ll keep your things and stay when you’re not entertaining.”

“I don’t have any things,” she muttered.

He looked down at her kindly and stroked her wet hair back from her face. “I know you don’t, sweetheart. But you will. Listen, I’m going to use this bathwater since it’s been drawn, to try to wash off the smell of smoke. Turn your back if it bothers you.”

It did bother her, but, devil take her, she could not make herself turn around. She lay on the bed, watching with nothing short of fascination as Diggory shucked his shirt and pants. His back rippled with firm muscle, tapering to a narrow waist and strong legs. She could see a long scar looking like a knife wound ran along his side to his back. Word was Jake Diggory may dress and talk like a gentleman, but he fought like a *bandito*. He was quick with a gun and brutal with his fists. No one in Dorado Hills crossed him. *Ever*.

Rosa, one of the whores at Smoochy's place, had told her the story of how Jake Diggory came to own his

gambling hall. "He worked there, as a strong arm, running the gambling tables and playing the piano for the French girls' dancing routine. Jenson, *el señor* who owned it then, he did something bad to one of the girls—cut her with a knife, I think, or beat her real good. They say Diggory killed him with his bare hands—he could have used a gun, but he preferred to fight like a wild dog. They say you couldn't even recognize Jenson's face when he was through with him."

Cora had shivered, but secretly admired his defense of the girl. At Smoochy's, no one protected them from their boss, who had done as he pleased, taken whomever he pleased, or beaten whomever he pleased. She mused now

on Diggory's promise that no one would hurt her on his watch. Maybe it was true.

“The girls, they all covered it up for him,” Rosa had said. “The body disappeared and no one would tell the sheriff anything. Afterward, they say Diggory was going to leave Dorado Hills, but the girls begged him to stay, said they needed a man to protect them. And then Smoochy goes over, sniffing around to see if he might take over and Daddy Diggs puts his gun right in Smoochy's face, tells him to turn around, walk back to his place, and never set foot there again. And it's been Daddy Diggs' ever since.”

She watched him now, cupping his

hands in the water to splash it over his head, where it streamed down over his face. Her body was in a wild state—her bottom still stung from the spanking and her back hole burned, yet she felt warm from the gentle way he'd cradled her afterward. Something about his acknowledgment of her parents—that he'd known them, that he thought they were good people, had awakened some part of her she'd thought was dead. It was as if the old Cora, the real Cora, was suddenly stirring somewhere deep within her. And for some reason, Jake Diggory made it seem like he knew that girl.

But still she didn't trust him.

She wondered if he would force

her to service him. Or maybe the better question was *when*. Her skin prickled with heat at the thought, which was a new feeling for her. Could it be she actually *wanted* him to use her? Certainly not. She had never, in the five years she'd been selling her body for money, wanted a man. Yet now she felt a tiny thrill of excitement at the thought of Diggory—dark, unyielding, and downright dangerous—taking her for his pleasure.

No, that was fear or disgust, not excitement.

Definitely not excitement.

He stood from the tub, brushing water from his limbs and shaking

droplets onto the floor like a dog stepping out of a river. She stared at his manhood, hanging thick and long, even at rest. He glanced at her and raised an eyebrow, but instead of commenting, merely asked, “Not ready to sleep?”

She shook her head.

“Are you hungry?”

She sat up in the bed, holding the blanket to cover her breasts. “Yes, sir.”

“Come on downstairs, then,” he said as he pulled on his clothing.

She sat up and pulled the coverlet off the bed, draping herself with it.

He glanced at her and grinned, his smile transforming his face, making him look ten years younger. She smiled back before she could think to scowl. He held

out an arm and she moved into it, allowing him to guide her, barefooted and clad only in a blanket, down the hall.

He showed her where a key was hidden above the door frame for the bunk room at the top of the stairs. Inside, he pointed out an armoire. “You can wear any of the clothes in there—the girls share most everything.”

The room had rows of bunks along the walls, and a long plank table in the middle. The older Mexican women were sitting around the table and Joaquin was with them, chatting in Spanish.

A sheet strung across the middle of the room divided it in half. Seeing her

taking it in, Diggory said, "That side for men, this side for women."

"Which men?" she asked, rather stupidly.

"Right now, it's just Hank and now Joaquin," he said, nodding gravely to the boy. She wondered, vaguely, where he slept and was simultaneously relieved and disappointed that it wasn't in the bunk room.

"Josefina," he said, addressing the older Mexican woman who'd brought in her bath, "Will you find Cora something to eat when she's dressed?"

"*Sí, señor,*" Josefina answered.

It seemed Josefina had already taken Joaquin as her charge. She shooed him off to bed now, speaking with all the

command of a loving grandmother. "*Buenas noches*," Cora bid him, smiling and winking at the boy, happy to see he appeared comfortable here.

Cora looked through the clothes, examining with interest the drawers, which were all cut short in the legs with ruffles added to the bottoms as decoration. She donned a pair and found a corset which she pulled over her head and fastened in the front. She didn't bother tightening up the lacing in the back. After slipping into a chemise and modest day dress, she followed Josefina down the stairs to the back kitchen, where Josefina handed her a plate of beans and rice and left her on her own.

She didn't think she was hungry until she ate the first bite, then she shoveled the food into her mouth, suddenly ravenous. Afterward, she climbed back upstairs and found an empty bunk, fighting the feeling of contentment that had fallen over her. She needed to stay on the defensive if she was going to survive here.

She climbed into bed and heard the charming sound of Diggory's piano striking up and the crowd cheering. It must be time for their famous French can-can. She thought about creeping down the stairs to watch it, but found her limbs were too heavy to attempt leaving the bed. Instead, she fell soundly asleep,

lulled by the familiar sound of loud, drunken voices and the unfamiliar, but thoroughly pleasing sound of lively music.

* * *

Jake absently finished the warm-up music he was playing on his piano, his mind still on Cora Underhill. He normally felt satisfied, even powerful after spanking one of the girls, but Cora's punishment had left him needy. Fifteen years celibate and he had never craved sex once, not even working in a brothel with naked and willing women all around. Spanking the girls filled the void, gave him small moments of

intimacy, and allowed him to express his masculine power without being untrue to Eliza's memory.

But tonight, the thought of Cora's impudent breasts, the sensation of her soft form across his lap, the way her big eyes had searched him for answers kept rising in his mind. Was it just because she reminded him so much of Eliza? Or was it something else?

Catching Olive's eye from across the room, he gave a nod and she moved to find the other girls for their nightly can-can performance. Gigi and Marie had brought the can-can with them, along with countless other customs and know-how from the French brothels where they'd worked before they came to

America. They were the first in the wave of women who embarked for California with the promise their passage would be paid by brothel owners when they arrived. Jensen, the former owner of his place, had paid Gigi and Marie's fare, promising them they'd pay off their debt in six months, but keeping them as indentured servants long past the prescribed date.

The girls lined up now on the side of the stage he and Hank had built for them.

“And now, gentlemen,” he called out in his best entertainer's voice. “May I introduce to you the lovely ladies Olive, Margaret, Gigi, and Marie—two

misses, two mademoiselles! Give a big hand for them, fellows, and they'll give you a special treat!"

The gambling hall was filled with the sound of applause, boot-stamping, and cat calls. He began to play the signature music of the dance as the girls sashayed across the stage, their skirts swishing in a blur of ruffles and the intoxicating flashes of their black stocking-clad legs. They'd choreographed an intricate dance in which they formed two lines and then one, changing positions, locking elbows with one another and spinning in dizzying circles. The girls teased the men, giving their skirts little lifts and flounces while catching their eye,

building into an energetic crescendo of cartwheels and then a final line of high kicks, which drove the men wild with the glimpses of their garter belts. Then came the punch line, in which the girls turned one by one and flipped up the back of their skirts to show their ruffled drawers, to the enthusiastic shouts of the audience. The finale was two girls spinning while holding one leg up to their ear, as the other two executed a split on the floor with their arms outstretched in a high “V” and smiles plastered on their faces.

The men whooped and stomped some more.

“Let me hear your appreciation for

Daddy Diggs' girls!" he called out and the applause grew louder. "Twenty dollars to take your own spin with one of them, step right up and pick one out now!"

He heard grumbling at that. Most of the men were flat broke and the gold rush prices were outrageous. Still, those who couldn't afford the girls would buy drinks, and they'd lose to him at faro or roulette or craps. Either way, if they walked into Daddy Diggs', he'd take their money.

He surveyed the room as he played, keeping a sharp eye for any sign of thievery, cheating, or violence. Magdalena worked the faro table as Hank monitored for cheating. The girls

flitted about the room, accepting a few coins or the offer of a drink to sit down next to a man, giving him a brief and rare opportunity to enjoy a woman's presence in a land in which men outnumbered women ten to one.

Marie had drifted over to lean an elbow on the top of the piano as he started up with another lively tune. "What's with the new girl?" she demanded.

He glanced up, then looked back at his fingers, his mind mostly occupied with the music. "Name's Cora," he grunted.

"From Smoochy's?"

"Uh huh."

“Daddy, you know she's going to be trouble. Smoochy's girls were the lowest of the low. They lie, they cheat, they steal. She'll be stealing from you the first night.”

Jake glanced up at Marie's sour face, then looked out over the crowd, keeping his eyes alert for any sign of trouble. “You think?” he asked noncommittally.

“Yes! She'll rob you blind, Daddy. She'll probably steal from all of us. You've heard what they used to say about Smoochy's place. No one walked out of there without having his money stolen.”

He gave a very slight lift of his

shoulders, not giving Marie the satisfaction of looking at her again. He surveyed the crowd again.

“And that boy, too. If she doesn't steal, I guarantee you he will. You shouldn't have brought them in here, Daddy. We don't need them. We hardly have enough work for the four of us!”

Jake met her eye now, raising an eyebrow. She took the warning, snapping her mouth shut and standing up from the piano. “I'm just saying...” she said sulkily.

“I've heard enough. If you keep it up, you're going to get a spanking.”

Her lip thrust forward, but she said, “Yes, sir,” with a grudging tone and abandoned her post at his piano, in

search of a more receptive audience with Margaret.

He bent his head to the keys, mulling over her warning. It was true Smoochy's girls were known to steal. His instincts said he could trust Cora, but then again, his judgment might be clouded. She wasn't Eliza, after all, no matter how alike they looked.

* * *

Cora woke with a jerk, disoriented in the new bunk. She coughed, her lungs still aching from the smoke the night before. The gambling hall was silent, save the sounds of gentle snores. She slipped out into the main hall to look

around. It was so much finer than Smoochy's. The construction was solid wood rather than the sticks that had barely kept out the wind and rain. The floors were wide plank, swept clean from the activity of the night before. The gambling tables were clean, too—polished wood frame and green felt covering. She wondered if Diggory would let her work one of the tables instead of whoring. But no, she needed the money. Eight dollars a day he had estimated she might make. With those kind of wages, she could save up to make a new start, somewhere far away. For Joaquin, too, if he wanted, though with the way Josefina had taken him in, he might prefer to stay.

She walked the length of the large hall. There was a stage on one end, with the piano sitting below. It was Diggory's piano and even never having set foot in his place before, she knew how well he could play. His music would fill the wide streets of Dorado Hills, carried all the way to Smoochy's place if the wind was blowing right. She used to sit on the porch to listen, when she could get away with it without Smoochy yelling at her.

She stood over it now, her fingers brushing the keys without pressing them.

“I wouldn't touch that, if I were you.”

She started and whirled around. Josefina was standing in the doorway,

with her hands on her hips. “Daddy Diggs doesn't let anyone play his piano.”

A shiver ran down her spine, but she refused to show fear of the Devil Diggory. “I'll take my chances,” she said stubbornly and gazed back at the woman until she shrugged and left the room. Actually, she was more than a little frightened of Diggory. It wasn't that the spanking had been so awful—she wasn't even sore today—it was more the humiliation of it. Somehow, having her bottom bared for such a childish punishment, and the way he'd pressed a finger in her back hole like hooking a fish, was far more intimate than Smoochy's drunken pokes had been, and possibly more of a deterrent than his

angry fists.

She sat down on the bench and stroked the keys again, pressing one very slowly, listening as the note reverberated through the instrument. She loved music. Always had. Before they'd left their home in Chicago to join the gold rush as investors, her parents had owned a piano. The memory of her mother patiently teaching her produced a dull ache in her chest. What *would* her parents think of her now? They'd been members of polite society—a lady and a gentleman in their hometown. Out here in California, they were just rich targets for murder. Only they hadn't been so rich, had they?

As an optimistic and wealthy financier, her father had moved the family to California at the first discovery of gold in 1849 so he could lend money to the various mining operations and business enterprises springing up. He'd been particularly enthusiastic about the new engineering methods of hydraulic mining that used water to flush gold out of the hills. He had lent out money to almost every operation in Dorado Hills, yet so many of those operations folded, that when he was murdered by unknown assailants, Smoochy owned every note, and held some on her father to boot.

She touched the keys, running a few elementary scales. She plunked out her

first basic lesson: “Hot Cross Buns.” Then she explored the notes, trying to play a song her mother used to sing to her. *Hush little baby, don't say a word. Mama's gonna buy you a mocking bird...*

Her fingers sought the keys, seeking and choosing the notes to cobble together the lullaby. *If that mocking bird don't sing, Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.*

Almost, not quite. She tried again. Then again. After several attempts, she'd found the right notes. *And if that diamond ring turns brass, Mama's gonna buy you a looking glass.*

She closed her eyes, memorizing the location of the keys as she sang

softly, picturing her mother, who sang like an angel and was more beautiful than one. The sound of a new chord made her jump and open her eyes. Diggory was sitting beside her on a second stool, next to hers.

“Don't stop,” he said softly, the fingers of his left hand dancing over the keys in harmony with her simple tune. “Go on, try it again.”

Tension tightened every muscle in her body and heat pricked her skin. Reluctantly, she picked back up with her plucking tune.

“Sing for me,” he urged in a low voice, his head so close to hers she felt his breath in her ear. She wanted to

resist, but his voice picked up the words and she was stunned to stillness, surprised he would know her song and that he could render it so tenderly with his deep voice. When he fumbled the words, she corrected, joining in to sing the melody again while he added the rich tapestry of his elaborate counterpoint on the piano, making it sound like the most sophisticated and beautiful song imaginable. His right arm stretched around behind her, adding to her notes on the upper keys as well. She was intensely aware of the warmth of his body, the faint smell of smoke still on his skin, and the muskier, manly smell. She shivered at the feel of his hot breath on her neck. She stopped playing,

allowing his notes to take over, singing to his tune, but he stopped, picked up her hand, and replaced it on the keys. His hand was huge and warm where it covered hers and she felt an instinctive desire to capture his fingers between hers and keep his hand there.

“Keep going, Cora,” he murmured in his rumbling brogue. “You’re doing well.”

His praise should not have felt so satisfying, but his musical ability was so intoxicating, the need to be a part of making music with him so desirable, that she forgot her reservations and fear.

She kept at it, feeling silly for her lack of skill, as Jake Diggory made the

most incredible sounds all around her. When she'd sung the entire song twice and even improvised her own words to a few phrases, she stopped. Diggory went on, playing his exquisite composition, winding it down to a beautiful ending. As he allowed the last note to reverberate, he turned to her and smiled. It was the boyish smile again, the one that changed his look so completely.

“You like music?”

She found she could not speak. She nodded like a fool.

His smile widened. “I will give you lessons, if you like.”

She sat stock still. “You... would teach me?”

“Aye, lass. If you like.”

“Yes,” she breathed, before her better sense stopped her. “I should like that very much.”

He smiled again, as if amused by her eagerness. “After breakfast, then. Every day. You'll have to commit to practicing after each lesson. If you don't, I'm not wasting my time.”

“I will,” she assured him.

He tousled her hair like she was a small child. “Good girl,” he said. “Come, breakfast will be ready in the kitchen. No lesson today.”

Breakfast was a self-serve sort of affair of beans and eggs warmed on the stove. Diggory ate quickly and then beckoned to Joaquin. She strained her

ears to listen. "Eat up, I'm going to take you on a ride today."

Was he getting rid of the boy? Concern tightened her chest. "Where are you taking him?" she demanded.

Diggory stopped and gave her a warning look. He touched a finger to his ear. "You'll mind your tone when you speak to me, lass."

She felt herself flush, knowing without being told he was threatening another spanking, and worse still, fearing everyone in the kitchen knew it, too.

She shrank under his domineering gaze, her breath rising and falling quickly in her chest, but she refused to apologize. If he was taking Joaquin

somewhere, she had a right to know what his purpose was. They stood staring at one another, Joaquin's eyes wide, the tension in the room growing.

“Would you care to try your question again?”

She was horrified to feel tears sting her eyes at being treated like an errant school child. She pressed her lips together, blinking rapidly until she'd recovered. Taking a breath, she made her tone sweet. “May I inquire where you're going?” she asked with exaggerated politeness.

“Certainly,” he said immediately, as if nothing awkward had transpired. “I have an errand to run out at Thomas

Sirey's ranch, and then I thought I might teach Joaquin how to shoot a gun.” He turned to look at the astonished boy. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, sir!” Joaquin said immediately, eagerness and wonder echoing in his voice.

