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**Missouri Love Story**

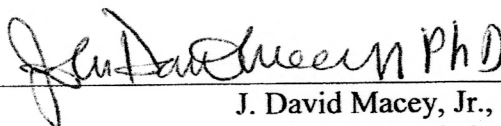
A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH  
by  
Pamela K. Smith

Choctaw, Oklahoma

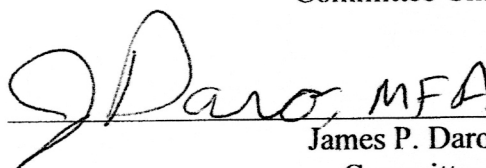
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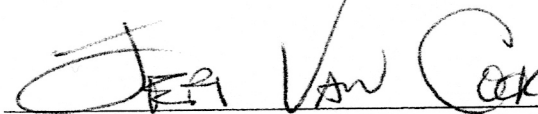
A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Summer visits to her family are usually filled with friendship, joy, and love, but the year Kylie Bellows turns sixteen, she faces the reality about her family. For the past nine years Kylie has attended school in Boston and has only come home for a few months each summer. She does not realize, when she sees one young man selling a horse at the livery and then meets another man several years older than the first, that her life is about to undergo a dramatic change. She falls in love with one of the men, but the other receives her father's blessing to marry her. Kylie's father sent her to Boston as a way to control her, but he does not understand that Kylie will not be controlled by any one, for any reason, and this leads him nearly to kill her.

Kylie's strength, determination, and independence infatuate one of the men, who eventually becomes her husband. He knows she has secrets but does not know what they are, but when he sees what her life in Boston entails, he cannot deny that she truly loves him and that she knows that he truly loves her. This forbidden relationship leads to a showdown that could lead to the death of Kylie and of her unborn child.

## Missouri Love Story

By Pamela K. Jackson

### Chapter 1

“Oh my!” I whispered about the man standing just off the main road, distracting me from the noise of the coach, as it rattled along the rutted roads and the constant music of the horses’ hooves dancing along the hard ground. I stared out the window toward a young gentleman who stood just in front of Carthage’s only livery stable with his hand sliding across the hip of a gray-coated mare. He was showing her to a foreigner, who obviously didn’t know a lot about horses. I caught myself laughing when the foreigner couldn’t get the mare to lift her leg so he could inspect her hoof.

“I could teach that man something,” not realizing my laughter could be heard above the noise of the coach, but the young man smiled at me, ignoring the problems of the prospective buyer. I smiled back, and our eyes met as my chariot rolled a couple of feet from the horse sale. One of the wheels found the deepest rut in the road, causing the coach to wobble fiercely, breaking our stare and knocking me back against the hard leather seat. It turned a corner before I resumed my position at the window, hiding the livery behind the row of shops, a diner, and the saloon. Pouting, I sat back, folded my arm across my chest, and ignored the shouting from outside the coach.

“Kylie!”

“Whoa!” The driver called from his post on the front of the coach. “Carthage, folks. We’ll be here for two hours.”

I closed my eyes, thinking of the gentle blue spheres that made me want to curl up in a warm quilt on a cold night. Visualizing the man made my body ache, and I longed to see his smile light-up his face.

“Kylie!”

“Miss, we’re here,” the driver said, offering me his hand.

“Oh! I’m sorry,” placing the tips of my gloved fingers in his dirty palm. I stepped out from my soon-to-be-forgotten prison and frowned, glancing toward the end of the road, no sign of him.

“Kylie!” My mother’s shouts caught my attention. The tears that always greeted me streamed down her rosy cheeks. She stood next to my father, with my grandfather, and two of my brothers, Randal and Alex.

“Mama.” I wrapped my arms around her neck while her lilac perfume filled my senses. Three more bottles were safely packed in my luggage.

“Kylie Ruth Bellows.” My father’s voice held the warm and loving tone I remembered as he hugged me. “You are so beautiful.”

“She’s the spittin’ image of her grandmother.” My grandfather’s rough embrace pulled me tight. I held my breath so as not to choke on his hard tobacco and sweat, knowing that at least four more days would pass before his next bath. His cheerfulness made me laugh because he always bragged about having gotten the prettiest of Patrick Kyle’s daughters.

“If you get any prettier, we’ll have to fight off all the young men in town.” He leaned down to whisper to me, “just like I had to do, because all boys wanted the girl with the curly, dark red hair.”

“Grandpa.” I laughed but became distracted by the thundering sound of hooves and shouting heading toward us. I turned to see the blue eyes and brilliant smile belonging to the young man from the livery. He pulled back on the reins, causing his horse to rear up. He tipped his hat at me before his horse hit the ground in a run, chasing three other riders.

“Kylie.”

I watched him and ignored my family. He looked magnificent on the back of a horse. His blue vest and white shirt gave his eyes even more color. I twisted my fingers in my curls, dreaming about running them through his shoulder length muddy brown hair tucked under his darker brown, wide-brimmed hat.

“Kylie!” My father said, raising his voice to get my attention. I snapped out of my thoughts to look at my father. “You stay away from that boy. I don’t want you any where near that family. Do you hear me?”

I nodded, “Yes, father.” Even though I stared down the road in the direction, the young man had disappeared. Glancing across the street, a young man stood in front of the saloon wearing an expensive, long, dark blue coat that hung down past his hips. A heavily embroidered beige vest adorned his narrow waist, while his snug-fitting black pants melted into his polished riding boots. I rolled my eyes as an arrogantly rich smile crossed his face.