“Oh.” She felt foolish for questioning him when he was clearly acting for the boy's benefit. To cover her embarrassment, she admonished Joaquin to follow directions.

“*Escúchate bien, no?*” She'd picked up enough Spanish over the past five years at Smoochy's to be able to sound like she was fluent, even though she wasn't.

“*Sí, claro que sí,*” he assured her.

She nodded dismissively and caught the slightest flash of eyebrows from Diggory—an acknowledgment that she wasn't fooling him for a moment.

It was probably impossible to fool that man.

* * *

Jake pressed his forehead against the rough plank wall in his room as his hand moved up and down his shaft. This confounded act made him feel like a pubescent teen, hiding in the stable loft for privacy while dreaming of getting under Eliza's petticoats. His need for release since he'd sworn celibacy in her honor had been so infrequent his arm

now grew tired from the repetitive motion.

Why must self-pleasure be so steeped in guilt?

Hurry, dammit.

He pushed the self-condemnation out of his mind in favor of getting it over and done so he could get back to matters of real concern. Squeezing his eyes shut, his mind went blank. But that did not help his goal of finishing.

To hell with it, then.

He brought to mind the image of Cora sitting at his piano, her eyes shining with admiration, her rosebud lips parted in earnestness. He could almost smell the scent of her skin as he'd reached behind her to play the piano; he

could hear the sound of her sweet soprano song.

Closer.

Her spanking then. *Ah, God.* He always kept spanking separate from sex. He justified it as discipline. But her sweet little arse. The gift of her submission—it had been worth more to him than he cared to admit. And yes, it turned him on. He'd wanted to bend her over, spread her legs, and explore that bottom with a different appendage.

Oh God, yes.

Yes, she'd feel so warm and inviting, she'd look over her shoulder at him with those big, blue...

Ahhh.

He finished, panting. Then, disgusted with himself, he put his cock away, buttoned his pants and tucked in his shirt. Donning a leather waistcoat, he banged out of his room before his breath had returned to normal.

Downstairs, he stationed Joaquin behind the bar where he could start learning from Susanna how to pour drinks and make change. On their ride and shooting lesson, he'd found the boy bright and quick to follow instructions. He'd said Cora had taught him to read and write and considering he spoke English and Spanish fluently, he might be a real asset in just a few years.

Other than Hank, he had all women

working at his place—a true anomaly in gold rush California. In addition to the five prostitutes, counting Cora, he had five more women employed working the gambling tables, tending the bar, and cooking and cleaning. Susanna had been a prostitute until last month when her pregnancy became noticeable. Janey had quit whoring after her second baby was born, and her contribution was mostly just caring for her children, with the plan that she would care for Susanna's babe, or any others that were born, when the time came. They were all like family to him and he took care of his “girls” and their children like a Daddy should.

Jake made the rounds, checking on all his employees, greeting a few

customers and finally, settling at his piano where he could lose himself for a few blessed hours of the day. Cora traipsed down the stairs with the other four women. Like the rest of the girls, her lips were painted in the red pigment the French lasses had brought with them—a mixture of beeswax and plant dye. Though it was provocative on all of them, on her it seemed even more so, perhaps because her face was so otherwise wholesome, with her dimples and big baby blue eyes with long, curling lashes. She was wearing one of their dresses, a light blue satin with black ruffles, cut away to show off her black stockings and garters. He drew in

his breath and shifted on his stool, his cock gone rock hard despite his earlier release. It was an odd sensation, because at the same time his mind completely rebelled at seeing her dolled up. In fact, he hated it. It wasn't her.

Olive, Margaret, and the French girls loved what they did at Daddy Diggs'. They loved the power they held over men, loved pleasing them, loved taking their money. But Cora—Cora had a look of stone resignation on her face. A blankness in her expression, her eyes dead, the cords in her neck standing out with tension. It made him want to order her straight back upstairs and refuse to let her work his floor. It made him want to take her over his knee and spank her

for doing something she hated. But that wasn't fair. He'd seen the hunger in her face when he spoke of wages. The poor girl had been living in practical slavery with Smoochy, and it was no wonder she was desperate to earn some money and buy herself freedom.

He watched as the girls circulated around the room, stopping to chat with the men, sitting down when offered a coin for their companionship.

“She's pretty,” a voice at his elbow reached him. It was Hank, hovering over him, also keeping a sharp eye on their flock. “But she don't look like she's any good at it.”

Damn straight she's not.

But that was foolish. She *was* a whore. She had been for the past five years. Why did the idea offend him so much? He'd never had any scruples about women filling one of the most lucrative positions available to them if they wanted. Except she didn't want to, and that was at the heart of his disquiet over seeing her sell herself. He brought his song to a conclusion and sat watching as she crossed the room. Her figure was lovely—breasts pushed up by the corset so that they were half spilling out of her gown, waist cinched to a small circle. She floated through the room gracefully, but like a ghost. Almost as if she wanted to disappear so badly

she had somehow made herself transparent.

She pressed her back against a wall and stood watching a faro game, until one of the men grabbed her by the arm and forcibly pulled her to sit down next to him.

Chapter Three

Cora's backside connected with the wooden chair so hard her teeth slammed together. She took a shaky breath. She could handle this jackass. The trick was to do it in a way Diggory wouldn't notice. She didn't want him to think she was turning customers away, but there was no way in hell she'd be entertaining this smelly miner tonight.

“Whassamatter princess? You think you're too good for me?” he slurred.

She crossed her legs and stroked a soft satin ruffle on the dress they'd let her wear. “No, sir. I just wasn't ready to sit yet, that's all. Are you buying me a

drink?"

"Depends on how betting goes," he grunted. "Hopin' to win enough to take you upstairs, honey."

God, no.

She feigned interest as she scanned the other men at the faro table, hoping for a better option. They all ignored her attempts at eye contact.

Well, shit.

It wasn't like she hadn't serviced plenty of men by whom she was disgusted. Actually, that described all of them. But this one would be absolutely revolting. The smell alone would make her wretch. Her best chance might be to encourage his drinking so he was too

drunk to win any bets or take anyone upstairs. "Would you like me to get you another drink?" she asked sweetly, starting to stand up. He grabbed her arm and yanked her back to her chair, hard. Once again, her teeth rattled in her skull. Ugh. She rubbed the place on her arm where he'd grabbed her, then started as the imposing form of Jake Diggory darkened the green baize of the table. He was dressed in a fine, well-fitted waistcoat over a crisp, boiled white shirt and cravat. His black leather ankle boots were shined to a gleam. He looked every inch a gentleman. Her eyes flew to his face, trying to judge if he was angry with her. He looked grim, but his focus was on the man next to her.

“Did you just handle one of my girls?” Diggory asked in a deadly tone.

The dirty miner looked up hazily. “Wha—?”

Diggory walked around to her and offered a hand. Surprised, she placed her hand in his large one and stood up with his assistance. Diggory gave her hand a squeeze before he released it.

“I said,” he began slowly, as if speaking to someone who didn't understand English. “Did you just handle one of my girls?”

Sensing a threat, Dirty Miner stood up from his chair and scowled at Diggory. “I wuz jus' *inviting* her to sit with me.”

“Did you pay her to be your companion at the faro table?”

“Wha—? No! You gotta pay a girl just to sit with you? That's bullshit!”

Daddy Diggs stepped in front of her, placing his body between her and the miner. “Listen closely. I'm going to give you two choices. The first is you sit down and shut up and don't touch another girl here unless she invites you. The second, I throw you out of my place and you never come back. Now, which is it?”

Dirty Miner's head took a belligerent angle and his fist swung out in a wide, ill-aimed arc. Diggory ducked and landed a punch of his own in Dirty

Miner's gut as he moved in close to the man. A second punch knocked the miner to the floor, and then Diggory hauled him to his feet, already dragging him toward the door. Though Hank stood nearby at attention, he did not look concerned with his boss's ability to handle the situation.

Diggory strolled back into the gambling hall as if nothing had happened. Arriving at her side, he grasped her elbow and firmly guided her out of the room. Her heart picked up speed. Was he angry she'd not wanted to entertain the miner? He had defended her, but maybe he had words for her, as well. Maybe worse than words. Her chest began to heave as she fought

against her corset for breath.

When they arrived at the base of the stairs, in the area where only employees went, he turned her to face him, lifting her arm and examining the angry red marks left by the miner's fingers. He rubbed them. "Are you all right?"

She met his eye, surprised at the concern. She took a moment to catch her breath, her heart slowing its pace to a normal tempo. "Yes, sir. Thank you for your assistance."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Next time you don't want to entertain a man, you tell him, 'No, thank you' and walk away," he remonstrated. "If you're clear with them, it's easier for me to

govern behavior.”

She drew her head back, tears stinging her eyes. She had expected rebuke, but not in this direction. Diggory's words implied she'd *had* a choice, and her choices would be honored and defended. As relief turned her limbs to jelly, the bittersweet realization she need not have suffered through that scene caused tears to continue welling.

She dashed at them with the back of her hand. “I'm sorry. I will. I promise.”

He touched her cheek lightly. “Why don't you take the night off—go and get some rest.”

Apprehension coursed through her again. “Wh-why? Am I in trouble?”

He smiled slightly. “No, little doll, you're not in trouble.”

“Then what?” She was beginning to gasp for breath again, panic at losing the best shot at freedom she'd had in five years turning her to ice. She needed money—and working the Devil Diggory's brothel was the only way she could earn it.

He shrugged. “You just don't look like you're up to working my floor.”

“The hell I'm not!” she said heatedly, ready to defend her skills and itemize her assets. But Diggory's face turned rigid, his eyebrows rose in a distinct warning, and she realized too late she had broken his rule. “I'm sorry,”

she uttered quickly, stepping back and bumping into the stair rail. "It slipped out. I swear to you, I won't curse again."

"Upstairs," he said, lifting his chin toward the stairs.

* * *

"No! I mean, no, sir," Cora's eyes had rounded and she had pressed herself up against the rail backing away from him.

He gave her his most implacable expression.

"Daddy Diggs," she said, her voice pleading. It was the first time she'd called him "Daddy" rather than Mr. Diggory and he liked it. Her mistrust of

him was beginning to fade. “I understand you mean to punish me, and I know I deserve it. But what I was trying to tell you—but was going about it in the wrong way—is that I assure you I am up to the challenge of working at Daddy Diggs’.”

Her desperation was palpable and it made his heart contract painfully in his chest. Still, he showed nothing on his face. “We'll talk about it upstairs.”

She swallowed, a sad, lost expression flitting across her countenance as she turned resolutely to the stairs, lifting her skirts to climb them. She paused awkwardly at the top, unsure where to go, so he put a hand at her low back to guide her to his room. His hand

fit nicely there, spanning the width of her cinched waist, the satin of her gown sliding under his palm as her hips swayed. God, but she was delicious. The heady rush of power and satisfaction spanking a beautiful girl brought him was already flooding his senses, his cock stirring in his trousers, his blood warming.

He unlocked the door to his room, feeling her tension mounting. She rushed out of his grasp when she entered the room, her feet carrying her to the middle of the room where she stopped, uncertainly. He sat down on the bed and simply waited, offering no command, curious to see what she would do.

She turned slowly to face him, her eyes sweeping his face as if looking for clues for what to expect. Still he waited. Her chest heaved under the constriction of her corset, creating a lovely view of the tops of her lifted breasts framed by the low, square cut bodice of the gown. She didn't move from her place, and her eyes fell from his face to his feet. The tension in the room grew, the silence only cut by her shallow panting. At last she took one, faltering step in his direction, then another.

He sat back with satisfaction. It had been so very easy to bring her to heel. He'd been certain that underneath the cursing and defensive exterior was a

very obedient girl. Her last few footsteps quickened, bringing her to stand directly before him.

“Good girl,” he murmured approvingly. Her little panting breath answered with the whisper of a tiny moan. He put his hands on her waist and turned her slowly around so he could unfasten her gown for her. It had a series of tiny hooks in the back and it took some time for him to release them all so he could open the dress. It fell in a satin puddle at her feet, and he began unlacing her corset. She took several deep, shaky breaths when he released her lower rib cage from its constriction and tossed the corset to the side. She didn't move. She simply stood there, her torso bared from

the waist up, a slight trembling making her back twitch. He put his hands on her hips and turned her to face him.

Though he'd seen them before, he was unprepared for the full effect of her breasts. Like everything else about her, they were so youthful, so wholesome, so full of the promise of life, that he found it was he who trembled. Willing himself to ignore them, he lifted his eyes to her face.

“Did you...” she began tentatively. “Did you want me to show you my capabilities?”

He made a sudden coughing sound as his cock went rock hard at her suggestion. When he recovered, he said,

“No, Cora, I just wanted to be sure you can breathe when I spank you.”

“Oh,” she said, her full painted lips formed into an “O” as round as her eyes.

“I will never ask that of you,” he clarified firmly.

She narrowed her eyes. “You will never ask that of me?” she queried, disbelief evident in her tone.

“No. I don't sleep with my girls.”

“What? You don't? You mean you pay them for it?”

“No, I mean I don't. Ever. I don't sleep with my girls.”

A rosy blush was rising to her cheeks, as if she'd just propositioned him and been turned down, rather than believed he was going to force her to

perform for him. The innocence of it, the vulnerability she revealed added to the knowledge she'd been expecting to have sex with him, made it hard for him to breathe. He felt an urgent need to put his hands on her and spank her, and looming behind it, an even greater, dizzying need to snatch her from her feet, throw her on the bed, and pound into her with a violent, animal savagery. He carefully placed his hands on his thighs and looked at them until he had marshaled his desires.

“Why am I spanking you, Cora?” he asked with mustered authority.

Her shoulders sagged slightly. “For cursing,” she mumbled.

“That's right,” he said. He tugged at her petticoats. “Take these off, please.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, untying the string holding them up and allowing them to fall to her ankles. “These, too?” she asked, fingering her drawers nervously. They were the modified drawers all his girls wore—much, much shorter than the normal kind, with ruffles sewn on the bottoms for their can-can dance. They flipped their skirts up in the number to give a peek at their *derrières*, as the French girls called them.

“Those you can leave on, if you like. But I will be pulling them down.” Ladies’ drawers had a wide slit in the crotch area to facilitate relieving

themselves, but it didn't allow them to open enough in the back for his purpose. Plus, he loved the look of a beautiful, bared bottom, framed by the black stockings and garter belt.

He reached up and untied the drawers, pulling her across his lap with her torso resting on the bed.

* * *

Cora clenched the muscles of her buttocks, acutely registering the humiliation of her position. As Diggory deftly pulled her drawers down and bared her bottom for punishment, goosebumps sprang up all over her skin. *Oh God.*

This was pure agony. Somehow it was so much more tortuous than any of the violence she'd received from the fists of Smoochy. She could not steel herself against it or allow it to make her defenses stronger as she had with him. This punishment was so calm, and Diggory was almost tender. No wonder they called him Daddy Diggs.

She'd almost felt disappointed when he'd promised he'd never sleep with her. There was a heat blazing between her legs that she honestly had not felt with another man.

His hand connected with one bare cheek, making a resounding slap, and she yelped, digging her elbows into the

mattress as if she might wriggle right off his lap. His arm clamped firmly around her waist as his hand came down on her other cheek with another loud crack. She wriggled some more and he slapped again and again. The surface after-burn of the earlier spanks crept across her skin as the sharp impact of fresh blows made a different sort of pain. She balled her hands into fists and bit on one knuckle, trying to keep herself from crying out. It hurt, but she'd endured worse. Certainly she could handle this.

And yet Diggory did not slow down or show any sign of stopping. He was spanking her as if he might spank all night and this spanking seemed much harder than the last one he'd given. She

kicked her legs, not to try to hurt him, but as an involuntary reaction—an instinct telling her to protect herself. He clamped one leg over hers, easily handling her resistance, though in the newly pinioned position her instinct screamed even louder to free herself. She wriggled more actively and reached a hand back to block his blows. He caught her wrist and gently bent her arm behind her back, then began spanking even harder, though she would not have thought it possible.

“No!” she shrieked. “Please! Please! Daddy.”

He stopped abruptly and rubbed her blazing bottom. “Shh, Cora. You're all

right. Stop fighting it. You admitted yourself that you deserve this, didn't you?"

She tried to pull her arm back and he allowed it. She tucked her forearms up under her chest and rested her forehead on the quilt. "Yes, sir," she said into the covers, still stunned that she'd called him Daddy.

"You deserve it and I promise you can take it. I'm not going to use anything but my hand tonight."

"Thank you, sir," she said, surprised to feel hot tears starting to wet the quilt. Were they from the pain? Surely not. What then? Remorse? Perhaps. Embarrassment, perhaps. Or was it his kindness? Was it that no one

had been so kind, yet firm, with her since her parents had died? It made her feel like a child, in a safe and cared for sort of way.