“Grandpa, boys, let’s get Kylie’s luggage.” My father ordered. “Which of these is yours?”

I glanced down at my luggage, a stack of four medium-sized and two huge trunks, one with a curved top and smiled. “They’re all mine.” Confusion showed on my father’s and grandfather’s faces, but my brothers’ aggravation made me laugh.

“All?”

I nodded and walked around the coach to look at Carthage and see how many changes happened since last fall. I rubbed my hand under my hair, lifting it slightly off my neck. I looked down at the light blue dress that took me six months to make; at my fancy travel shoes that buttoned all the way up to my ankle and at my lace gloves on my hands, I had changed too.

“Did you bring me a horse to ride?” I asked.

“No. You are a young woman. You will ride in the carriage.” My father’s disapproval echoed in his voice. I couldn’t help but frown, thinking of how the other passengers really enjoyed looking at my rump as I threw up out the window. So much for the lady my father wanted.

“Your hand, Miss.” Grandpa held up a dirty palm. I reluctantly took it and climbed in the carriage followed by my mother, father, and then my grandfather.

“Good day, Abraham.” The man from the saloon stood beside the carriage.

“Asa. Good day to you.” My father shook his hand, smiling.

“What brings the Bellows to town on such a lovely day?” Asa asked with that same look of arrogance filling his face.

“We came to meet the stage.” My father glanced over his shoulder at me. The look in his eyes sent a shiver down my spine as he continued, “Asa, I don’t believe you have had the privilege of meeting my daughter, Kylie.”

Asa touched the rim of his hat, “Miss Bellows, I am honored to make your acquaintance.” Our eyes met; my stomach twisted from the possessive glint I saw.

“Hello, sir.” I kept my voice low, wanting to get away from him as soon as I could.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes. Yes. Asa, good day.” My father frowned then shook Asa’s hand again. “Drive on, Marcus.”

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The ride home sung with questions about what I learned at Miss Abigail Blackheart’s School for Ladies and the political climate in Boston. I cared nothing for neither and couldn’t give them much information. I avoided talk of the impending war as much as I could, but the continuous stories about the clashes between the Kansas and Missouri settlers brought it closer to home. To avoid any more questions I used the one answer that would make them all happy.

“I don’t get out of the school much, because I’m always in my room reading or studying.”

“Have they been able to teach you how to cook yet?” My mother looked very hopeful.

“No mama. I’m not allowed in the kitchen. It caught fire on three different occasions, when I was in there.” I smiled innocently. I set the fires every time they punished me, by assigning me to work in the kitchen.

“So for the everyone’s safety, I am no longer allowed anywhere near the kitchen.”

“What happened?” she asked.

“Stop the carriage!” I shouted.

“Keep going, Marcus,” my father countered my order.

I stared out at the large horse farm as we rolled past. He was there, still sitting astride his horse and tipping his hat at me again. I didn’t have time to react because my eyes focused on the most beautiful black stallion.

“Who are they?”

“Who are who?” My father responded angrily.



“The owners of this farm.” I smiled at my father then turned back to the stallion as it danced across the corral.

“The Monroes. I want you to stay away from them.” My father sighed while taping his hand on the carriage door. “They’re a rough, ignorant bunch, but they do know horses.”

“Ignorant?” I asked, looking back at him.

“Yes. Out of the four boys only the younger two have gone to school.” He paused, looking up at the farm, “I don’t think they even go now. I also don’t like the fact that they wear their guns in the open.” I looked back at the stallion, twisting my curls around my fingers again while he continued.

“Kylie, stay away from them.”

“I want that stallion,” I finally said. “Can you get him for me?” I tried to let my eyes do more pleading than my voice.

“No. You have a fine mare at the house,” he reminded me.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, but she’s getting old. She’s lost the spirit she used to have, especially since you started using her for a farm horse.” I glared at my father, matching my stare to his. “I’ll bet by now she is all worn out and can’t even be ridden.”

“Kylie, that’s no way to talk to your father,” my mother scolded.

“That’s what you get for sending her to that fancy school. She thinks she can speak her mind,” Grandpa observed, because he hated me going to Boston for school.

“Daddy,” my mother turned her scolding toward her father, “you just hold your tongue. Our little Kylie will marry some wealthy man, like young Mr. Worley, and make him a fine wife.” My mother’s triumphant dream was for her oldest daughter to be a fancy lady like the ones she’d read about in books.

\* \* \* \* \*

I sat quietly for the rest of the ride home, wishing my stomach would quit rolling. My father bragged about expanding our farm again. He proudly explained how he'd bought another fifty acres to the north of our home and fifteen to the west. We lived about an hour's ride west of Carthage.

I could hear shouting as we turned up the drive leading to the house. "They're here! They're here!" Karrie Ann, my youngest sister shouted, as she ran to meet the carriage while the rest of my family began to gather around the porch. I smiled, then jumped from the carriage while it rolled slowly up the drive. Laughing at my mother's screams, I ran to the waiting arms of my other three brothers and two sisters, making my way through the hugs that ended at the steps leading up to the porch, where Cassie, a freed slave who now worked for us and my grandmother, stood waiting her turn.

"Kylie," my grandmother's voice filled with love as she held her hands out to me. Her once curly red hair held more silver now with only hints of the deep red that once matched mine.

I growled when I tripped on the hem of my dress, forcing me to lift it up before climbing the stairs.

"Grandma." Our arms wrapped around each other, revealing that we were the same height now because I had grown almost two inches over the past year.

"I am so glad your home." She whispered.