He started again, more slowly this time, pausing between each spank. She drew in a shaky breath, listening to the feel of his punishing palm, so large and firm. She thought fleetingly of his long fingers dancing across the piano keys. He began to build in tempo and intensity, striking with less precision now, the blows falling all over her bottom, the backs of her thighs, and the place right over her sex. She was grunting with each slap now, her breath coming in sobs until she allowed herself at last to let go

and cry in earnest. She buried her face deep in the quilt, her back shaking, as the sobs ran through her. Daddy Diggs lightened the force of his spansks, but continued at the same pace and she released all resistance, going limp over his lap, accepting his discipline. She hardly realized it when he stopped, until his deep gentle voice penetrated her cocoon and she became aware of his hand softly stroking her blazing bottom.

“I know you're eager to earn a wage, sweetheart. I'm guessing Smoochy never paid you?”

She shook her head without lifting her face from its nest of quilt.

“Well, I'm not going to keep you from it. But you looked more than a little

miserable down there, doll, and that concerned me.”

She felt exhausted. Too exhausted to even think of an answer. Fortunately, he didn't seem to require one, he just kept stroking her bottom and thighs, caressing her, soothing her, offering a form of comfort she would never have imagined she might want or accept from a man who'd just spanked her to tears.

After another few moments of stroking, she realized with horror that she was starting to arch toward his hand, seeking his caress like a cat that lifts its back to be petted. Heat was growing between her legs, causing a tingling sensation in her sex. She clamped her

knees together and jackknifed up, using her hands on the bed to propel her backward, off Diggory's lap in a scramble. She pulled up her drawers and tied them with shaking fingers, fumbling several times before she managed to complete the bow.

Diggory reached out and grasped her by the waist, pulling her toward him once again. She stumbled in between his knees, her breasts coming inches from his face. His gaze locked on one and she felt a sharp contraction in her sex as her nipples stood out, eager to perform for his attention. This time it was Diggory who seemed suddenly uncomfortable. He pushed her back to make room as he abruptly stood.

Some foolish part of her felt a surge of satisfaction. He wanted her—she'd seen it in his face.

He looked down at her from his towering height. “Well, the choice is yours, lass. Come downstairs or don't. But if you're on my floor, I want you looking like you're happy to be there. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she said softly, stepping into her petticoats and tying the lace. “I understand.”

She took her time getting dressed, trying to regain her wits before she walked back downstairs. When she did, she had a smile pasted on her painted lips. Olive waved her over to where she

stood.

“Did you just turn a trick?”

“Trick?”

“That's what we call it. Well, it's what Gigi and Marie call it. It's French—*trique* or something—I think it actually means a stiffie. We call it 'turning a trick' when they take a customer upstairs.”

“Oh—no, I wasn't with a customer, I was with Daddy Diggs.” She willed herself not to blush.

Nothing got past Olive, though. She gave her a bemused glance. “Did you get spanked?”

Another contraction in her heated sex. Why on earth was she getting so excited over Jake Diggory? She felt her

cheeks grow warm. “Why do you say that?” she asked, cursing the waver in her voice.

Olive shrugged. “That's his way. He keeps us in line with a firm hand, but he'd never really harm you. Are you all right?”

She nodded, a little too quickly. “I'm fine.”

Olive peered at her under her lashes, a mischievous look on her face. “Spanking is his sex.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he'll never, ever ask you to suck his cock, he'll never lie with you, but he'll flip you over his knee and spank your bare bottom anytime you step out of

line. It satisfies him—it's his substitute for a roll in the hay. Did he get hard?"

Cora bit her lip and felt her cheeks grow warm. Olive was grinning broadly, her eyes dancing. "Well, did he?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe so." As she said the words, she felt suddenly jealous—she didn't want Jake Diggory getting hard when he spanked the other girls. But that was mad—she hadn't wanted his attentions at all, had she?

"So he never has sex with you?"

Olive shook her head solemnly. "Never, ever. Not with me, not with anyone."

And that fact shouldn't make her so happy.

"That's strange, isn't it?"

Olive shrugged. “That's what I meant. Spanking *is* his sex. I've heard of it before. Gigi's told me all about it—there are even special bordellos in France that cater to it. There are people who like to spank and people who like to be spanked. Men who like to be tied up, and women who like to be made to lick your boots. Someday I'm going to open my own brothel and that will be our specialty.”

“Spanking?” she asked incredulously.

Olive grinned. “Why not? I have a regular now—James McCollum—he likes to be spanked. Has sex with me too, but always after spanking him. With

his razor strap! Pays extra for it, too—ten dollars extra.”

“You're kidding me.”

“I am not. I've been saving my money. I've saving it up and someday I'm going to open my own place—me and Gigi'll work it. You, too, if you want. I'm calling it Spank-a-loons.”

“Wow... When?”

She shrugged. “I don't know. It would kill me to leave Daddy Diggs, and I wouldn't want to compete with him, so I'd have to go somewhere else—maybe San Francisco. Don't tell Daddy Diggs, though, it's just between us.”

“All right, I won't tell.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”



Jake closed himself in his office after spanking Cora. The girl was proving to be more of a temptation than he'd bargained for. She wasn't Eliza, but the uncanny similarity confused him. He'd never been tempted to break his vow of celibacy until now.

He steadied his nerves with a large gulp of whiskey and sat down at his desk. *She wasn't Eliza.* She wasn't Eliza and yet... he felt so close to her. So drawn to her. She felt like a kindred spirit in this sordid world of sex, gambling, and liquor—she somehow reminded him of who he used to be. He

wanted to pull her out of Daddy Diggs' and drag her back to a place—nay, a time—when life was simple and easy. They both had had that time in their pasts. Perhaps that was their connection. Or perhaps it was the music. He'd seen real joy in her face when they'd sat at the piano together.

Music was his refuge. The thought of giving her piano lessons cheered him. It was a gift he could offer that might become a bright spot in her day. He pulled out a piece of paper and the new iridium-tipped gold nib fountain pen for which he'd paid a small fortune. Its superiority to a quill that must be constantly dipped in ink was irrefutable, even if the cost was outrageous. He

sketched out a grand staff and began by placing notes on it for “Ode to Joy.” Then he wrote out the melody for the lullaby she'd been singing when they'd played together.

A light tap sounded on the door and Olive poked her head in. “We're ready for the dancing if you are.”

“I'll be right out.” He set down his pen and sat another minute before heading out to the noisy hall.

The place was packed and there was a rowdy energy to the crowd. He called out the introduction and sat at the piano, striking up the music for their dance.

As he played, he watched Cora

come downstairs. She looked better. It was funny how a good spanking could relax a girl. There was a calm serenity about her now, and when she met his eye shyly, she gave him a small nod. He smiled and winked, watching as she wandered through the room and accepted a coin to sit at one of the tables as a gambler's companion, turning her chair so she could watch the performance.

When the dance concluded, the men cheered and whooped and the girls moved out on the floor. He stood and took a stool at the bar and ordered whiskey. Sam Stryker, the owner of the biggest mine in the area, took a seat next to him. It was he who had pioneered the use of hydraulic mining, pumping water

through the canyon to sluice out the gold. He was dressed in his gentleman's finery, as usual, his round belly protruding under his waistcoat.

“Who's the new girl?”

“Cora Underhill.”

Stryker whistled. “John Underhill's daughter?”

Jake gave a single nod, finding the conversation distasteful.

“She turned out a beauty, didn't she?”

His fists clenched and unclenched, but he took a deep breath and exhaled. “Aye.”

“What was it that happened to her father?”

“He was murdered.”

“Oh yes, that, but I mean how did she end up with Smoochy?”

Jake's skin prickled with irritation.

“That's between her and Smoochy, I guess,” he said coldly. He wasn't about to drag her family's business out for Stryker's inspection.

“So how'd you get her?”

Could the man not take a hint? Jake threw back his whiskey and looked away without answering. Stryker made a harrumph sound and stood from his stool, sauntering over to where Cora sat. After a few moments of discussion, he offered his hand and she accepted, standing and walking to the base of the

stairs as Stryker paid Hank her fee. Jake watched the two of them climb the stairs together.

He ought to be happy. Cora looked comfortable working the floor and she'd already scored her first trick.

So why did he want to murder someone?

Chapter Four

“How was your trick?” Olive asked, plopping down to join her for breakfast. It was a hearty plate of rice and beans with fresh-squeezed orange juice. The Spanish had planted oranges in California and they grew well—producing the most delicious juice. Cora still remembered her first taste of it when they'd arrived from Chicago. There weren't any groves in Dorado Hills—it was barely a town then—but the traders brought oranges from San Francisco and she remembered peeling and biting into that first delicious fruit, the shock of sweetness making her

whole body come alive in ecstasy. She'd told her mother it tasted like pure heaven.

She savored the taste of the juice in her mouth now, and then gave Olive a shrug. "He was a trick."

Olive snorted. "Mine was horrible."

"What do you mean? How so?"

She snorted again, but a look of amusement animated her face with the promise of a story. "He is a talker. We call him 'The Narrator'. He describes the whole act like he's reading a book. Like, 'You're taking off your stockings' and 'you're holding my cock' then 'I'm grabbing your ass' and 'I'm fucking you

so hard'." She laughed derisively. "Ridiculous!"

Cora giggled. "I saw you, though. You left the door open—was that on purpose? Anyway, you looked like you were enjoying it."

Indeed, Cora had stopped, riveted outside the door. Olive had been riding on top, her head falling back, hair cascading down to her bottom. Cora had been struck by the look on Olive's face. Her friend had clearly been seeking her own pleasure with the customer. She'd had her eyes closed, her breasts arched high in the air and she was urging him on in a guttural, needy tone.

Never, in the five years Cora had been whoring, had she found pleasure.

Nor had she sought it, as Olive clearly had.

Olive grinned. “Well, as long as I can shut my ears to his constant stream of chatter, I can still find *la petite mort*.”

“Find what?”

“The little death. My climax.”

“Ah.” Cora giggled. It was nice to have someone like Olive to talk to about these things. At Smoochy's, she'd learned to speak Spanish and some Chinese, but she'd never really had a camaraderie with the other girls. Sure, they looked out for each other's safety, helped when they could, but there was no laughing—no making fun of the customers. Well, there was no laughing, period.

Gigi joined them. “So how was The Narrator?” she asked with a wicked smile, her French accent thicker on a sleepy tongue. She had long, dark hair that was a little wild and frizzy, a pale face and small eyes that always danced with amusement.

Olive turned her head and Gigi planted an easy kiss on her lips, momentarily shocking Cora, who was trying to sort out whether that was French custom or there was something between the two.

It appeared to be the latter, as Gigi pulled her chair closer to Olive's and they tangled their legs together under the table.

“The last time I had him I simply narrated back. I said, 'Oh, you want my pussy? Now you will lick my pussy.' I made him do all the work and he was so excited he spewed before he could even get it inside me.”

Cora giggled. “You call it a pussy?”

“*Oui. Le chat.* That is what we call it in Paris.”

Le chat. Derrière. Trique. She was learning all kinds of new words. Yes, the atmosphere at Daddy Diggs’ was an enormous improvement to Smoochy’s. Here the women seemed empowered. They laughed about the men. And if what Diggory had said last night was true,

they weren't ever required to service a customer they didn't want.

Diggory walked into the room just then, his lanky grace reminding her of the easy, boneless look of a cat. He stopped in the door and beckoned to her. "It's time for your lesson."

"Oh!" she jumped up so fast she knocked her fork to the floor. "I'll be right there."

She'd forgotten about her lesson, but her heart danced at the thought of it. She brought her plate to the large tub for washing dishes and rinsed it off, watching the water flow out a hole in the bottom where it was directed outside through a series of hollowed out logs. Daddy Diggs kept a nice establishment,

with all the latest conveniences. She was impressed.

She found him sitting at the piano, sheets of music spread in front of him.

“Do you know how to read music?”

She bit her lip. “I used to. Every Good Boy Does Fine, right?”

He chuckled. Good. And the spaces?”

“F-A-C-E.”

“Good girl. Now show me where they are on the keys.”

She placed her hands on the keys the way her mother had taught her and slowly ran a scale, naming the notes as she went.

“That's it, now with the other

hand.”

She complied.

“Now together.”

She followed his instruction.

“Very good.”

He placed one of the sheets of music in front of her. “Can you play this?”

She studied the treble notes and plucked out the tune with her right hand, realizing quickly it was Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. She smiled and repeated the song, faster this time.

“How about this one?”

He pointed at the next song. She tried it out, singing lightly to Mary Had a Little Lamb.

“Okay, now this one you already

know, right? Just do the treble first.”

She looked at the song and began to find the notes. It was her lullaby. He'd written in a simple part for the bass as well. She tried to add the bass but her brain couldn't hold focus on both hands at once, and the discordant sounds became so disjointed she slammed both hands down on the keys, making a loud, frustrated bleat.

In a flash, she was over Jake's hard thighs, facing the wooden planks of the saloon floor as he delivered several hard swats to her bottom. He pulled her back upright and plopped her back on her stool.

She sat looking straight forward,

pressing her lips together to smother a laugh. Catching a smile on the corner of Daddy Diggs' mouth, she let the giggle erupt and he chuckled, too.

“Are you going to do that every time?”

“Every time you fail to pay attention to my directions.”

Her lips still twitched with amusement. “I'm sorry. I will pay attention, Daddy Diggs.”

“Good. What were my directions?”

“Treble only.”

“Play it for me.”

She played it several times, until she could play it smoothly, and only then did he permit her to add the left hand chords.

By the time their lesson was through, she was able to play the entire song, treble and bass, at the tempo she liked to sing.

“Well done, Cora,” he praised her, and she flushed with pride.

“Where did you learn to play?” she asked him.

He smiled. “It's odd for a man to play, isn't it?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted.

“My mother played the pianoforte and I begged her to teach me. She said I loved music straight out of the womb. My father allowed it because I seemed to have an aptitude.” He gave a wry grin. “Maybe he thought I'd be the next

Mozart.”

“Well, you are, practically,” she said, knowing she was gushing, but unable to stop herself.

He threw his head back and laughed, then stood from his stool. “You stay and practice a while longer. See if you can't memorize it by tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Jake? I mean—Daddy Diggs?” She flushed, unsure what had made her use his first name.

He sat back down on his stool next to her. “You may call me Jake,” he said softly, his eyes intent on her face.

“I, uh—I'm sorry—I didn't mean to be so familiar.”

“I said I'd permit it.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, her face still

flaming.

He sat staring at her, the magnetic pull of his gaze sucking the breath right out of her chest. “What were you going to say, Cora?” He asked in a low, gravelly voice.

“Oh. I just wondered, ah, if you would play with me again? Like you did yesterday.”

He smiled slightly and nodded. “You begin,” he said, “Treble only.”

She played the song he'd written out for her, and then he joined her, weaving an elaborate harmony of bass, then reaching around behind her, as he had done the day before, adding higher notes to their song. She closed her eyes,

enveloped by the song and adding her voice to the tapestry, making it as soft and angelic as she could, the way she remembered her mother singing it. When they finished, Diggory pulled her head to his chest and kissed the top of it, then released her and stood without a word, his long strides taking him out of the saloon.

She sat staring after him, feeling warm all over.

* * *

“No, no, Joaquin. What are you doing? You've messed the whole thing up! Ack. Here, let me.”

He elbowed the boy aside and

moved underneath the large wash basin in the kitchen, where he'd fashioned a series of hollow logs to carry the used water to the dirt outside. Josefina had informed him the drain had become clogged, so he and the boy were working on repairing it. He snatched up the little shims he'd been using to change the angle of the drain pipe.

“That's a fine way to treat someone who's trying to help.”

“Eh?” Jake craned his neck around to see Cora standing next to them, her hands on her hips, her eyes flashing. From where he was lying he could see up her dress, a fact which amused him considering the attitude she was giving him.

“You might tell him nicely—you don't have to act like a jackass.”

The room had gone quiet with Cora's first snappy words to him and the air now crackled with tension. No one cursed at Jake. Holding the pipe in place, he looked past her at Joaquin, who had scrambled out and was staring at his shoes, his face a splotchy red. Had he hurt the boy's feelings? It appeared so.

“Joaquin, come here. Cora, you'll go to my office and wait for me and if you say one more word, you'll be sorry.”

Her mouth had opened, but she snapped it shut, blanching. She did not obey immediately, however, staying to

watch what he would do with the boy. Joaquin approached and he handed the pipe back to the boy. "I do need your help—I'm sorry I was rude. Hold this," he said. He looked over his shoulder at Cora. "*Now, Cora.*"

She jumped a little and left the room, her back stiff and straight as she walked.

To make amends for the lad's damaged pride, he turned the project back over to him, explaining what needed to happen. Then he stood and dusted off his hands to deal with the bigger problem in his office.

Cora looked up warily when he walked in. He strode across the room, picked her up and plopped her on his

desk.

“When you have something to say to me, you will say it politely.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered immediately, her eyes wide with fright.

“I will not tolerate your sass, and you already know how I feel about cursing.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You will be.”

She licked her lips nervously. He pulled her off her perch, spun her around and pushed her torso down over the wide expanse of his desk to present her bottom for chastisement. Pulling her skirt and chemise up to her shoulders, he roughly pulled open the laces of the

bottom half of her corset so she could breathe. The cord to the petticoats was in the back, while the one for the drawers was in the front. He tugged each of them loose and let them fall to the floor in a crumpled heap. She wasn't wearing stockings and her lower half was now completely bared to him, a sight which stirred him despite his ire.