## Chapter 2

The simple surroundings of my small Missouri bedroom felt more like a cage except that the four large pane windows overlooked the dirt courtyard that separated the house from the barn and our front yard. The windows kept me from feeling closed in as I sat on the edge of my bed with only two empty trunks because the small closet could not hold all the clothes in the four remaining trunks. I always forget not to bring a large wardrobe. My mother had three working dresses, one for church, and one for parties, but two of my six party dresses were still packed. Kneeling down in front of the large trunk with the flat hood, I unlocked it, revealing silk and satin dresses. All my favorite clothes lay hidden in the bottom. Looking down at the three-day dust covered blue satin I wore, covered with three days of dust, reminded me that I needed help to get out it. It took me two steps to reach the door and call down the stairs for assistance.

“Cassie.”

“Yes, Miss Kylie.” Cassie responded. She chose to continue working for us because she had no family of her own. My father had built her a small cabin and paid her a weekly wage in gratitude.

“Are you free to come help me get out of this dress?” I asked.

“Yes, Miss Kylie,” Cassie replied. I heard the rustling of her skirt as she climbed the stairs.

“Kylie, are you feeling alright?” My mother called as she walked out of the parlor.

“I’m fine. It was a long ride and I just want to go to bed.” I smiled at her before walking back in my room, only to find Cassie shaking her head.

“Miss Kylie. You should’ve had these trunks unloaded hours ago.” Her round chubby face frowned.

“I unloaded two and ran out of room for the rest.” I smiled, then winked. “If we tossed out the dresses, slips, and hoops, I would have more room for all my favorite clothes.”

“If your mama heard you talking about your dresses that way, she’d tan your hide.” Cassie started unbuttoning the back of my dress. “Good gracious me! How many buttons is ther’?”

“Only forty-five. Be glad it’s not the one with sixty.” I laughed.

“Sixty. Where’d ya put them all?” Cassie scowled. It took her a several minutes to get my dress unbuttoned.

“Miss Kylie, this is the softest fabric I have ever felt. How could you afford it?”

“I know one of the local dressmakers in Boston and did some work for her to get it.” I made a habit of not to talking about my life away from Missouri.

“Cassie, this dress needs cleaning.” It took both of us to pull the light blue dress over my head. “When you get ready to wash it, let me know, and I’ll show you how not to tear it.” I tugged on the cord holding the corset in place.

“Cassie, one more favor, can you untie me?”

“Yes, Miss Kylie.” She unlaced the corset before helping me out of it. She stared at my camisole. “Please don’t think me bad, Miss Kylie, but your father doesn’t have the money to afford clothes like this, and those trunks are full.” She paused, staring at my luggage until a frown crossed her face, and she pointed her finger at me.

“I believe you’re up to somethin’ up there in Boston, and I hopes that you’re minding your manners.” I giggled at her accusation, because we kept very few secrets from each other.

I smiled, opening the large flat top trunk, and took out a brown paper package. “I knew you’d notice my clothes. So to keep my secrets, accept this small token.” I handed Cassie her gift and sat on the flat surface while she slowly opened it. She frowned at me but excitement danced in her eyes. I fought to suppress my laughter, watching her struggle with the wrappings. She knew I never told everything about Boston.

“Oh my heavens!” Cassie held up the silk. “Miss Kylie, I can’t accept this. These are too beautiful for me.”

“Well, if you don’t want them, I guess, I can take them out and clean the horse stalls with them.”

“Shame on you, Miss Kylie.”

“You always said you wanted some red silk pantaloons. So, I added a silk camisole and petticoat.” I moved back to my trunk to take out my nightclothes. “So, is my secret safe?”

“I say again, shame on you, Miss Kylie! You don’t play fair,” Cassie stated. “But if your mother or anyone else asks me where I got them, I’ll tell them. I’ll not lie for you, but I won’t speak about it unless asked.”

I threw my clothes on the bed, then hugged Cassie. “That’s all I ask. Let me finish changing, then you’ll be able to wrap them in my clothes as you carry them downstairs.”

“Miss Kylie, it’s good to see you home, but I know you’ll put at least two dozen more gray hairs on this old head.” Cassie hugged me. I quickly changed out of my silk and into cotton underclothes then helped wrap her present in the folds of my soiled blue dress to carry them out to her cabin.

The cotton camisole made me wish for my large cotton-stuffed mattress wrapped in the soft bed coverings. I stared out the open windows at the sea of green grass dancing in the field

south of the barn until darkness blocked my view. I found my journal and sat on the windowsill and began to write about the young man from the livery, describing his blue eyes and smile until my memories settled on the majestic black stallion. I laughed that I could remember more about the horse than the young man. Frustrated, I closed the journal, returned it to the trunk and then checked through my supplies, only to discover I needed more blank writing tablets. Locking the trunk, I counted the steps from my bed to the door of my room and back again, repeating the process several times before yawning.

Focusing my mind, I began to remember every detail about the man, his morning glory blue eyes with the matching vest, the tight black pants tucked in his high leather boots. I knew his surname, but how to find out his Christian name? I began to dance around my small room, forming an idea.

“I can buy the stallion and take it with me in the fall,” whispering to myself. “There’s enough money packed to pay him to care for it.” Plans to meet the young man unfolded, giving me a subtle way to meet him. I’d need to get up early to pull it off and hopefully save some money on an unbroken horse.

I yawned again and sat down on my bed. “Ugh! Three months of lying on a board. Wonderful.”

I tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable spot on the hard bed, agonized by the flat straw mattress, covered by one filled with feathers and lying on a board. Buying a new bed would be easy, but my father would become suspicious. I had no intention of telling him, that I had spent the last eight years working every day and night breaking and selling horses, earning enough to invest in two farms and several other businesses. I resigned myself to the discomfort of the hard wood in order to keep my secrets.

### Chapter 3

The hardness of the bed tormented me and I reconsidered sending for my silk sheets and over-stuffed mattress. Frowning, I would have to accept a series of sleepless nights before returning to my palace. After punching the flat feather pillow under my head for the hundredth time and giving up on any possibility of sleep, I lit the small lamp on the small bedside table. My camisole hung loose, exposing my chest as I leaned on the windowsill and examined the sky for any sign of daylight. I opened my large trunk and began removing the dresses that hid my favorite clothes.

I lifted out my knee high black boots and placed them beside me. The brown paper that separated the boots from the silk protested as I removed it and revealed my elaborate wardrobe. A black silk shirt caressed my fingertips, unlike the thick denim pants dyed black to match most of my clothes. The royal blue of my vest with black etching around the seams, gleamed in the lamplight. I moved to another trunk to retrieve matching camisole, pantaloons, and a corset that tied in the front.

The paper rattled when I returned it and the dresses to the trunk. I checked my money pouch; it held enough money to purchase the stallion. I quickly changed from the cotton to the silk underclothes, including my favorite corset. Cassie used to say, “A corset will help keep the girls in place,” and it made riding more comfortable. I rubbed the soft shirt across my cheek, dreaming of the day when boy would touch me the same way. I laughed as the material shimmied down my body. I rolled my tight pants up my legs, then tucked in my shirt before sliding the vest over my shoulders, and I finished with my stockings and boots.

I quickly brushed through my curls and tied a ribbon in my hair before making my escape out the window. I listened to crickets as my boots crushed the thorns and vines on the rose-covered trestle attached to the porch and laughed because my mother's rosebushes never grew higher than the porch handrail.

My steps quieted by the soft dirt near the barn. Pulling the door open, the old hinges cried like a baby screeching. Once inside, I grabbed the lantern by the door, lighting it as a horse whinnied. The stallion stood in my stall.

"Hey, gorgeous." Unable to hide my excitement, I rubbed my hand over his hip then slipped in beside him. He stood taller than my old mare, which meant I'd have to have help getting on him and when brushing him.

"Have they broken you yet?" I whispered, nuzzling his nose before stretching the bridle over his head and singing softly to him. Then I moved him out of the stall. My hands rubbed in rhythm to the melodies while he relaxed at my touch. Gently sliding my hand down his legs, he allowed me to check his hooves.

"New shoes. He took good care of you. How about we get you saddled and go for a run," moving a barrel up next to him. I dropped my saddle beside the barrel then climbed up with my blanket and gently rubbed his back before tossing the coarse wool across his back making him stamp his hoof in protest.

"Easy now," I whispered, "you're all right. I'm going to get my saddle." Never letting my hand leave his side, I lifted the saddle up, then gently placed it over the blanket. He didn't move this time, so I stepped off the barrel and secured all the straps.

I pushed the doors to the barn all the way open, cringing at the sound of the hinges, which sounded like a crying baby, and blew out the lantern. If he decided to buck, we needed a clear



path to run. Continuing to sing, I kissed his nose before climbing back on the barrel and on to him. He fidgeted under my weight, then I kicked him into a run, not leaving him time to buck.

I pushed him down the drive, feeling of his power between my legs. Every muscle flexed as we turned onto the main road, with only the moon to light our path. The cool air felt good as it blew through my hair when the ribbon came loose. We ran for several miles and past the huge farm. Once the sun rose, we could go cross-country.

Freedom reigned with the rhythm of the hooves, sending chills down my spine. The stallion's graceful movements let me know he felt the same way. I loosened my grip and let him run. He kept the constant motion in his steps and gave no sign of wanting to stop.

A distant thump of hooves sounded behind us. I pulled on the reins, breaking his stride and making it easier to hear the fast approaching rider. I guided us into the shadows of some trees.

"Shh," I whispered, rubbing my hand along the stallion's neck. The rider slowed his progress keeping to a gentle gallop the closer he got. A dark silhouette emerged in to view, with no way to see the rider's face, forcing me to wait patiently for him to cross our path. I kicked the stallion; he darted then reared in front of the other horse. With a fast jerk of the reins, the rider rammed his horse's hindquarters into my stallion.

It caught me off guard and made me lose my balance. I fell to the hard ground, landing on my back, but managed to roll away from the trampling hooves. I continued lying on my back trying to breathe. After a few moments, I sat up. Everything spun in circles, forcing me to close my eyes and focus on breathing. I struggled to stand, fighting the dizziness.

"Hey now. Hold still," the rider said, gently pushing me back to the ground. I smiled when I saw it was him.

“Lie still, you’re not breathing right yet.”

“It’ll pass,” I whispered, as I tried to sit up again.

He held my upper arm, giving me some help. “You’re the girl from yesterday.”

“Yes. Why?”

“I haven’t seen anyone with your color hair in Carthage, except that old crone down the way.” He smiled as I took a slow gentle breath.

I glared at him, forcing myself up into a straighter sitting position. “That old crone is my grandmother.” I allowed my voice to show a little anger.

He chuckled softly. “So you’re the spitfire from up north. The one they bought the stallion for.”

“I guess I am.”

“What are you doing out at this time of the morning?” He sat down on the ground in front of me.

“Riding. What were you doing following me?”