He began spanking with his hand, using his full strength, listening to the sound of her yelps and cries as she flinched and squeezed her bottom in useless defense. He spanked mercilessly, watching as her creamy skin turned pink and then a deeper red. Because it was an act of dominance, and he wanted to put her in her place, he

pressed his thumb into her back hole as he had done that first night. She stilled. Her listing and flinching stopped and her whimpers increased as he continued spanking while his thumb held her in place. He had to adjust the angle of his spans, but he still managed to make them sting.

Her hands moved down and he thought she was going to try to cover herself, but instead she stunned him by bringing them between her legs, cupping her mound and holding it as he slapped her round cheeks. Did she have to use the chamber pot? But no, she was moving her fingers over her folds. He heard the sound of slick flesh on flesh.

Suddenly dizzy, the room grew hot and began to spin. Slowly, deliberately, he slid his thumb out of her bottom and reached around to catch hold of her hands, lifting them out of the way. Nudging her legs farther apart, he slapped her pussy. It was wet and swollen, begging for touch. He slapped it again and again. His forearm was stopped by her tailbone as his hand wrapped down to fully slap her sex, so he caught the entire corridor from her anus to her little rosebud of pleasure. The wanton cries she made fueled an overwhelming desire to take her like a wild animal in heat. After a dozen slow slaps he replaced her hand over her sex,

helping to pleasure her by moving his fingers over hers, tangling through them to penetrate, to circle, to lightly slap.

He was sweating. All thought had left his brain. The need to bring her to completion was overwhelming, and he thrust his fingers into her welcoming sex, using the thumb of his other hand in her back hole, pushing them in and out at the same time. His movements were rough and desperate and she was making keening cries, standing up on her tiptoes, her pelvis pressed tightly against his desk. With a choked sound, she orgasmed. He continued moving his fingers within her, slowing the speed, checking the intensity until the tight squeezing of her muscles had eased. He

slid his fingers out and rested with a hand on each side of her, leaning over her bent form.

He panted there for a moment, his mind still half-crazed, and then began to spank her again. Her bottom was so enticing to him—no, more than enticing, spanking it was a need for him, an itch that must be scratched. He grabbed a chair and yanked it around the desk, plopping into it as he pulled her across his lap at the same time. She let out a shriek of protest, gripping his calf to steady herself. He started to spank again, fast and hard, rubbing the full erection in his pants against her sex. He knew she understood—she ground against him,

even as she squealed at his relentless smacks. He continued spanking until he brought himself to a climax, grabbing her waist with both hands and rubbing her body against his lap as he ejaculated.

Oh God.

And it had not been enough. He leaned back in the chair, catching his breath, relief from his release already fading as the raw, underlying passion flamed even hotter. It was as if once lit, the fire would continue growing until it exploded within him. He ran his hand through his hair in frustration, allowing Cora to slide off his lap. Normally so in control, he was now strangely helpless—no words could address their situation.

Yet Cora, sweet Cora, who of all the girls was the least likely to ever try to seduce him, was kneeling at his feet, reaching for his cock. She unbuttoned his trousers and released his length, which still stood at attention, despite the release. She met his eyes, opened her mouth and extended her tongue, slipping it around the rim of his cock as if she *wanted* to taste him.

It was his undoing. With a roar, he grasped her by the hair and hauled her to her feet, half shoving, half carrying her backward until she hit the wall. His mouth open, he attacked her lips, her cheek, her neck, devouring her, consuming her very essence until their

two bodies fused into one. Her dress had fallen back down and he tore at the skirt, lifting it and one thigh to his waist, lowering his trousers enough to free his erection and plow into her.

Oh God, yes! Fifteen years since he'd had a woman and it had never been so good. He slammed into her, his fingers digging into her flesh, his pelvis pumping forward and back as if his very life depended on it. In fact, he was sure the only thing that could have stopped him at that moment would have been death itself. If sex was a beast, then he was the devil, and nothing would sate him until he'd plumbed every inch of Cora Underhill.

As the wall shook under the force

of his thrusts, Cora made that same keening sound she'd made before and the need to satisfy her filtered into his consciousness. Reaching his hand around, he once again pressed a finger into her arse and she nearly screamed, her body convulsing against his, her pussy and anus clamping down hard on his cock and his finger as her entire body shuddered. The magnificence of her climax brought on his own and he shot his load into her, thrusting upward while he held her tightly against him.

It was a long orgasm and when it was through, he was sure of only one thing.

Everything had changed.

* * *

Daddy Diggs collapsed against her, his lips brushing her neck and sucking lightly. He kissed her there, once. Twice. Then higher, toward her jaw, again on her hairline. She felt the heavy beat of his heart where it pressed against her chest.

"I'm sorry," he said hoarsely, stepping back at last, looking stunned and more than a little disturbed. "I didn't mean to—" he swallowed. "I didn't mean for that to happen." He buttoned his pants and tucked his shirt in as he stared at her with shock. "Are you hurt?"

His eye fell on her lip, and she

touched her tongue to it, tasting blood. He must have bitten down as they had climaxed.

But no, she was not hurt by his ferocious onslaught, nor had she been afraid. Though it was a new experience, she recognized raw passion and had been as swept away in it as he had.

Regret in his eyes, he cupped her face tenderly with one hand and lowered his mouth to hers, licking the blood from the corner as he buried his hands in her hair. "Did I hurt you?" he asked with real pain in his voice.

She shook her head, still unable to speak.

"I'm sorry," he rasped.

She circled her arms around his

neck. "I'm not," she managed to whisper.

He stumbled back but she held her arms fast, staying his retreat. He looked down at her, as if wondering who she was. His arm circled her waist and he stroked her cheek with his thumb. He started to lower his head to hers, checked the movement, then started again, delivering the softest, sweetest kiss of her entire life. His lips were gentle, supple, exploring her mouth with a tenderness she'd never before experienced. She stood on her tiptoes, giving back what she was receiving, leaning into him and his delicious kisses.

"Diggory?" A loud knock at the door interrupted their embrace and they

both flew apart, startled. It was Hank's voice.

Daddy Diggs ran his hand through his hair. "What is it?"

"Sheriff's here. Said he wants to ask you some questions."

Daddy Diggs cleared his throat, rubbing his face. "All right. I'll be right out." He looked at her, then around at her clothing on the floor.

"Go ahead," she urged. "I'll get myself together."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go on."

He gave her one last uncertain look before opening the door only wide enough to step through, then closing it tightly behind him. She stood stock still

for a moment, listening to her body. It felt as if it were made of pudding—her legs wobbled and her arms were heavy. Her sex still throbbed from excitement and rough use and she had a feeling she'd have more than a few bruises. But it had been worth every small pain she'd earned.

That was what sex was about. She'd never really understood, and had never enjoyed it, or wanted it, even with the customers who tried to satisfy her. She'd rather prided herself on her disinterest, and had used it to keep Smoochy off her, by lying as still as a corpse underneath him, until he cursed and slapped her and sent her away.

Now, it was as if some new part of her had been awakened. She'd experienced the power of inspiring passion in a man and she was proud, somehow, that *she* had been the one Jake Diggory had finally taken. She wanted to be that inspiration to him again. And again.

She dressed slowly and then left the saloon to go for a walk, wanting to be alone to fully experience this change in herself. That night she chose not to work the floor. She rationalized that it was because she was too sore, but the truth was she didn't want anyone else to touch her. Her body belonged to Diggory, or so it felt.

She sat in the bunk room, reading *The Scarlet Letter*, a new book she'd found in Diggory's extensive library. Joaquin was curled up at her feet, reading an encyclopedia, spelling words to her now and again to inquire their meaning.

Daddy Diggs entered. "May I have a word with you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," she said, standing up, feeling a little rush of excitement as she crossed the room to the door where he stood. He stepped back to allow her through the doorway, then put his hand at her waist and guided her down the corridor to his room. She liked the proprietary feel of his arm around her,

being close enough to feel his warmth.

He kept a simple room, consisting of a bed and armoire, another bookshelf filled with books, and a trunk. The quilt was a beautiful pattern of deep red, orange, and brown silk. It was masculine, but had a rich and luxurious feel to it. Her heartbeat picked up speed as she wondered if he was already wanting another round with her.

“You're not working tonight.”

She looked up to gauge his expression. “No, sir.”

He touched her shoulder. “Because I hurt you?”

She hesitated. She didn't want him to regret what had happened between them. She shook her head stubbornly and

shrugged. "You said I didn't have to if I didn't want to."

His brows came together as he studied her. "Aye."

She lifted her shoulders again. "I just didn't want to."

"Fair enough. But I know how eager you were to earn money, and if it's because of me..." he trailed off, reaching into his pocket and drawing out a ten dollar bill.

It had the same effect as a javelin through her heart. She stumbled back from him, a searing pain in her chest and a flashing light before her eyes. Hurt quickly turned to fury. "You're *paying* me for this afternoon?"

* * *

He realized at once he'd given a horrible offense.

“No,” he said quickly. “No, I'm not. No money in the world could pay for that, Cora,” he assured her, watching her face soften as his words sunk in. He held both her shoulders, looking down into her beautiful, upturned face. “What we shared—that's never happened before. Not for me, anyway. And... there are no words I can find to... to thank you for giving yourself to me that way.”

She lifted a trembling hand to stroke back the lock of hair that had fallen in his eyes. He caught her wrist

and brought the little hand to his lips, kissing each of her fingers. Her eyes filled with tears and he drew her close. “Why are you crying?” he asked, a lump in his throat making him sound gruffer than he intended.

She blinked rapidly. “I’m not,” she said, shaking her head.

“Tell me,” he insisted.

“No.”

He bent his head toward hers and kissed the top of it.

“Jake?”

“Aye.”

“Who is it you said I reminded you of?”

He released her, taking a step back.

“What?”

“My first night here. You said I reminded you of someone you once knew.”

He shook his head, taking another step back, feeling dizzy.

“Who is it?”

“Eliza.” His voice cracked on the name of the woman whose ghost had tormented his thoughts for fifteen long years.

“Is that why... is that why you picked me?”

Anger flared, making him clench his fists, though there was no rational cause for it.

“No—I didn't *pick* you. I didn't pick you at all. It was just something that

happened. It's something we both should forget.”

“I see,” she said, her expression turning cold.

He knew he had hurt her, but couldn't make himself stop. Better to end this thing now, once and for all. He pulled the ten dollar bill out of his pocket again and tossed it on the bed. “It's not payment. It's not anything. Take it if you want it. I don't really care,” he said and strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

He went downstairs and threw back three shots of whiskey before sitting at his piano to lose himself.

Cora came down during his first song, dressed to work. She didn't look at

him as she passed, sashaying into the gambling hall with the air of royalty greeting her people. And if the drunken gamblers were her people, they certainly paid attention. Every eye followed the beautiful blonde and several men held up dollars to wave her over to sit with them.

She joined a man at his table, accepted a drink, and waved a black fan, watching the bets with feigned interest. He lowered his head and closed his eyes, letting his fingers dance over the keys to help him slip away from the stink hole that had become his life.

“She's settling in nicely, isn't she?” Olive's chipper voice pulled him out of

his reverie. She was leaning on his piano, her lifted breasts spilling out of her corset.

He scowled and didn't answer.

“Something going on between you two?”

“No,” he growled.

“Really?”

“Shut it, Olive.”

She smiled a slow, knowing smile.

“That's what I thought,” she said smugly, drifting away.

To complete his misery, Sam Stryker walked in, looked around, and made a beeline for Cora. Feeling sick, Jake stopped playing abruptly and stood, stalking to the bar to toss back another shot of whiskey. The burn had barely

cleared his throat before Stryker paid Hank and escorted Cora upstairs.

Well, good. She had a regular. He swallowed the overwhelming urge to punch Stryker in the gut and walked outside, standing on the wooden porch and gazing down Whiskey Row. He had to get out of this life. He didn't belong here, no matter how successful the business may be.

An hour later, when Cora and Stryker descended the stairs together, he was downing another shot of whiskey and had turned downright surly. He expected Stryker to leave but instead he pulled Cora down to sit with him at the faro table. Cursing under his breath, he

stood and strode over, sitting down on the other side of her.

“You punting, Diggory?”

Jake shook his head. “No. Just watching.”

“Watching who? Do you think I'm cheating?” Stryker demanded with a vehemence that wasn't called for.

Jake raised one eyebrow. That sort of defensiveness didn't come out of nowhere. He crossed his legs and interlaced his fingers over one knee. “Actually, the thought hadn't occurred to me.” He paused long enough to watch that sink in. “Should it have?”

Stryker chose to ignore him, turning his attention back to Cora. “I have a proposition for you, little girl. How'd

you like to be my regular mistress? I'll keep you in fancy clothes, you'll live over at my manor."

Only a pompous ass would call his ranch house a manor. Jake's lips pressed into a thin line and his gut clenched, waiting to hear her answer.

She smiled prettily. "That's a very nice offer, Mr. Stryker, but I can't accept it."

The pinching grip he had on his knee loosened slightly.

"Why not?" Stryker demanded, clearly offended.

"Being a man's mistress is like being a slave—all the duties of a wife, but none of the benefits."

“What benefits are there to being a wife?” Stryker scoffed.

Cora looked coolly around the room, not deigning to answer.

“How is it any different from what you do here? You're Diggory's slave now, aren't you?”

Cora stiffened and Jake's hands left his knee, a fist clenching so tightly his knuckles turned white. But he waited, needing to hear Cora's answer.

Her eyes flicked to him, her expression still cool from their earlier encounter. She turned back to Stryker and said with perfect confidence, “I'm not Diggory's slave. He doesn't keep slaves. Do you, Mr. Stryker?”

Stryker's face flushed. "Of course I don't," he snapped, though the silence that followed seemed to contradict his statement. Everyone knew Stryker's miners ended up in more debt for their living expenses than they earned from him.

Stryker pushed his chips toward Magdalena with a curt, "Cash me out," and receiving his money, stalked out without another word.

Chapter Five

Jake had avoided her all week. Which was perfectly fine, since she'd been giving him the cold shoulder ever since he'd reduced what happened between them to a cheap monetary transaction. She knew it meant more than he'd made it seem. She'd pressed Olive for every detail of Diggory's love life, and Olive had sworn Daddy Diggs had never been with any woman as far as she knew. Which sounded right, considering the uncontrollable need with which he'd taken her—he certainly had seemed like a man starved for a woman's touch.

She was falling into a rhythm at the

brothel. Gigi and Olive allowed her into their fun, gossiping and teasing her as if she were an old friend. They'd made an attempt to teach her their can-can dance, but when it became apparent dance was not her forte, they told her to keep up her practicing on the piano so she could play at Spank-a-loons if she decided to leave with them. Margaret was friendly too, but was simple-minded. Cora decided Margaret was lucky that Daddy Diggs had taken her and cared for her, since she obviously couldn't find her own way out of a potato sack if her life depended on it. The only sore spot was Marie, the other French girl, who seemed to resent Cora.

Mr. Stryker hadn't returned since she'd insulted him, but she didn't care. There were plenty of customers, and she was starting to catch her stride with how to work them the way Olive and the rest of the girls did. She had already saved forty dollars. Soon she would have enough to leave Dorado Hills for good.

When Stryker entered the hall that evening, she made her way to him with a smile pasted on her face, sitting down next to him without an invitation. He was at the faro table, an oval-shaped table with a cutout for Magdalena, a stout Mexican woman who acted as both banker and dealer. Stryker had his chips all over the table, placing multiple bets

each hand. She watched as Magdalena pulled the banker's card and then the player's card.

“Ah, tough break,” Stryker cajoled a player who'd bet on the losing card. At the same time he directed focus to that player, she saw his elbow deftly nudge his chips toward the winning card.

Her jaw dropped. He was a cheater. She'd heard the innuendo from Jake the last time he was here, and now it was confirmed. She considered telling on him, but that could result in a scene, even gunfire, which Daddy Diggs' saloon could do without.

Instead, she reached a hand into his pocket, slipped out his wad of bills and stealthily withdrew several. Smoochy

had taught her the trick. He used to require it—they were to palm anything they could and turn it over to him.

Magdalena looked toward the bar, nodded, and then caught her eye. “Daddy Diggs wants a word with you at the bar.”

“Wha—? Oh!” She exclaimed, whirling around, wondering how he'd communicated that to Magdalena.

She stood up and walked to the bar where Diggory was leaning, face out. When she drew close enough, he reached out and wrapped his large hand around the nape of her neck, drawing her head close to speak evenly into her ear.

“Put it back, the same way you took it. Then excuse yourself and wait for me

in my room.”

Without waiting for her to answer, he turned her around and sent her off with a sharp slap on her backside. She scowled a little, but it was only to cover her fear. Her whole body trembled. Was he angry? It certainly sounded that way. But she'd only been taking what Stryker had stolen from Daddy Diggs'. Maybe he thought she was keeping it for herself. She sat back down, weak-kneed, and waited for the right moment to slip the bills back in Stryker's pocket. It was a long, agonizing fifteen minutes before sufficient diversion occurred and she was able to complete the act. Then she nonchalantly stood up and excused herself. Walking toward the stairs, she

stopped and looked toward the back door for a moment. She could just leave. She had the money she'd earned stuffed in her corset, not trusting enough to leave it lying in the bunk room. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to get her a start out of town.

She looked around and saw Diggory staring at her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. Swallowing, she turned and slowly walked up the stairs to his room. She turned the handle and found it locked. Then, remembering where the key was kept for the bunkhouse, she reached above the doorframe, finding he kept his key there too. Clearly Diggory trusted

his staff. It seemed the security was just to keep out thieving customers.

She paced the room, stopping to look out the window at the darkened road below. She could hear the snort of horses hitched below and the din of loud, drunken voices carried up from the saloon.

She sucked in her breath when she heard the door open behind her, but she didn't turn until Diggory's curt voice summoned her. "Come here, Cora."

She walked slowly to him. He'd opened his trunk and had pulled out thin rope, curled in a loop with the ends tied together to make a handle. She'd never seen such an implement, but the sight of it turned her fingers to ice.

“My girls don't steal, Cora,” Diggory said heavily. He looked truly displeased.

“But he was cheating! Let's talk to Magdalena—he moved his chips! I was only taking what he stole from you. I was going to hand it over to you, I swear.”

“I don't care. You let me deal with the cheaters. You don't steal. I'll not have it known that any customer was robbed at Daddy Diggs'. Do you understand me?”

She jutted her chin forward, but after a moment, she muttered, “Yes, sir.”

“I'm going to punish you with the loop, but I want you to know something, Cora.”

She lifted her eyes, but could not bring herself to ask him what.

“If you had thieved from me or anyone else who lives here, you'd be out on your ear. Period. I won't tolerate someone I can't trust. Is that perfectly clear?”

She made herself nod. Shame enveloped her, tears already smarting her eyes. At the sight of them, Diggory's shoulders slumped, but he kept the same determined set of his mouth.

“Take off your clothes.”

She swallowed. When he'd spanked her before, *he* had removed her clothing. To undress herself under his stern gaze daunted her. She kicked off her boots,

and then plucked at the laces of her bodice with trembling fingers, pulling the dress awkwardly over her head. The girls didn't wear a chemise while working, but the cut-out petticoats followed, then the corset. She shivered in the cool evening air, pulling at the string to her drawers and feeling utterly ashamed as they fell to her ankles.

“Stockings, too?” she asked, barely keeping a waver out of her voice.

He nodded. “Everything.”

Was he planning on whipping her everywhere? Her belly flipped at the thought. She took off her garter belt and stockings and stood before him, shoulders hunched and knees pressed together as if that might somehow shield

her nudity.

“Bend over the bed,” he ordered.

She did as he bid, grateful for the opportunity to hide her face. She leaned on her elbows and waited. Her momentary relief disappeared with the first bite of the loop. She screamed. It was a cruel instrument that lashed her flesh much like a switch. With the second stroke she involuntarily began to scramble up on the bed to escape him. A large hand at her calf caught her and dragged her back down.

“Stay in position, Cora,” he said evenly. “I know it hurts.”

Of course he knew it hurt, yet for some reason that acknowledgment

helped, as if his understanding of the intensity of the pain made it more bearable. But after the fourth stroke she was sobbing and was crawling out of her skin to avoid further punishment. In desperation, she reached her hand back to cover her bottom, spreading her fingers wide to protect it.

“Sit up and look at me, Cora.” When she didn't move, he tapped the loop across her open palm. “Now.”

Reluctantly, she rolled over and sat up, but could not bring herself to look at him. Instead, she sat sobbing, her chin tucked to her chest.

He cupped her chin and lifted it, but she kept her eyes resolutely lowered. He held her that way a long time, perhaps

imagining she might eventually look at him, but she simply could not. She was lost in her sobs, in her embarrassment and remorse.

He sighed and released her chin. He walked over to his trunk and she heard it open and close. She started to shake all over, wondering what implement he might have retrieved for her torture this time.

It was a leather strap, which certainly couldn't be worse than the loop.

“I will use the strap instead,” he told her. “But if you move from position or try to cover, I will switch back to the loop, understand?”

She nodded quickly, overwhelmed by his mercy. “Yes, sir,” she blubbered. “Thank you.”

“Get back into position.”

Eager to obey, she turned around immediately and lay on her arms with her elbows bent underneath her, so she was not tempted to stretch them down and attempt to cover her welted backside.

He began to strap her, making even stripes down her bottom to the backs of her thighs, then back up again, and then repeating his pattern. The dull slap of the leather was so much better than the bite of the loop, those weals now stung like she'd been attacked by a swarm of bees.

Still, he was not going easy on her and no matter how she tried to prepare herself for the next stroke, it never became manageable. She sobbed into the quilt, abandoning all resistance and accepting her whipping, her mind coiling around and clinging to one small thought: he had shown her mercy. He did care.

She hadn't realized the spanking was over until Diggory pulled her legs up onto the bed, curling them into her chest so she lay in a fetal position. He sat next to her and stroked her hair, pulling her head up to rest in his lap. She hid her face.

“Shh, it's all right,” he murmured, wiping the fresh tears from her eyes with his thumb, then continuing his petting of

her head. "It's over now, little doll. All is forgiven."

His kindness brought on a fresh wave of sobs and in response, he pulled her even closer to him, curling her body around his seated form before beginning his stroking of her hair again. She soaked up his tenderness like bread sops milk. Her entire being buzzed with raw emotion and pain, yet she drew from him a sense of comfort and calm.

She was just starting to drift into sleep when a scream pierced the air.

* * *

Jake shot out from under the weight of Cora's head. "Stay here," he barked,

leaving the room at a run. Olive's scream had come from a room down the hall. He tried one door and found the chamber empty. When he flung the next door open, he was greeted with a horrific sight. A customer was straddling Olive on the bed, brandishing a knife while holding up a small, bloody piece of flesh with a maniacal glee. Olive's neck was coated in blood and it pooled on the quilt beneath her. She was clutching at her ear and screaming.

At Jake's entry, the man scrambled off Olive and whirled to face him, holding his knife at the ready, crazed excitement on his face. Jake reached reflexively for the gun he normally kept at his waist, but he had taken it off to

punish Cora. *Dammit*. He crossed the room in a few strides to where the lunatic stood holding his knife defensively. Jake kicked him square in the gut, catching a slash of the knife to his thigh before he knocked the man to his arse. Not waiting for him to get up, he charged, managing to stomp on his knife hand and kick the weapon free before his own foot was wrenched from him and he fell headlong to the floor. He took an elbow to the kidney, which momentarily stunned him, but then he threw his full weight on his opponent, rolling to the top of him and landing a punch on his jaw. His second punch missed and connected with the hard

wooden floor, the crack of bone sending shooting pain up his arm. His fingers didn't respond to his attempt to make a fist after that, so he used his left arm, swinging wide to catch the man in the ribs just as he started to stagger to his feet. He lunged away from Jake and Jake followed, only to be thrown several feet back as the deafening sound of a gunshot rang in the room.

He was hit. He narrowed his eyes, trying to bring them into focus on the gun. A pocket pistol. One shot only—thank God. He scrambled to his feet, ignoring the terrible burn in his left shoulder, hoping to reach the miner before he retrieved the knife for which he was scrambling.

“Hold it right there!” Olive yelled. Both men whirled to see Olive holding his Colt Walker revolver, which she must have retrieved from his room. She was standing with her feet planted wide, aiming his gun very carefully, with the nine-inch barrel resting on her forearm to keep it steady just the way he'd taught her. Cora stood behind her in the doorway, and Hank had just arrived and was trying to shove her back to safety.

The miner's lip curled derisively. “You ain't gonna shoot me,” he taunted.

“No?” Olive demanded, looking demonic with the thick coat of blood covering half her torso. “Watch me.”

With that, she pulled the trigger and

the shot deafened him again as the miner was thrown back. Jake ran to him, ready to finish him off, but there was no need. Olive had shot him clean through the center of his head.

“Well done, little girl,” he said, turning to Olive, but his knees buckled and he landed gracelessly on his arse, next to the dead miner. Stars swam before his eyes and his vision tunneled. The need to control the situation quickly became more dire. “Cora, send Joaquin for Doc Smith first, then the sheriff. Hank, clear everyone out and close up for the night. Olive, sit down before you faint.”

“Only the Devil Diggory would still be giving orders after he'd been shot

down,” Olive said with a shaky voice and a wry smile.

He watched hazily as time sped and then stopped and then sped again. The people in the room moved and shifted. He was hauled up onto the bed and Olive lay down next to him, holding his hand. Then Doc Smith was there, pouring whiskey on his gunshot wound, setting his hand bones, and stitching up his leg. He dimly remembered the sheriff's presence, then having water pressed to his lips much later.

The next time he woke, he staggered to his feet reflexively, and then paused as a wave of dizziness overcame him. He was alone in the room. His

head, hand, and shoulder all throbbed to the rhythm of his heartbeat, a slow but hypnotic pace. His hand hurt worst of all—it was swollen a dark blue and purple, with two of the bones between his knuckles and wrist buckled up from the break, despite the work Doc Smith had done to set it. Blood stained the wood floor—his and the dead miner's. He moved slowly, awkwardly making his way to use the chamber pot and then walking carefully down the hallway to his own room.

When he woke again, it was to his door being thrown open and a worried-looking Cora bursting in. “There you are! For heaven's sake, did you have to move? I couldn't find—” she broke off

when she saw his wince and rushed to his side. "I'm sorry," she said in a much quieter voice. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been flattened by a train," he grunted. "What's that?" he asked, seeing she carried a glass of whiskey.

"It's for your wounds, not to drink," she chided and gently tugged at the bandages on his shoulder. He hissed and cursed softly as she poured it over his wound. "Doc Smith said you're lucky. The bullet went clean through. Said if we can keep it clean like this, you'll heal."

"Thirsty." His lips were dry and cracked and his head pounded, as though

he were dying of thirst.

She pressed a glass to his lips and he drank a few sips of water, then closed his eyes again and slept.

The next time he woke, he felt hot. He kicked the covers off his legs and saw Gigi there, mopping his brow with a wet cloth. That scene repeated itself several more times, though the girl with the cloth changed. He realized, distantly, that he'd turned septic, which didn't bode well for his survival. As his dreams began to take on the colorful and surreal quality of a fevered mind, he began to prefer them to waking, especially when the discomfort of his body overwhelmed him. He was back in Ireland, riding across the green meadows of his family

estate, walking the forest, and standing in the sea. He was a child and everything was simple.

He played with Eliza again, sometimes as a girl, sometimes as the lovely young woman she grew up to be. The next time he opened his eyes she was there with him in the room. He blinked at her. “Eliza?” he croaked.

“It's Cora.”

He blinked at her, confused. “Eliza?” he said, feeling alarmed, knowing something was amiss, but unable to understand what it could be.

“Shh,” she touched his face with the wet cloth. “Tell me about Eliza,” she said.

He screwed up his brows. “You’re Eliza. No,” he shook his head, memories colliding into one another as the present slammed into his past. “No, I remember you now. Not Eliza,” he shook his head. “Not Eliza.” He eased his head back to the pillows and closed his eyes. “Almost Eliza,” he murmured.

* * *

Jake Diggory was going to die. His cheeks were flushed with fever and the smell of the wound on his shoulder was fetid. Cora had stopped putting the bandage back over it, hoping the fresh air might help it dry out—it was an oozing mess. It made her hair stand on

end just to look at it.

No matter how she might pretend that she didn't care about Diggory, she did. Her fear of his death had her wound so tightly she could neither eat nor sleep. Nor would she leave his room, insisting that she be there at all times in case he needed something.

“How is he, Doc?” she asked anxiously when Doc Smith stood and snapped his bag closed. He simply shook his head.

Her eyes filled with tears and panic swelled, literally rocking her on her feet. She'd been so desperate for the doctor to come back—she had sent Joaquin first thing that morning to fetch him again. But it seemed he could do nothing. She

watched him leave, brushing the tears that were already falling down her cheeks with the back of her hand. Surely there was something else they could do for him?

She remembered, then, the Chinese doctor who had treated one of the Chinese whores during a pregnancy. He'd had his own herbs, and small needles he poked into her skin. They said he'd caused the baby to turn from breech, and she'd given birth successfully. Running downstairs, she called to Joaquin and asked him to go to the Chinese settlement just out of town to see if he could find Dr. Yee.

The Chinese had come in droves to

“Gum Sham” or Gold Mountain, as they called California. They were hated by the white miners because they were willing to work long hours for little pay. They lived separately in Dorado Hills, on the outskirts of town. Joaquin left for their camp at a run and returned with the doctor and a young woman.

“Mei!” she cried. Mei had worked for Smoochy as a prostitute, and Cora hadn't been sure whether she'd survived the fire.

“Cora,” Mei said with a faint bow. She'd always been reserved—Cora had never known whether they were friends or not. “This is Doctor Yee,” she said, introducing her companion. It appeared she had come to translate, which was a

relief to Cora.

Cora bowed to Dr. Yee. “Thank you for coming,” she said and led them upstairs.

In Diggory's room, Dr. Yee uncovered the bandage over the gunshot wound and made a clucking noise, saying something to Mei.

“We need hot water,” Mei said. Joaquin went to fetch it.

She crossed the room to Diggory's side. “This is Dr. Yee,” she said pleasantly. “He's going to help you.”

Diggory's eyes swiveled to her face and he made a barely perceptible nod. Dr. Yee mixed powdered herbs into the pot of boiled water, and then he poured

a small amount into a glass and spoke to Mei again.

“Make him drink,” Mei translated, pointing at the glass.

Cora nodded.

Dr. Yee then pulled out a rough cloth which he dipped in the mixture and began to scrub rather viciously at the wound. Diggory started and flinched, making a grunt of pain.

“What's he doing?” she asked Mei anxiously.

“Debriding. Cleans rot from wound.”

Dr. Yee spent a long time on this painful treatment, scrubbing the edges of both the entry and exit wounds. Then he brought out the needles she remembered

from his satchel. He placed them in his mouth first, and then tapped each one lightly into Jake's flesh, all around the wound.

“Surrounding the dragon,” Mei explained.

He placed additional needles down his arms and in his hands. They stuck out like porcupine quills. Jake's eyes were open slits and he observed Dr. Yee with brows drawn, but did not protest any of it.

Leaving the needles in place, Dr. Yee rubbed a camphor-smelling brown liniment over Jake's broken hand, which had been splinted across the palm by Doc Smith.

“To knit bones,” Mei offered.

Cora felt a rush of gratitude for Mei and her help and vowed that if Jake recovered, she would ask him to hire her—*if* Mei wanted to work, of course.

Removing the needles, Dr. Yee packed a poultice of the bitter smelling yellow herb concoction over the wound and explained through Mei that they should apply it several times a day.

“Fever should get better. We’ll come back in two days.”

Cora fumbled in her corset, pulling out the money she’d earned to pay them, but Diggory interceded, “No.” She looked over her shoulder to see him frowning at her. “My pocket,” he

grunted, slowly moving the hand attached to his injured shoulder.

“I'll get it,” she snapped, rushing to his side and then reaching her hand into his pocket, thinking that in other circumstances this might be an erotically charged moment. As it was, the sound of Diggory's ragged breathing made her eyes smart. She found a roll of bills and extracted them.

“How much?” she asked Mei, seeing her calculating look. Mei could have named any amount, though, and Cora wouldn't have blinked. She had a feeling Dr. Yee was Diggory's best chance at living through this.

“Ten dollars,” Mei said. Cora guessed it might be more than he

normally collected, but she handed it over without hesitation.

“Thank you, Mei. Thank you, Dr. Yee,” she said, repeating the bow.

The two of them bowed to her and departed.

She curled up beside Jake on the bed and was surprised to feel a heavy hand on her head. It was his splinted hand, and he moved it awkwardly, as if it were a brick attached to his wrist rather than articulating joints, but he was clearly petting her as best he could. She scooted closer to him, nestling her body against his, resting her hand on his thigh.

When she woke later that afternoon, Jake was clumsily stroking her hair

again. “Eliza?” he croaked.

She got up and brought the draught to him, pressing it to his lips. He drank a sip and then grimaced. “Go on,” she urged. “It’s medicine, to help you heal.”

Obediently, he bent his head to the glass and took a few more sips, then leaned his head back against the pillows. He looked better—his cheeks were not so flushed and the glazed look that had been in his eyes had receded. If he hadn’t just called her Eliza, she would have thought he had regained his senses.

“I’m not Eliza.”

He blinked, and then shook his head impatiently. “I know,” he said hoarsely. “I know. I know who you are, lass.” His Irish brogue seemed even thicker than

usual. He patted the bed next to him and she sat down. His arm wrapped behind her and he pulled her into him. “Cora.”

She thought he would slip back into slumber, as he'd been doing for the past two days, but he surprised her, speaking completely lucidly. “The Cora who will not be stealing any more, right?”