He avoided looking at me. “Let’s move off the road. There’s a clearing close by. You can rest there.” He offered me his hand when he got to his feet. I took it, still feeling wobbly. He surprised me with his tender touch.

I didn’t get fully to my feet before I started to fall. I could see the ground getting closer, but he grabbed me and held me around the waist.

“Easy darlin’. Move slowly. You must have hit your head.” He led me to where he tied the horses. He looked from me to the stallion then back at me.

“How in the world did you get on him?” I just smiled. “Can you ride?” He still held me tight as I nodded. I reached for my saddle but he led me to his horse.

“You’re in no shape to ride alone.”

“Who says?” I whispered.

“I say.” He released me so I could lean up against his horse.

“And who do you think you are?” I didn’t want him to think I was incapable of taking care of myself.

“Give me your foot.” He lowered his hand for me to step in. “I’m Parker. Parker Monroe.”

“Parker,” I rolled his name off my tongue, then put my foot in his hand. He lifted me onto his horse before climbing up behind me. He wrapped the reins of the stallion, lightly brushing his hand close to my body.

“Well, what do they call you spitfire?” He asked as he sniffed the back of my hair.

“Kylie.”

“Kylie what?”

I rolled my eyes, “Kylie Bellows.”

“Nice to meet you, Kylie Bellows.” He smelled my hair again. “Why haven’t I seen you around here before?”

“I’ve been shipped off every fall to a school in Boston since I was seven.”

“You must really like the school.” I noticed the soft and gentle tone of his voice.

“No. I hate the school.” I leaned back against his chest.

“You probably have a lot of suitors up north.” He leaned in a little closer to me.

“Can’t say I have. Most of them are stiffer necked than Raymond Wright’s boys. Do you know them?” I closed my eyes, hoping to stop the spinning in head. Glad that I hadn’t seen

any of the Wright boys at my home when I arrived. Mr. Wright was my father's friend, and I had spent a lot of time with the boys each summer.

"I know of them. Never met 'em." He tugged on the stallion's reins as it fidgeted against the lead.

"You're lucky not to be thrown in with that pack of coyotes." I smiled a little when he laughed at my description.

He tightened his grip, guiding his horse to a small clearing. He pointed the horses toward a cluster of trees that over looked a pond. The sun's rays reflected off the water, creating a sense of peace.

"Stay put," he told me before climbing down and tying the horses to a fallen tree. The stallion drank fresh water as he unsaddled it. I climbed down but held tightly to the saddle as a wave of dizziness swept over me. I didn't hear him but he held me, before walking me over to where my blanket and saddle laid nestled under several trees. He lowered me onto it with my head resting on my saddle, then sat down next to me.

"If you don't get any better, I'll be forced to take you home or to the doc's in town."

"I'll be fine in a minute." I said with my eyes shut.

"It's been at least a half hour since you hit your head." I could hear him chuckling.

"Shit!"

He burst out laughing. "I thought schools back east were to teach you to be a lady. Since when do ladies talk like that?"

I just looked at him. "If I have my way, I won't be going back to that school."

"Why?" He paused. "You sure looked pretty in that blue dress."

"Ugh." I moaned, placing my arm over my eyes.

“What?” He gently lifted my arm away; he couldn’t hide the concern in his blue eyes.

“Boys are all alike. You think a girl belongs in a dress, cooking, cleaning, and sewing. She can’t have a mind or even be capable of using one.”

“Well if you’re not cleaning or havin’ babies, what are you good for?” He sounded serious, but I didn’t know him well enough to know for sure.

I still felt dizzy but wanted Parker Monroe to understand that I didn’t belong in a kitchen. Slipping my hand down to the top of my boot, I grabbed the handle of my four-inch Bowie boot knife, swinging it so it rested against my arm with the razor sharp blade pressing into his throat, forcing him to lean against his saddle.

“I could slit your throat.”

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“Mama?” I stared up at her as she wiped a cool cloth over my face.

“Shh. You be quiet.” My mother dipped the rag into the water basin. “That young man, Parker Monroe, brought you home then asked if he could fetch the doctor. Your father allowed it. They haven’t got back yet.” She paused and released a frustrated breath. “We need to talk about your wardrobe when you’re better.”

Closing my eyes for a few minutes, I woke to someone talking in the hallway.

“She’s awake.” Karrie Anne shouted from a chair sitting next to my bed.

“Well, Kylie, how do you feel?” Dr. Reynolds came into the room.

“Can I get up?” I struggled against the heavy blanket my mother had piled on me.

“No. You need to rest. Parker said that you hit your head when you fell off your horse.”

Dr Reynolds helped me adjust the pillows to a sitting position. “You seem to have put a light in that boy’s eye.”

I ignored him until he smiled and winked. “When can I get up?”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

“Can I see Parker? Is he still here?”

“I’ll look into it.” Dr. Reynolds continued to smile. “You need to rest today and all day tomorrow so you can be up for your party.”

“Thanks, doc.”

“Your welcome.” He nodded at me, then walked out the door.

I laid there not knowing whether they would grant my request. I listened but heard nothing except for some low, rumbling voices. After a few moments, boots scraped on the hardwood floor, echoing in the hallway, along with the rustling of a skirt. I turned to see my mother and Parker standing in my doorway.

She smiled at me before she turned away, “Don’t talk to long. She needs her rest.”

“Yes ma’am.” Parker moved into my room, nodding toward my mother before coming closer to the bed. Holding his hat in his hands, he sat on the edge of the bed.

“You look a might better.”

“What happened?” I whispered.

“You fainted.” He smiled, gently brushing his bangs out of his face. “I brought you back.”

“Mama said you went to get the doctor.” I twisted my hair around my finger.

He nodded then smiled. “It was the least I could do.”

I heard more boots in the hallway. “Well, Mr. Monroe. I do thank you for bringing me back home.” My father grumbled from the door.

Parker took my free hand from where it lay on the bed; lifted it to his lips and gently kissed it. “You rest now. You’ve a party in two days.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Monroe.” He just nodded as he walked out.

My sisters and Cassie came in and began fretting over me. I closed my eyes trying to ignore the pain of my sisters arguing while hoping for sleep.

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“Miss Kylie, where’s does ya think you’s going?” Cassie scowled at me standing in my doorway.

“I’m going to the outhouse.” I tightened a belt to my robe around me.

“No’s ya ain’t. The pot’s over there in the corner.” She pointed to a rusted chamber pot sitting in the corner.

“If you think for one minute, I’m going to use that,” I scowled, “you don’t know me as well as you think.” I put my hands on my hips, meeting her glare with my own.

“Kylie, Cassie, what’s all the fuss?” Mama asked, coming to the bottom of the kitchen stairs.

“Miz. Bellows, Miss Kylie’s refusing to use the pot. She’s insisting on going to the outhouse.” Cassie frowned.

“Kylie, Cassie’s right. You need to stay in bed,” Mama said.

“Fine.” I turned around, slammed my door, and headed for the window.

“Miss Kylie, don’t you go out that window.” Cassie stormed into the room.

“I’m sorry Cassie, but it seems that I have to go to the outhouse because the pot has disappeared.” I smiled, knowing that the rusted bucket was lying on the ground near the rose bushes.

“Miss Kylie, you’s not too big for me to put over my knee.” She grabbed my arm and escorted me down the stairs toward my preferred destination. “Don’t you be piddlin’ in there. You need to get back in that bed. O’ Lord please bless me with patience because I knows I’ve gained two more gray hairs.”

I giggled hearing her prayer, but I also felt a little guilty. After returning to my room, I retrieved my journal and began to write until late in the evening while my mother slept in a rocking chair next to my bed. I couldn’t persuade her to leave my side for any reason.

The next morning I woke before her and climbed out of my bed without bothering her. I barely reached the top of the stairs when she appeared at my side. Holding onto the rail, we walked down them together, and then she escorted me to the outhouse. I didn’t need her help but it made her feel better.

The sun peeked out above the trees when I spotted Parker riding in the distance. He didn’t come close but tipped his hat. Moaning, I wanted to escape, to meet up with him, but my father had banned me from riding my stallion until next week. I frowned, because all I had to look forward to was my party.

## Chapter 4

The house bustled with everyone putting up the decorations. I moped because shortly every eligible strutting rooster would be cocking his feathers to impress me and my father. Why hadn’t I stayed in Boston?

“Kylie, quit moping. Go get dressed. The guests will be arriving soon.” My mother ushered me up the stairs. “Wear that white and blue dress. No, maybe the pink one.”



I frowned. The pink one made me itch; the white one with the blue trim resembled a wedding dress. Oh, and the green one made me look fat. Finding something wrong with every dress, I finally choose the white one with blue trim but I slipped into my pants and boots then covered them with the dress.

I hated parties that served me as the main course. Each young man, dressed in his finest clothes, strutted like a gander in front of the prize goose. I nodded, feigned interest, and fought the urge to run. The music played and encouraged the guests to dance, talk, and enjoy the festivities, but I stayed on the porch avoid it all, especially when Asa and Peter presented themselves to my father.

“Asa, Peter, welcome. Please come greet Kylie.” He led them toward me while I purposely faced in the opposite direction. “Kylie, you remember Asa, and this is his little brother Peter.” I nodded and scowled.

“Miss Bellows, you look exquisite today,” Asa said. I just rolled my eyes.

“Hello,” Peter said.

“Hello, gentleman,” I finally said.

“Kylie, why don't you dance with one of these boys?” My father pushed me into Asa, forcing him to turn and offer me his arm.

“Would you do me the honor of this dance?”

“Just one,” I answered, walking past him, and then cringed at the closeness of our bodies as the music started to play. Taking my hand from where it rested on his bicep, I pushed against his chest. “If you want to continue to call yourself a man, you will stay away from me.”

“That is a very unladylike thing to say.” Asa smirked and cocked his eyebrow.

“I don't know you, but I do know I have no interest in you,” I smiled.

“But I do in you.” Asa tightened his grip on my hand.

“You smell of alcohol and you had lip rouge on your shirt the other day. This is my only warning, stay away from me.” I curtsied, then left Asa alone with the other dancers. I guzzled a cup of punch and accepted a dance from another gander.

A smile crossed my face when Parker rode up. I was elated that my parents invited him but he greeted me, then joined the rest of the guests. My feet were hurting from dancing with almost every boy until I finally excused myself to go to the outhouse for a short reprieve from the insanity of the auction block.

I closed my eyes, thinking of Parker smiling at me each time our eyes met. My heart pounded in my chest as I dreamed of being alone with him, rather than in here. Shrugging from my hiding spot, I stepped out to find Parker under the shade of a nearby tree.

“I prefer the blue dress. It goes better with your eyes.” He smiled. “If you had worn it, every fella here would have been clay in your hands.”

“Including you?” I asked walking toward him.

“Including me.”

“Thanks for hiding my secrets.”

“It’s my pleasure.” He offered me his arm and guided us up the west-side steps of the porch.

“I wish I could get out of here.” My hand squeezed his tight muscle.