Her face flushed and her awareness flew to her bottom, where she still felt residual pain from her whipping. “No, sir,” she mumbled. Then, to redirect the conversation, she asked, “Who was Eliza?”

Chapter Six

Cora cast a sidelong look at him. Melancholy washed through him, but he took a breath and answered. “My fiancée. Back in Ireland. We were betrothed from the time we were children.” He lifted his chin toward the draught and she brought it to his lips again.

“Your fiancée,” she said musingly. “Did you spank her, too?”

He watched with faint amusement as her cheeks turned pink. She probably wished she could take back her question. He was silent for a moment, considering whether to answer. It felt like a betrayal.

But he had already betrayed Eliza with Cora, hadn't he?

“Aye,” he answered at last. “Once.”

He finished the draught and wiped his mouth on his good shoulder, remembering a past in which he was an entirely different man.

“We were walking in the woods and she gave me a bit of sass.” He shrugged. “I can't remember what, exactly. I sat down on a stump and pulled her over my lap.”

He gazed out the window, unseeing, remembering the smell of the trees, and the early summer air.

“I could feel her trembling, though

she protested bravely. I kept it light—no more than a dozen slaps. It was the first spanking I'd ever given and," he swiveled his eyes to look at Cora, giving her a weak smile. "I was practically shaking myself to keep from squirting my load right there."

She laughed, as he'd known she would. She did understand him.

"Afterward I kissed her and it was as sweet as honey. I was afraid she might be angry, but she just looked up at me with her eyes shining. Big blue eyes—like yours."

The pain of her loss shot through him, as if it were fresh.

"What happened to her?" Cora asked softly.

“She drowned.”

The worst moment of his entire life. The day fortune turned to failure. Promise of a future turned to the prison of this existence. He had never spoken of it. Not to anyone. Yet now, with Eliza's young doppelganger sitting next to him, the need to tell it, to be free of his worst secret, bubbled up and spilled over until he heard his own voice speaking as if from far away.

“It was on my watch,” he confessed.

His fault.

“We were swimming in the ocean after a picnic. The tide was coming in and it was getting choppy. I'd just told

her we ought to head in when a swell took her. Her head smashed on a rock, she took a breath full of water and went under. It all happened so fast—one moment she was laughing, the next she'd disappeared. I dove for her, dragged her to shore, but I couldn't get her to breathe again.”

He sat in silence, listening to the reverberation of his words through Cora's shocked silence.

“So I left everything. Got on a ship for America and disappeared.”

“How long ago?” her voice came softly.

“1840. Before the potato famine that brought all the rest of the Irish over.”

“And your family?”

He shrugged. “I never wrote.”

“Do you think they survived the famine?”

“Oh aye. My father was in the peerage—they wouldn't have suffered much.”

“What's the peerage?”

“It means he was titled, a landed gentleman—a lord in parliament.”

“Oh,” she said, eyes rounding.

They sat together in silence as guilt over the pain he'd probably caused his family by disappearing washed over him, along with the larger guilt over Eliza's death. The shame of it brought on that familiar burden of responsibility he

felt for all the women in his life.

“How is Olive?”

“She's all right. The end of her earlobe that was cut off, but it's already healing and it won't show if she lets her curls fall down over it.

“Good. What happened with the Sheriff?”

She shrugged. “Self-defense.”

He nodded. “Are we open right now?”

“Yes,” she said soothingly. “Olive and Hank are keeping everything going smoothly. You just worry about getting well. Do you think you could eat anything?”

He groaned, the thought of food making him feel nauseous. But he should

eat. "How long has it been?"

"Three days."

"Maybe." He sighed. "Bring me a little orange juice."

She stood up to get it.

"Water it down by half."

At the smile on her lips, he demanded, "What?"

Her smile grew wider. "Like Olive said, nothing stops you from giving orders and trying to manage everything yourself."

He attempted a shrug and winced at the pain in his shoulder. "'Tis my job."

"Let us care for you for a change," she said, crossing the room to the door.

Scowling, he lifted his hand to

examine it. It felt different since the Chinese doctor had stuck needles in and rubbed it with the liniment—the pain was still intense, but the hand seemed more alive, and the pain spread out, rather than just at the broken bones. A splint crossed his palm to prevent him from bending at the knuckles and two smaller splints straightened the two fingers connected to the broken bones. He attempted to wiggle his fingers but they didn't move.

He sank his head back into the pillows again, feeling nauseated. He knew one thing—if his hand wasn't going to work again, he'd just as soon die. Aye, he'd welcome his death now—he'd been the walking dead for almost fifteen

years now, and it was about time the reaper came to claim him.

When he woke his fever was back. His body was burning and he peered at the swimming room like fish in a glass bowl. Big blue eyes appeared before him and a cup pressed to his lips. It was impossibly sweet—the orange juice he'd asked for earlier. He shook his head and let it fall back.

Come reaper. I'm waiting.

He opened his eyes, remembering that he had details to take care of before he died. His girls needed looking after. “Cora,” he croaked.

The eyes appeared again.

“Look under the bed, lass. There's a

loose floorboard. Pry it up.”

The eyes disappeared and he vaguely registered the sounds of her banging around underneath him. When she returned, her face was pale and shocked as she held up the prize he'd sent her for: a huge gold nugget, the size of her fist.

“That's for you. If I die, you take that and get yourself out of here. Go back East, find a nice man and get married.”

“Where did you—? What about —?” she trailed off, her hunger for the gold clearly warring with her growing loyalty to the rest of the girls.

“That's for you,” he said firmly. “I'm leaving this place to Olive. She wants her own brothel, she'll have it.

She'll take care of everyone else.”

Cora's eyes widened even further. “You know about that?” Then she answered for herself, “Of course—nothing gets by you, does it?”

“Fetch me some paper and I'll put it in writing. Bring Hank up to witness it.”

Cora put the gold nugget back under the floorboards and then brought the writing utensils and Hank, who stood looking pale under his bushy mustache. He dictated the words to her, and then signed awkwardly with his left hand.

“Hank, I'm leaving it to Olive. Not because I like her any better, but because she wants her own whorehouse. If I left it to anyone else, she'd leave and start

her own and I want you all to stick together. We're family, remember?"

Hank swallowed and nodded. "I want you to stay and protect the girls. Help Olive the same way you help me. Will you do that?"

Hank hesitated, and then nodded. "Cora's not staying, though," he said emphatically. "I've given her the means to get out of here, and I want you to see to it that she does. Understood?" He looked sternly from Hank to Cora.

"Yes, sir," Hank said.

Cora nodded as well, tears falling down her cheeks.

"That's all, Hank. Thank you," he said.

Cora blew her nose in a

handkerchief as Hank left. Then she glared at him. “You're not going to die, Jake Diggory.”

He patted the bed beside him. “Come here, sweetheart.”

She climbed up next to him, curling under his arm as if she belonged there. She stroked his arm lightly with her fingernails.

“Jake?”

“Mmm?”

“It wasn't your fault, what happened with Eliza.”

He felt his resistance to that statement in the form of a rapid heartbeat, but he didn't waste his energy answering.

“Remember what you told me about becoming a whore? That life is the raging river we get tossed into? Well, life tossed you into the rapids. It wasn't your fault—I don't believe that for one second. It was just what happened—to you and to her. It couldn't be helped.”

His eyes burned with sudden tears and Cora had the wisdom to quietly slip out of the room, leaving him to them.

* * *

“Who appointed *her* Daddy's personal nurse?”

Cora heard the scathing tone in Marie's voice. Marie had never been kind—resentment had seethed from her

since the night Cora first arrived.

“Would you rather she be down here taking all the tricks from us?” Gigi answered in a bored voice.

Olive took notice of Cora's approach and cleared her throat, calling loudly, “How is he?”

She shook her head. “The fever is better since Dr. Yee was here but he's in a horrible mood and the wound still looks infected.”

“I cannot believe you are allowing that Chinaman to put those needles in him. You are probably killing him!”

Cora flushed with anger. “That's not true—he has only improved. And I've done everything Doc Smith ordered as well.” She was going to add that if

Marie thought she was a better nurse, she could have a turn, but she held her tongue. She actually didn't want anyone taking her place. In fact, she would put up a fight with anyone who tried to make her leave his side.

“Well,” Olive sighed. “The best thing we can do is keep this place running smoothly for him.”

“How is it going?” Cora asked, looking around. Things seemed relatively normal.

“We're managing. The piano brought in a lot of customers, and we can't very well do our can-can without music.”

Cora chewed her lip and eyed the

piano. Could she pluck out the can-can music? Just the basic tune? It was a pretty simple song, with a lot of repetition, really. If this was a way she could pull her weight at Daddy Diggs', she was up for giving it a shot.

“Is there sheet music for it?”

“Oh, golly. I don't know. He's been playing it without music for as long as I've been here. Why?” she asked, giving her a keen look. “Can you play it?”

She shrugged. “I don't know. I can try.” She sat at the piano and plunked on the notes, trying to find the right ones. She kept at it the rest of the afternoon in between her frequent checks on Daddy Diggs until she had the basic melody. That night, she sat at the piano, warming

the audience up singing and playing her rendition of “Oh my darling, Clementine”, the ridiculous song that had somehow sprung up and caught on about a gold rush miner and his daughter. She received a very unenthusiastic response to that attempt, so she took a deep breath and called out, just like Diggory would, “And now, I present to you, Daddy Diggs’ Darlings!” She sat down at the piano and played the melody as loud as she could, to make up for its simplicity. It was enough; the girls’ entrance received the usual hoots and hollers, and the focus was on them. She was so engrossed in her playing that she did not notice anyone was near her until

suddenly, the low notes were being played. She whipped her head around in surprise, her fingers faltering over the keys for a moment.

“Go on,” Diggory said gruffly. He looked pale and wan, but had somehow put on a boiled shirt and waistcoat. Even as haggard as he looked, he was the most dapper man in the place.

She flashed him a brilliant smile, thrilled to see him up and out of bed and sitting beside her. He winked, continuing his intricate finger work as if it were the easiest thing on earth.

“Go on, lass, I can't play that part.”

“Yes, sir,” she murmured, smiling to herself as she struck up the tune again.

On stage, the girls whirled and

kicked, putting on the performance that made Daddy Diggs' brothel famous. Diggory talked her through the ending, telling her to repeat the chorus, to slow down, to hold the ending note as he filled out the song.

When she turned to him, giddy with pleasure that between the two of them they'd been able to play the song, she saw a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and strained jaw muscles, as if he were gritting his teeth against pain.

Her thrill instantly morphed back to the overriding fear that had racked her since he'd been shot.

"You should get back to bed," she said anxiously.

His eyebrows drew together. "You are not in charge of me, little girl," he said very sternly, and then kissed her forehead to soften his words. She watched helplessly as he stood and stiffly walked the length of the room to perch on a bar stool and survey his business. Her belly clenched with worry and a hollowness permeated her soul.

She ought to be happy. She ought to be thrilled that Diggory was well enough and that things would now be returning to normal. Except that *normal* was completely distasteful to her. She didn't want to return to working the floor for money. She didn't want to give up her post beside Jake Diggory's bed, even

though she wanted him well. And now that the idea of taking that gold nugget and leaving Dorado Hills had been planted, she didn't want to stay. But she had no choice, did she?

She stood from the piano and squared her shoulders, forcing her feet to carry her through the hall, her hips to sway provocatively and her lips to curve in invitation. She found a miner who lifted a dollar at her, and drew up a chair beside him, providing her companionship as he gambled away his earnings. The emptiness inside her was overwhelming.

It was a familiar feeling. It was the same soulless feeling she'd had since her parents died and Smoochy had put her to

work selling her body for money. It was only Jake Diggory who had made her feel alive again. With his piano. With his passion. With his tender punishments. He truly saw her, understood her.

But no... that wasn't right.

He was only kind to her because she looked like his dead fiancée. In fact, he didn't know her at all.

* * *

“Jesus, I wish he'd just spank us all and get it over with,” Olive complained to Gigi and Marie, not knowing he was in his room and could hear every word they spoke from the bunk room. He had admittedly been on a tear—his black

mood causing him to lash out at anyone and everyone in his path. It had been weeks since his injury and he'd been in a foul temper every moment of them. He couldn't stand feeling so helpless, unable to use the fingers of his dominant hand.

“Isn't that the problem? He won't be spanking anyone for a long time. At least not with that hand.”

“I don't think it's the spanking so much as the piano playing that he's missing.”

He heard a creak outside his room and then a light tap on his door. He threw it open with a force that caused it to bang against the wall.

Cora jumped back a little, but said nothing, clearly prepared for his ire. She

chewed her lip.

“What?” he snarled.

The sound of his voice brought an abrupt halt to the gossip from the bunk room and the girls hurried out and down the stairs, casting him glances under their lashes on their way.

“May I come in?”

His brow wrinkled in surprise, but he stepped back and allowed her to pass. She walked into the room with a swish of skirts, her narrow waist accented in a light blue satin affair. She paced aimlessly through his room, finally coming to sit on his trunk, her two knees pressed primly together in sharp contrast to her revealing costume.

She didn't belong in this hellhole he called his business. He felt an overwhelming urge to press that gold nugget back into her palm and tell her to get herself out of California. He hadn't moved it from the hiding place he'd revealed to her, even knowing she had a propensity to steal. For one thing, he wanted to believe she was trustworthy. But if she disappointed him, well, he'd be glad she got the hell out.

“I truly thought I was going to die that night of the fire,” she said at last.

He didn't answer, but studied her beauty—the smooth, creamy complexion, the shadow of her dimples, the underlying intelligence behind the

doll-like face.

“Once I had resigned myself to it, I found I was ready, actually looking forward to it. I wanted to know—you know—about heaven.” She shrugged. “Or hell,” she said in a wry voice that seemed incongruent with her innocent appearance. “I thought I might see my parents again.”

His heart had picked up speed; every part of him was listening intently. She was describing something akin to what he'd experienced after his gunshot wound.

“And then you showed up, and rescued me. And I hated you for it.”

An unnamed emotion swept through him. He crossed the room and pulled her

to her feet. She blinked at him, unafraid. “I hate you for it, too,” he growled.

She nodded, unaffected. “I thought so.”

Then he was kissing her, crushing her lips with his own, plunging his tongue into her mouth with the ferocity of a wild animal. With his good hand, he grasped her hair and pulled her head back. Her mouth opened and she panted, her breath too constricted in her corset to sustain much more excitement. He stared down at her.

This again. This cannot be. He did not have sex with his girls.

Why did she bring out the beast in him? He dragged his lips over her face

until he reached her ear, which he nipped with his teeth.

“You make me weak,” he said hoarsely.

“You make me strong.”

She did look strong—not the innocent Eliza, but Cora, brave enduring Cora, who understood what it was like to want to die. They were two of a kind, weren't they? He pulled her head back even further, to expose her neck, which he bit and kissed, working his way lower, down the creamy expanse of her heaving chest. He tugged at her dress, trying to free a breast from her corset, but the fingers of his broken hand wouldn't work, wouldn't move as he commanded them. She started to lift her

fingers to help.

“Don't,” he gritted.

She clutched at his arms to steady herself instead, because he refused to let go of her hair to use his good hand. After another moment of struggle with the bodice, he released her all at once in frustration, and they stumbled back from each other. He picked up a book from his trunk and hurled it across the room. It struck the bedside table as it fell, overturning the lantern, which crashed to the floor with a clatter of broken glass.

Cora stared at him, still unafraid in the face of his rage.

“Get out,” he panted. “Please.”

When she didn't move, he shouted,

“Get out!”

She drew back and some emotion crossed her face before it went resolutely blank.

“I can't—I don't want this.” He was pleading now, willing her to understand. He knew she could.

She nodded and turned for the door, her back stiff, her head held high.

A bitterness welled up in him, then. An old, familiar bitterness. It tasted of love and loss.

And it had nothing to do with anything.

Chapter Seven

“Why don't you see if Daddy Diggs will pay you to play his piano?” Marie suggested.

It was afternoon and Cora had been practicing, trying to learn more of the can-can song. They'd continued playing it as a duet, but it was the only time Jake sat down at the piano and it seemed to make him even more miserable, as if it put his diminished capacity on display for all to see. Or perhaps it was more personal than that. Maybe it was too painful to play, knowing he might never again perform with both hands. He'd refused to give her any further lessons,

though he had scratched the music to several songs for her to learn on her own.

Marie's suggestion was obvious—she wanted her off the floor and away from any customers she might draw. The truth was, Cora preferred the piano to whoring, but she wasn't going to give Marie the satisfaction of admitting so. Instead, she ignored her and turned back to the notes Jake had clumsily drawn on the page with his left hand. She stayed and practiced until it was time to get dressed for the evening shift.

In the bunk room, the five of them dressed and primped, pulling on their black stockings and lacing up their

corsets.

“Just blow jobs for me tonight, I'm on the rag!” Olive announced.

“Same with me,” said Gigi.

“Me too,” sang Margaret.

“Ah, God. That means I'll be getting mine by tomorrow,” Marie complained.

“I guess that leaves you and Cora for first on the floor tonight,” Olive said brightly.

“When do you get yours?” Marie queried suspiciously, as if Cora had purposely scheduled her monthly courses so she could take business from the rest of them.