“Can’t you ride yet?” He asked leaning against the porch rail.

“My father has forbidden me to ride until next week.” My pouting caused Parker’s lip to curl slightly, but he laughed when I frowned at him.

“You want to go for a ride.” He smiled then covered his mouth to keep from howling as I lifted my dress high enough for him to see my boots.

“Kylie. There you are?” One of the eligible ganders said, walking up to me. “Parker.”

“Braydon,” Parker answered.

“Kylie, I was wondering if I could have the next dance,” Braydon asked.

“Sorry Braydon, but Kylie just agreed to let me have the next dance after she rests up a little.” Parker smiled at me, hoping I didn’t give him away, while placing his hand around my upper arm.

“Is that so, Kylie?” Braydon kept his eyes firmly on Parker as he moved over to stand next to me.

“Yes. He did.” I smiled up at Parker, “and I did agree.”

“Well, then, the dance after his?” Braydon asked.

“That would be fine.” I smiled when Braydon nodded, while Parker’s grip tightened on my arm just above my elbow. After accepting my answer, Braydon left to join the other guests.

“Are you jealous?” I giggled at Parker because he was caught.

“Let’s dance.”

We joined the other dancers before Parker pulled me close enough to smell my hair. “You know how you can get out of this party?” he whispered. Our eyes met before he continued. “Tonight, meet me near the front of the barn and I’ll take you riding.” I giggled with excitement. “Don’t smile or they will know you’re faking.” He spun me a couple of times until my eyes rolled and my body to collapse into his awaiting grasp. “I’m so glad you’re light,” he whispered, picking me up while I fought not to laugh.

“Kylie!” I heard my mother scream.

“What happened?” my father asked moving through the guests.

“She fainted,” Parker told them and hid my face.

“Carry her up to her room, Parker. Do you remember where it is?” my mother continued.

“Yes, ma’am,” Parker whispered, then moved through the house. I could hear my mother ordering everyone around inside as he laid me on my bed then lightly kissed my lips.

“Good luck. Tonight.” He smiled and stepped away before my mother took her place at my side.

“Thank you, Mr. Monroe. Seems I’m once again in your debt.” My mother nodded.

“I best be going. Oh. I almost forgot.” Parker reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box wrapped in blue paper. He handed it to me over my mother’s shoulder.

“I hope you like it.”

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Ladies.” He nodded then left.

“Well, are you going to open it?” my mother asked while dabbing a cool cloth on my face.

I unwrapped the small box and slowly opened it, discovering a dark blue ribbon. I held it up, revealing a gold charm, oval in shape, with a rose lying across a heart embossed on it.

“Oh that is so beautiful.” My mother admired it. “I wonder where he got the money to get it.”

I shrugged and stared at the charm before turning it over, revealing an inscription, “Ky always Parker.” I tied the ribbon around my neck then lay back on my bed, having escaped of the rest of the party.

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I ignored my grogginess after waking and embraced my excitement about meeting Parker later. My heart pounded at the thought of him and the tenderness I saw in his eyes. His smile warmed me, convincing me that he cared for me.

“Dinner,” came a shout from the bottom of the stairs. I joined the family and picked at the salt pork and cabbage stew. I didn’t allow it to be served at my home in Boston.

After dinner, I opened all my gifts and wrote the customary thank-you cards.

“These are some very nice gifts,” my mother stated, “but none of them as nice as the charm young Mr. Monroe gave you.”

“What gift?” my father asked. “I didn’t think he brought a gift.”

“Did you remember to write him out a thank you note for his gift?” my mother asked.

“Yes. His was the first I wrote.” I smiled and touched the charm hanging on my neck.

“Kylie.” My father interrupted my thoughts of Parker. “What did Mr. Monroe give you?”

“This little charm.” I stood, picking up as many of the useless trinkets my arms could carry. “If you will excuse me, I am going to go back to bed, and before you ask, I am just a little tired.”

“What about the rest of your presents?” my mother asked.

“Cassie, can you help me?” I asked as she walked past the parlor.

“Yes, Miss Kylie.” She came and began picking up the rest. She followed me up stairs not saying a word until we entered my room and closed the door behind us.

“Miss Kylie. I knows you’s up to somethin’. You and that boy. I saw you dancing. That boy would’ve shot every boy you danced with, ifin he had a gun.”

“I hadn’t noticed that Parker didn’t carry his gun at the party.” I helped Cassie sit the gifts around the room.

“You and that boy are up to no good. Ain’t ya? Don’t ya lie to me now.” Cassie pointed her finger at me. “You best mind yur manners. Do ya hear me?”

“Cassie, Parker and I are not up to anything.” I didn’t look at her, because she knew me better than my mother.

“Miss Kylie. You best say yur prayers tonight because you’s lying at me.” She scowled. “That boy spent lots of money on that charm. So, I knows he’s up to something. That boy’s got it in for you. I seen his face when that Conrad boy was talkin’ with ya.”

“Did you know, you’re chopping your words?” I winked at her.

“Ugh! Child you’ll be the death of me. None of the others get to me the way you do.” She put her hands on her round hips before pointing her finger again. “You best mind your manners!” she told me before taking a deep breath. “You already added more gray hairs and ya ain’t been home a week.” She continued mumbling in her most frustrated tone. I knew this anger; she reserved it only for me.

“Cassie. Sit down. Please.” I scooted to the top of my bed so she could sit at the foot. “Why do I mean so much to you?”

“Miss Kylie, I’ve raised you since the day you was born. I nursed you because your mama was too weak. My baby died the day you were born.”

“You had a baby?” She had never told me that.