“Next week, I guess.”

“That is not fair, is it?” Marie demanded to the rest of them.

Olive snorted, giving Marie a “smarten up” look.

“She'll be on our schedule by next month. It's a given when women live together,” Gigi said nonchalantly.

“Where's the lip paint?” Cora asked to change the subject. It normally remained on the shelf by the looking glass where they primped.

“I put it away with my things. It is mine, did you not know that?” Marie asked.

“Oh,” Cora said stupidly, knowing that Marie was hassling her, but not knowing what to do about it.

“Oh, let her use it, Marie. There's no need to be like that,” Olive snapped.

“It's all right, I don't need it.”

“Yes, you do. It's part of the costume,” Olive said with authority. “Marie, get it for her.”

“It is in my trunk over there,” Marie pointed, without even looking.

Cora sighed and searched the trunk until she found the sequestered lip paint. Yes, Marie had definitely hidden it to give her a hard time. After applying it, she turned to Marie.

“Look, I didn't come here to steal your job. Is that how you feel?”

Marie gave her a sneering look and didn't answer.

“There's enough work for everyone,” Olive said firmly. “There's

no competition here.”

“That's right,” Marie said, looking in the mirror and rubbing her lips together. “There's *no* competition.” Her tone implied that Cora couldn't possibly compete with Her Fabulous Frenchness.

Hackles raised, Cora went downstairs determined to score the first customer. She raised her hand in greeting to Mei, who Diggory had hired as an additional barmaid. Mei had not wanted to return to prostitution, nor did she want to leave the Chinese settlement, but she'd been grateful for the wages Diggory had offered her to work behind the bar.

Sam Stryker walked in and despite the way their past interaction had ended,

she had him upstairs in fifteen minutes flat. *Eat your stockings, Marie.*

* * *

She woke the next morning to the sound of Marie shrieking.

“My money! It is gone! Somebody stole it!”

Scrambling out of bed, she stood in her chemise as a crowd gathered around—everyone asking questions and just gaping at the frantic Frenchwoman, who opened and closed her trunk, digging through her things and then holding her hands up in frustration.

Olive grabbed Cora's arm and pulled her to the side, asking in a low

voice, “Did you take it?”

“What? No!”

“Just tell me the truth, and I’ll help you. I know you’ve stolen before.”

“I did *not* take it!” she insisted, her heart thudding painfully in her chest, her palms clammy. How did Olive know she’d stolen before? She felt her cheeks burning with the shame of that.

“What’s going on here?” Diggory demanded, entering the room. The crowd parted for him and he stood, imposingly tall and authoritative.

“My money—all of my money—is gone!” Marie wailed. “It was here, in my trunk.”

Then she turned and gazed directly at Cora. “And *she* was digging through

my things last night.”

Cora took a step back, feeling slightly dizzy. She shook her head, unable to speak.

“Is that true?” Daddy Diggs asked, his dark eyes boring into her.

“Yes—I mean, no—.”

“Everyone saw you. All of us were here. Remember?” Marie demanded of the other girls.

Gigi nodded slowly. Diggory noted it and looked at Margaret, who also reluctantly nodded.

“Yes, because you put your lip paint away and then sent her to look for it,” Olive said with her hands on her hips.

“I did not tell her to steal my money while she was there!”

Diggory's eyes swiveled to her. Cora stumbled back again and hit the wall. She shook her head quickly from side to side. Joaquin edged up next to her, as if to somehow protect her or declare his loyalty.

He turned back to Marie. “How much money was it, Marie?”

“Two hundred dollars,” she said.

“Exactly?” he said.

Did she detect a dubious note to his voice? With a wave of sickness, she realized that Marie might have staged this whole thing to get rid of her. Daddy Diggs had told her that stealing from the

staff would get her cast out on her ear. Perhaps it was a known rule. Maybe he'd enforced it before. Olive had known she'd stolen—what if they all had?

But who would he believe?

He'd already caught her in the act once before, a fact which jabbed her conscience on a daily basis—the shame of his disapproval still smoldered.

“No, it was more than two hundred—I don't know, exactly—two hundred something,” Marie said, sounding angry, and perhaps a touch flustered.

Diggory's expression was inscrutable as he studied first Marie's face, then her own. She felt her cheeks flaming with raw emotion, her throat constricting painfully. She still could not

seem to speak to defend herself. Her eyes filled with tears under his gaze.

He crossed the room to her bunk, pulling back the covers, then lifting the mattress. There, under the mattress on the wall side of the bed was a large roll of cash.

Hot indignation coursed through her. “That wasn’t—I didn’t put that there!” she spluttered.

Wordlessly, he tossed it to a triumphant Marie.

“*She* put that there!” Joaquin spluttered, pointing at Marie, his face red with anger.

“Of course *you* would defend her!” Marie shot back. “You probably helped

her to hide it.”

“Come into my room, Cora,”
Diggory said grimly.

“But I—” she protested.

“*In my room.*”

* * *

Jake followed Cora into the room and shut the door. She turned to him immediately, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“I didn't steal her money, I swear to you. I know I've stolen before and it looks bad—really bad—but this time it wasn't me.”

He listened, keeping his face impassive.

Wringing her hands, she paced the length of the room. “Marie’s resented me since the day I arrived. She framed me—put her lip paint away so I had to go through her trunk in front of everyone while we were dressing.”

She stopped pacing and stared at him across the length of the room, her eyes pleading. He remained still, listening. Discouraged by his lack of response, her shoulders sagged and she closed her eyes, bowing her head.

When she looked up, her eyes were bleak and resigned.

“I know you must do what you must do,” she said in a shaky voice. “Punish me. Throw me out. I don’t really care—I

never planned to stay, anyway. I won't miss it one bit. Except, what I do care about—” Her voice strangled and she made a visible effort to regain control of her emotions. “—is what you must think of me.”

She twisted her fingers in front of her, but raised her eyes bravely to meet his.

“I was so ashamed when you caught me stealing from Stryker. It was something we did at Smoochy's—he taught us how to do it—it was a requirement of the job. But... you made me see that—you made me feel—” She stopped, looking desperately around the room as if she might find the right words somewhere hidden on some shelf.

“I was so sorry to have disappointed you,” she whispered, her lips trembling, fresh tears sliding out the corners of her eyes. “I have come to care,” she swallowed, “about what you think of me. I want to be the person you think I am, or who you expect me to be. And so I'm sorry, more than anything, that you think I would disobey you after—ah—”

“After I'd punished you?” he offered gently, slowly crossing the room toward her trembling form.

“Yes,” she whispered. She shook her head vigorously. “Because I wouldn't. You made me feel like there was still good left in me. You helped me

to remember who I am. And so I'm grateful to you for that," she said, hanging her head in resignation.

He took hold of her shoulders, meaning to offer some form of comfort, but as usual with her, his control immediately slipped away.

God, if she didn't make him remember who he was, as well.

He bent his head and slanted his lips over hers, claiming them aggressively, grasping her face and holding it steady for his onslaught. His lips twisted over hers, tasting the salt of her tears, his tongue pillaging what he realized now he'd always believed belonged to him. The wetness on her cheeks dampened his own, and he wiped

it with his thumbs, stroking her fine cheekbones as he deepened his kiss.

When he pulled away, she was breathless, gazing up at him with such confusion and hope that his heart lurched in his chest.

“You believe me?” she asked tremulously.

He nodded. “Aye.”

He drew her into his arms and gazed down into her reddened eyes. “Were you telling me that you care about me?”

She gave a little sob of laughter, her eyes blinking back tears again. “Yes, sir. I was.”

“Let's get out of here, Cora—leave

Dorado Hills.”

She gazed up at him, her eyes wide and shining with wonder. “Together?”

He smiled. “Yes, together. Would you have me?”

Another sob bubbled out of her and she flung herself against him, pressing her face to his chest.

“Is that a yes?”

She pulled away and gave him a watery smile. “Yes.”

He smiled and tucked one of her curls behind her ear.

“Where would we go?”

“I don't know. Boston? Chicago?”

“How about Ireland?”

His chest constricted with emotion. To think of returning again—of seeing

his beloved countryside, of being whole—not his old self, but a new one, with a new future. One he had not even begun to contemplate, but that involved this perfect companion. To see his family again...

“I don't think my younger brother would be too pleased to have me return and take his title,” he said ruefully, considering the effect of his return.

Cora blinked up at him. “You don't need to take his title. You could abdicate. We have enough with the gold to make a start, don't you think?”

He felt the purity of hope buoying all thoughts about the future. He smiled at her. “It won't go as far as you might

think, but if we invested it wisely, perhaps. We could build a cottage on my family's property. You'd love it there—it's so beautiful.”

“Invest it wisely,” Cora repeated softly. “Jake, what do you think happened with all my father's investments?”

He stroked her cheek. “I think there wasn't as much gold out there as everyone thought. He lent money to a lot of operations that went under. I suppose he tried to make it back by borrowing from Smoochy and continuing to invest.” He shrugged. “It was a risky venture and his gamble didn't pay. That doesn't mean he wasn't trying to do the very best for you and your mother.”

She nodded. “Yes, I used to blame him, but I think you're right. Jake?” She looked grave. “One more thing.”

“Aye?”

“I'm not Eliza.”

He cupped her face. “I know, my dear. I know exactly who you are. You're the girl who helped me remember who I am. The one who helped me let go of my past—and Eliza.”

She studied his face intently, as if seeking the truth of those words, so he gave her the full benefit of his gaze, showing her all the warmth and love in his heart. Her shoulders relaxed and she smiled.

He bent to kiss her again, trying to

keep himself in control. When he pulled away, he said, “Come on, let's go to Preacher Dan right now. I'm going to make an honest woman of you before I nail you to the wall again.”

She looked down at herself—she was still in her chemise. “I'll go put something on,” she said and crossed to the door, and then stopped in front of it, hesitating.

Of course she wouldn't be comfortable going out there. He felt a surge of fierce protectiveness.

“Right. I need to deal with Marie first, don't I?”

* * *

She stepped aside to allow Jake to open the door, the glee of righteous vindication rising up only to strangle her with a realization: he would spank Marie. The idea nauseated her. Not that Marie didn't deserve a good whipping, but somehow, she didn't want to share Jake or his discipline with anyone else. She grasped his arm and tugged him back, releasing it quickly when she saw a slight wince on his face. His gunshot wound had healed remarkably well since Dr. Yee had started treating him, so well that she'd momentarily forgotten his injury.

He stepped back into the room and shut the door again, looking at her

expectantly. She swallowed. There was no way to say it without sounding like a fool. "I don't want you to spank her," she said in a tiny voice, looking at her bare toes on the floor.

She peeked at him to see his eyebrows rise, but thankfully, he appeared to consider her request seriously. "Fair enough," he said at last. He looked thoughtful, and then he nodded. "I have an idea, but it will wait. I'm going to marry you first."

He crossed the room to the armoire and pulled out one of his dapper waistcoats, donning it gingerly over his injured shoulder.

"Come," he said, moving back to the door and holding it open for her. She

took a breath and stepped out the door, waiting for the gentle pressure of his hand at her low back to propel her forward to the bunk room. He entered with her.

“Out,” Jake said firmly to the other inhabitants.

There were many curious looks, but the room slowly emptied until only he and Cora were left. He threw open the armoire and looked inside looking through the dresses with a critical eye that made Cora giggle. He threw her a smile and selected a pale blue gown, which he tossed to her. She caught it and donned her corset, stockings, normal petticoats, and finally the gown under his

appreciative gaze. She ran to the mirror and pinned her hair up, rubbing her lips together to bring out the pink.

“You look beautiful,” he said, and she glowed at the compliment.

She took his arm, allowing him to escort her downstairs, out of Daddy Diggs’ and down Whiskey Row to the center of town, seeking Preacher Dan, the missionary preacher who had dedicated his life to saving the souls of miners who'd rather gamble and whore on Sundays than attend any church. There was still no church in Dorado Hills, but Preacher Dan resided as a guest at one of the boarding houses and they found him there.

Preacher Dan pumped Jake's hand

with enthusiasm when he told him their purpose. With a hand on his bible, they each swore their vows to each other. Cora could scarcely pay attention, her mind whirling as she assimilated all that had passed.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” Preacher Dan declared. “You may kiss your bride.”

Jake drew her to him, and murmured in her ear. “It's too late to change your mind now, sweetheart. You're mine, till death do us part.”

A delicious shiver ran up her spine and she melted into him, offering her lips for his taking. He kissed her once—a chaste kiss—then returned for a longer

one, until Preacher Dan cleared his throat loudly several times. Jake smirked as he pulled away. “Thank you, Preacher Dan. I think I'll be taking my wife back home, now. If you'd like to join us, we'll be celebrating down at Daddy Diggs’.”

Preacher Dan muttered half-heartedly about the dangers of gambling and prostitution while Jake chuckled and handed over a ten dollar bill, which shut him up. “Thank you, Diggory,” he chirped, his tone more than genial.

Jake offered his arm. “Ready, Mrs. Diggory?” he asked.

She started at the new title and giggled, grasping his arm. Her mind spun as it sunk in that she had just married the Devil Diggory. Her devil. It felt reckless

and wild, and absolutely right.

Jake didn't walk her back to Daddy Diggs'. Instead, he took her for a stroll up into the hills, taking her to a beautiful lookout where he spread his jacket on the ground for her to sit upon. They sat and talked, holding hands and making plans for a future neither one of them had ever imagined they might have.

"I want children," Jake told her. "Loads of them. Little girls with blond curls like yours."

Her belly clenched. "I've never missed a period, Jake," she confessed. "Five years of whoring and I always considered myself blessed to be barren."

His expression turned serious and

he touched her cheek. "I'm sorry." He looked out over the valley. "Perhaps," he said slowly, "it's more about enjoying the sex than how many years you've had it. Maybe with me it will be different."

The flutter of hope whispered through her like a breeze as she realized that he might be right. She had never climaxed before he took her that day in the office. Perhaps a climax was helpful for conception. A slow, serene smile stretched her face and she suddenly felt like the blessed Mother Mary herself. "I think it will, Jake," she said softly, and he squeezed her hand.

"But if not, that's all right," he promised.

She gave his fingers an answering

squeeze. “Thank you.”

“Come, we should get back before it's dark.”

They walked back slowly, talking about Ireland and their ideas for the future.

It was already dark as they approached Daddy Diggs', and she dragged her heels, not anxious to return.

Jake stopped and drew her body against his, kissing the top of her head. “We'll leave tomorrow, sweetheart. I'm as ready to be away from this life as you are.”

A warm happiness snaked through her at his understanding. She lifted her face and smiled. “Thank you,” she

murmured.

“Come on, courage for just another night. I need to get everything settled.”

She nodded and took his arm again, buoyed by his reassurances. They entered through the rear for dinner, sitting down in the kitchen to heaping plates of food from Josefina. The staff gave them curious glances, but the girls were out on the floor, and no one else would dare say anything.

The sight of Joaquin gave her a sudden pang of disloyalty, realizing how easily she'd forgotten about him and his fate.

“He can come with us,” Jake said softly, noticing her gaze.

Her eyes filled with tears at his

kindness. “Truly?”

He nodded. “I know how much he means to you.”

She considered a moment. “He may not want to leave.”

“Joaquin,” Jake called, taking charge as usual.

The boy scurried over. “Yes, sir?”

“I’ve just married Cora and we’re leaving town. You can come with us, if you like, or you may stay. Olive will be running the saloon and everyone else will remain.”

Cora felt a current of interest from everyone who’d overheard Jake’s news. Joaquin blinked and looked over his shoulder at Josefina. She was listening

intently, her brows drawn, her warm brown eyes fixed on him.

“I'll stay,” he said in a low voice.

She saw Josefina relax.

Jake smiled at him. “Very well,” he said, digging out a twenty dollar bill. “Take good care of yourself,” he said, handing him the money.

The boy beamed at him and stuffed it quickly in his pocket. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

He turned to Cora awkwardly, but she jumped to her feet and pulled him against her in a rough embrace. He might think he was too old to be hugged that way, but she didn't care. They parted with her blinking back tears and Jake running his crooked hand up and down

her back soothingly.

“Come on,” he said. “Let's go shock the rest of them.”

Chapter Eight

Jake took a detour to his bedroom where he retrieved his leather riding crop from his trunk, and then led Cora into the hall, aware that his words in the kitchen had probably already spread like wildfire. He took up a position at the bar, perching on a bar stool and wrapping his arms around Cora, who stood with her back to him. He caught Olive's eye from across the room and motioned her over.

She played it cool, as he'd known she would, showing absolutely no surprise at the sudden turn of events. When she arrived at Jake's side she

stood next to him, also facing out, like they were two proprietors surveying their business.

“Daddy Diggs’ is yours, Olive. I’ll sign over the papers tomorrow at the bank to make it official.”

That caught her by surprise. She turned round eyes on him.

He shrugged. “You think I didn’t know you were saving for your own place?”

When her cheeks colored and she looked guilty, he put a finger under her chin, aware that Cora had gone still and was watching intently.

“I’m not angry,” he said softly, and her body relaxed. “You’ll do a fine job

as Madame.”

“How much do you want for it?”

He shook his head. “No, it's yours. My gift to you.”

Her lips parted and her eyes filled with grateful tears, which she hid by looking at the floor until she'd regained composure.

“My condition is that I want you to keep everyone on and take care of our little family, as always.”

She nodded. “Of course.” Then she looked curiously from him to Cora.

“Where are you two going?”

“Back to Ireland, we think.” He kissed Cora's nape. “We'll see.”

Olive picked up Cora's hand and squeezed it. “I'm really happy for both of

you,” she said with an earnest smile.

Cora threw her arms around her neck and gave Olive a peck on the cheek. “Thank you. For everything,” she said, emotion choking her voice. “You’re the first friend I’ve had in a very long time.”

When they pulled apart, Olive made eyebrows toward Marie. “What are you going to do about her?”

Jake’s mouth twitched in a smile. “The real question is what are *you* going to do? And I have an idea or two.”

He motioned to Susanna to ring the big brass bell behind the bar. The room went quiet, everyone looking at him expectantly.

“Gentlemen,” he said with a formality that his clientele did not deserve. “Allow me to introduce the new proprietor of Daddy Diggs’ Saloon, Miss Olive Jones.”

A loud whoop came from Olive's favorite customer James McCollum and was echoed by Gigi. There was a smattering of applause from the rest of the crowd.

“There may be some changes around here. I know Miss Olive has very interesting ideas for you men. To give you a taste of what is to come, I've asked her to give you a little demonstration of the things she has in mind. Marie, please go up on stage. Hand a stool up to her

there.”

He gave Olive the riding crop and wagged his brows.

With a sensual curve of her lips, she snatched it from his hand, sashaying to the stage with the signature confidence that made her his top earner. Marie had already guessed the direction of events, and her face closed with grim acceptance.

“Over that stool,” Olive commanded, pointing with the riding crop.

With a resolute sigh, Marie complied, leaning her chest on the seat of the stool and wrapping her arms around its edges.

“Spread your legs.” Olive tapped

the crop to one of her legs.

Marie obeyed.

Olive looked pointedly at the audience of leering men and slowly pulled up Marie's first skirt. The men roared their approval. James McCollum got up from his seat and elbowed his way forward, dragging a chair directly in the front of the stage, ignoring protests from the other gamblers. Olive lifted the fluffy expanse of petticoats, revealing Marie's shortened ruffled drawers. The men cheered again at the sight.

Olive walked around Marie and tapped her bottom with the crop. There were catcalls and taunts from the men, urging her to let it swing. She lifted the

implement and brought it down with a sharp slice. Marie jumped and grunted. The men grew quieter, perhaps surprised that Olive would spank in earnest. The crop whistled through the air as she brought it down a second time, and the crowd murmured a bit, nervous laughter filling the air.

McCollum, Olive's customer who liked to be spanked himself, was leaning back in his chair, his hand over the bulge in his pants. Olive brought the crop down a third time and Marie made a little whimpering sound. Olive changed the crop to her left hand and used her right to rub a slow circle over Marie's bottom. The crowd tuned up again, egging her on. She looked over her

shoulder at them, raising her eyebrows suggestively.

She received a chorus of whistles and shouts in response.

Slowly, with every flair of drama in her, Olive untied Marie's drawers, hooked her thumbs in the waistband, slid them down past Marie's thighs, and allowed them to fall to the floor. Shouts, cheers, and the banging of glasses on the table rewarded her. Olive fanned herself with her hand. "Is it getting hot in here?" she asked, tugging at the fastenings of her dress. She pulled it off along with her built-in petticoats to a roar of approval. Flexing the crop, she took a wide, confident stance in nothing but her

corset, stockings and drawers. The excitement in the room was palpable.

Jake pulled Cora tightly against him, pressing her soft bottom against his hardening cock. He smoothed her hair back from her ear and nipped at it. She pushed actively backward, molding her body against his.

The three weals Olive had already inflicted stood out against Marie's pale skin, and the sight of them affected Jake in the way that seeing a woman's spanked bottom always did. His cock stirred against Cora's body and she responded by slowly bending and straightening her knees to rub her bottom over it. He groaned in her ear.

Olive tapped Marie's alluring

backside a few more times before bringing the crop smartly across her cheeks, making a diagonal line this time, crisscrossing the first three straight ones. *Ah, God.* Olive brought the crop down two more times, and a little sob from Marie could be heard along with a loud groan from McCollum.

“She's got six more coming. Who wants to give them to her?” Olive queried her audience.

Chairs fell backward as men jumped to their feet.

“Now wait, wait, wait. I'm going to give this crop to the highest bidder, and we'll start at ten. Do I hear ten dollars?”

It was a stroke of pure genius.

Olive worked the crowd until she had the winning bidder up to forty-five dollars. “Pay Hank over there, then come on up here, mister. Let’s see what you can do,” she directed. He took the crop and brought it down hard—so hard that Cora gasped and her little body gave a jolt of shock just watching it.

“Now that was too hard, mister,” Olive informed him, inspecting the weal. “If you break her skin, I’m taking that away from you, and you won’t be refunded your money. Now try again.”

The next stroke was too easy, but he delivered the last four with a bite that made Marie cry out each time. Olive took the crop away from him. “Thank you very much. Now, who would like to

take this lovely lady upstairs? We'll start at twenty..." Olive began another bidding war for Marie, ensuring the two of them would make more money in one night than they normally brought in over the course of a week. Olive left Marie's welted bottom prominently on display as she managed the auction, eventually closing at thirty-five dollars. Only then did she throw her skirts down and allow her off the stool.

"And finally," said Olive with another suggestive waggle of her eyebrows and a flex of the crop. "Who wants to be spanked by me?" She gave a seductive smile, turning her eyes on James McCollum, who was practically

trembling with desire for her. Beckoning him with her finger, she sent him to Hank to pay, and then led him up the stairs, following Marie and her trick.

Jake nudged Cora away from him and slid from his stool. He patted her bottom meaningfully, imparting the idea of his imminent plans for her.

* * *

A giddy happiness filled Cora as she scampered up the stairs with Jake's steady footfalls trailing behind. She felt vindicated by Marie's punishment, but more than anything, she simply could not believe that Jake was hers. Her man. Her husband. *Her Devil Diggory*. She

waited for him to unlock his bedroom door and entered when he stood back for her to pass. Always a gentleman.

He had carried a lantern with him and he turned the wick down to a low flicker, leaving the room bathed in a golden wash of light.

“Take off your clothes,” he ordered, his voice husky.

Her heart skipped once and she smiled as she began to unlace the ribbons on her dress to let it fall, pooled at her feet. Her petticoats and drawers followed, and then she began to unhook the front of her corset.

“Come here,” her husband commanded from where he'd sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots. “I

want to do that.”

She walked slowly to him and turned around so he could unlace the back of the corset. He finished and then pulled her down on his lap, his good hand stroking up her inner thigh until it reached her moist sex. He slid his finger over it lightly, but the moisture dried. Her passion had dimmed in the context of the bed and the bedroom, doing the familiar dance she'd done with hundreds of men. Her belly tightened, but she willed herself to relax, to enjoy Jake the way she had that day in the office when he'd taken her against the wall. The way she'd wanted him to only a short time earlier when he was pressing his

hardened cock against her backside down at the bar.

Realizing that he wasn't getting anywhere with her, he gently pushed her off his lap. "Lie down, Cora," he said, peeling his shirt off and unbuttoning his pants. She watched the hard ripples of his muscles as he climbed over her with sinewy grace. She held her breath, fighting off the familiar dread that was creeping over her. This was Jake. Her husband. Not a "trick."

He climbed above her to kiss her neck, and then moved lower, suckling on her nipple. She lay there in passive endurance, keeping her eyes wide open and on Jake, trying to stay with him, in the moment. So many nights she'd lain as

still as she could, not wanted to encourage the sweaty, smelly man on top of her.

He moved even lower, parting her thighs and licking into her folds. She squirmed, unable to remain unaffected by his ministrations, and her body relaxed. He cupped her bottom with his large hands—the contrast of the stiff broken hand compared to the agile one discernible. She spread her thighs wider and enjoyed the pleasure much like she would enjoy a warm bath—as a sensual, relaxing experience. Pleasant, but not arousing.

After a while he lifted his head and stared at her. She shrank under his gaze,

knowing full well she was disappointing him, like she'd disappointed so many men, but helpless to change.

“Gah, I don't like gentle, either,” he said, scrambling back off her and the bed. Grasping her thighs, he twisted them to flip her to her belly and pulled her down until her hips folded over the edge of the bed and her feet touched the floor.

He stroked her bottom with his stiff hand. She craned her neck to look behind her and found him gazing down at his mangled paw. He shrugged. “Well, I'm going to have to break it in sometime, aren't I?”

Before she could decipher his meaning, he clarified with a resounding

slap. He then proceeded to spank every inch of her bottom and the backs of her thighs.

She felt it then—a thrill of excitement. Was it just knowing that he enjoyed it? Or was it that she somehow enjoyed it too?

Considering the pain he was inflicting, that seemed counter-intuitive, except that part of her seemed to crave it. He stopped and stroked her bottom, murmuring his appreciation, and she felt her pussy spasm in response. She needed his touch, wanted more. When he grasped her hips and entered her roughly, she reveled in the violence of it—sensing his passion, desiring his

dominance. He drove in and out of her, plowing deeply so each time she felt him pounding against her inner wall. His hand moved from her hip to her sex, his finger drawing circles around the little sensitive bud in front. She squealed, her knees buckling as he continued to pump into her. Another hand pulled and twisted one of her nipples, and when she pushed on her elbows to lift her torso, he slapped at her tender breast, spanking it as he'd spanked her bottom. She lost it then, lifting on her tiptoes and making a high pitched moan as her entire body shuddered from the inside out, her climax sending wave after wave of pleasure through her body.

He held her tightly, pressed deep

within her until she finished, then he pulled out and began to spank some more. This time there was no resistance to the pain. She welcomed each slap, submitted to it. When he had thoroughly re-heated every inch of her flesh, he plunged into her once more. He moved roughly with the uneven strokes that belied an approaching orgasm. She felt his fingers wend through her hair, then his fist closed and he pulled back, lifting her head in another small act of violence as, with a shout, he came to his own climax. She shivered with pleasure, her sex contracting again on his long shaft, milking it for its seed. *Yes, this was how a baby was made.*

He pulled out and grasped her waist, lifting and tossing her back onto the bed, pouncing on her and placing hot, mad kisses on her throat. She wound her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. Her lover. Her violent, passionate lover, who was so very different from any trick she'd ever entertained. Triumphant that she had not disappointed him, love poured from her heart and her body sank into the deep languor of satiation.

Jake rolled to one side and wrapped his arms around her, looking into her face. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

She nodded.

“Good. Because you can expect that treatment every night. Maybe every day, too—the ship ride to Ireland will be long and we'll get so bored there will be nothing else to do.”

She giggled. “You weren't frustrated with me?”

He laughed. “Never. I might have been disappointed if you'd pouted and cried after the way I mistreated you. But you liked it, didn't you?”

She flashed a wicked smile.

“Yes, I'd say we're perfectly suited, you and I. We play to a similar tune.”

At the mention of music she picked up his crooked hand and interlaced her fingers through his, turning it around to

examine the bulges where the bones broke. “How is your hand?”

He shrugged.

“What if you can't ever play the piano again?”

A shadow crossed his face, but then he smiled, removing his hand from hers and stroking it over her hip. “No matter. I have a new instrument to play now.”

The End

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More Books by Renee Rose

Betrothed

Young Lady Julia is offered by the king as a war prize to the Duke of Pembridge after her father tries to forcibly take the Duke's land. Worried that she will suffer as a result of his animosity, she runs away dressed as a page, only to unwittingly end up in the very same Duke's army.

Bronson, the Duke of Pembridge, is not fooled by the little page's disguise for a moment, and offers the lady his protection, not realizing that he is the man she is hiding from. As the attraction between the two grows, Julia is

ultimately forced to face her fate and learn her place as the wife of a man she's come to love.

Loving Lucia

Marco Donarati, the Count of Parma, had no interest in taking a new wife. He got his pleasure from the working ladies, and that suited him just fine. Marco's greatest passion is reserved for his fledgling winery, and therefore he cannot bring himself to refuse when Italy's leading wine maker, Don Edoardo Dante, offers him a source of funds with which to improve his vineyards. In return, the Count reluctantly agrees to make Dante's red-headed daughter Lucia the next Countess.

When he makes the deal, Marco never suspects that he might actually grow to care about his lovely young wife.

Passionate and eager to please, Lucia must navigate her new role as Countess to a husband who holds her at arms' length. When the Count becomes guardian to her twin sister as well, things really heat up. Tested by trials, betrayals, and jealousy, Lucia and Marco must find their way together and often the quickest route is with her bent over his knee for a bare bottom spanking. Will her wholehearted submission and love be enough to break down her husband's resistance and win his heart for her?

Courting Celia

Celia Dante is notorious for her headstrong ways and getting into mischief. This time, she's out to seduce Tomi, her brother-in-law's handsome steward and the man she cut her teeth flirting with as a young girl. But in addition to losing her virginity to the rakish Duke of Tuscany, her colorful past includes joining her twin sister and brother-in-law in their bed, a fact which Tomi has a hard time swallowing.

When Tomi seems to reject her, Celia's pride spurs her to set herself against him, in spite of the fact that he does not hesitate to pull her over his knee for a sound spanking. As her

spirited actions escalate, Tomi must decide whether he's willing to put aside his jealousy and fully take her in hand, or whether he will let her go and leave Parma forever.

Deathless Love

Kate Strand has always had a crush on Dominic, the owner of the club where her band plays, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that he's a vampire. But when he sniffs out her predilection for spanking and brings her fantasies to life one night, she falls head over heels. The trouble is, Dom is allergic to relationships, or so it seems.

Dom loves knowing how to turn Kate on and domination comes naturally

to him. But he believes he likes Kate more than is good for either of them. In his mind, mortals and vampires don't mix, and the best thing he can do for her is stay far away. But when another vampire targets Dom, Kate gets tangled in the dangerous web and Dom finds himself prepared to sacrifice his own life to save hers. Can he get her back alive? And if so, will they find a way to be together?

Pleasing the Colonel

Trapped in a crevice after a carriage accident, Amanda Downy is not sure whether she'll ever see the light of day again. With her tongue loosened by a fellow passenger's flask of brandy, she

reveals several well-guarded secrets about her life as a governess at Colonel Watson's residence, including the fact that she falsified her references to gain her employment.

The next morning Amanda is horrified when she finds that the passenger who saved her life after the carriage crash is sitting at the breakfast table at Colonel Watson's estate, and it appears that he is the long-absent Colonel himself! Amanda is certain that she will be immediately dismissed, but the Colonel has a different sort of discipline in mind for her...

The Colonel soon learns that in spite of the deceitful manner with which she obtained the position, Miss Downy

is an excellent governess and is much loved by his children. After a firm dose of the leather strap on her bare bottom, he lets her know that she may keep her position as long as she is truthful with him in the future. As time passes, though, the Colonel finds himself thinking of Amanda as he has not thought about any woman since his beloved wife passed away. Though he has no intention of ever marrying again, he cannot deny his growing need for her.

Amanda has a longstanding dislike for stiff military men, yet she warms to the Colonel, discovering that underneath his gruff exterior he is kind and generous. As she wonders if the

attraction is mutual, another suitor makes his interest known. Should she accept his offer? Or should she wait to see if the Colonel will ever make his move?

The Knight's Prisoner

Danewyn, a tavern prostitute, has always been cursed with the Sight--the ability to see into the unknown. It is a trait she has learned to keep hidden from others, but a moment of anger finds her blurting out a prediction about the Red Fox, the rightful king of Britain. Unfortunately, her prediction is overheard by one of the Red Fox's men, putting her in grave danger.

Captured and carried off for questioning, she finds herself prisoner to

Sir Ferrum, an enormous knight who bears the scars of an old injury upon his face. She finds Sir Ferrum to be firm and unyielding, but his treatment of her also reveals a gentleness which she has difficulty reconciling with his harsh discipline. To her dismay, her feelings for him continue to grow, and Dani must decide whether to continue her plans for escape or accept her new role as Sir Ferrum's woman and Seer to the Red Fox.

***Under Siege (Included in the book
Lords and Ladies: Two Medieval
Spanking Novellas)***

For Lady Camilla, the only thing worse than managing Falconworth castle

on her own would be her overlord discovering that she is a widow and marrying her off to his wretched nephew. Keeping her husband's death a secret is a top priority, right up there with ensuring that troops from a rival castle don't break down her curtain wall gate with their battering ram.

Yet when a devilishly handsome knight by the name of Sir Balen rides to her rescue, she is reluctant to turn over the control she has become accustomed to wielding. The attraction between them is palpable, but his arrogant assumption of the position and duties of her late husband irritates her, especially because those duties seem to include spanking

her bare bottom!

Can she swallow her pride and propose the marriage which she knows would be best for all involved, or will her stubbornness cost her and the people of Falconworth dearly?

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