“I worked in the fields then. I didn’t belong to your father. I was in the field when he took sick. The overseer forced me to carry him anyway.” She paused. “Your parents were on their way home when their wagon wheel came off. I ran to help them. My baby had died in my

arms earlier that morning. It was late afternoon when the wagon crashed.” Cassie sniffled, then wiped away a tear.

“Are you all right?” I took her hand in mine when she nodded.

“We buried my baby while your mama gave birth to you. Your mama was too weak to nurse you, and I was the only one on both farms who just had a baby. So, your daddy bought me to be your wet nurse. It took your mama a while to get better and by then her milk dried up.” She smiled and squeezed my hand. “You became my baby. That’s not changed. You never bonded with your mother like you should’ve.”

“That’s why you fuss at me all the time. Why haven’t you told me this before now?”

“Miss Kylie. I’s loved you since they laid you in my arms.” She patted my hand. “The only ones who knew were me, your mama, and your papa. When they never spoke of it, I didn’t either besides the good Lord knew I couldn’t handle two of ya. So he took the weaker one home.” She rubbed her hand over my cheek. “You’s been a handful all your life.”

“Is that why mama sent me up to Boston?”

“I’m sure it had somethin’ to do with it.” Cassie smiled. “She does love you but its been hard for her to get close.” She caressed my cheek, “You gave me a good life, and I can’t repay you. So you remember to mind your manners.”

“Oh Cassie, I always mind my manners.” I smiled at her reassuringly.

“Miss Kylie. I knows you better than that, but you need to get dressed for bed and get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.” Cassie tried to look stern, but her eyes twinkled with love.

I laid down to take a short nap before meeting Parker, but my excitement to go riding kept me from resting. While I waited for the house to grow quiet, I listened to Cassie and my

mother yell at my brothers and sisters for over an hour to go to bed. Another hour passed and the house fell silent but I continued to lie in bed a little longer. A loud snort echoed down the hall, signaling time for me to leave. I changed into a white silk shirt with black pants tucked into my knee-high boots, which made me feel more like myself. Peeking out the window, rain splattered my face.

“Great! This is all I need.” Opening one of my trunks, I pulled out a black leather jacket and then crawled slowly onto the slick roof. The smooth sole of my boot slipped, causing me to lose my balance and slide to the edge above the porch. I jumped when the trestle rattled in the wind. My feet hit the ground with a thump, and I curled up next to the porch to hide in case someone looked outside.

Parker waited behind some trees; when the lightning flashed, he motioned for me to hurry. We embraced, then he began to kiss me. His tongue pushed against my lips, encouraging me to welcome him. He held the back of my neck with one hand while his other hand slid along my hip. His lips caressed mine gently and with the softest touch. Parker didn't rush as the tip of my tongue circled his before he finally pulled back.

“Let's go.” He led me through the trees to where his horse waited.

“One horse?” I looked up at him.

He laughed, “I said, I would take you riding. I didn't say how.” He lifted me up onto his horse before he climbed up behind me. I realized that I knew nothing of Parker Monroe except that his family had gained their wealth through hard work and that he liked me. I squirmed when his hand slid between my legs, forcing me to lean back so he could kiss me again.

“Are you ready?” He whispered and squeezed.

“Ready for what?”



“For your real birthday present.” His arms wrapped around me as our tongues danced. He pulled back then kicked his horse into a trot. We rode through the trees until we came upon a small cabin. Parker climbed down before helping me.

“Wait here.” He led the horse into a small corral and unsaddled it. His face lit up as he smiled, then he wrapped one arm behind my back before using the other to lift me behind my knees.

“Welcome to my getaway.”

“It’s small.” I stared at the one-room cabin with a small fire in the fireplace and two small windows on each side of the room. An iron bedstead filled most of the room, but a table, two chairs and shelves lined another wall. He lowered my feet to the floor before he kissed me again, then walked to the fireplace to stoke the dancing blaze then opened the windows.

“I built the cabin with my brother’s help. We use it during the winter to hunt wild game.” He took off his gun belt, vest, and shirt. “Get out of those wet clothes before you catch your death.” He paused. “Better yet.” He moved slowly toward me then helped pull off my jacket and toss it on the table. His hands moved slowly to my waist and tugged on my shirt until it came free of my pants; he kissed me again before lifting it over my head.

His finger touched the charm where it hung on my bare neck. “It’s more beautiful on you than when I bought it.” He moved his hand down my chest and gently pulled the ribbon of my corset until it fell to the floor, followed by my camisole. I could feel my heart racing and I didn’t understand how Parker was able to breach the walls that protected my heart. What made him so different?

“Ky,” he whispered, holding me close. “Do you want this? You’re trembling.”

I brushed my hand through his hair, and stared into his soft, worried eyes, and wrapped my hand around his neck, pulling him down into a kiss.

“Yes.”

He moved back, then sat down in one of the chairs, pulling his boots off. I watched as the buttons popped, loosening his pants, until he held his hand out to me. My decision made, I wanted Parker.

He kissed me again. “Take them down.” He guided my trembling hands to the waistband, folding it in my grip, and kneeling, slowly lowering his pants and underwear. I gasped when his nakedness emerged, because I had never seen a man’s body.

“Ky.” He offered me his hand, waiting patiently for mine. Placing my fingers against his, he wrapped them around his penis and gently gripped it, sliding our fingers up and down the long shaft with my hand brushing against the hair. Letting him tilt my head with his free hand, I looked at him.

“Suck on it softly; keep your teeth away from it.” I started to say something but he leaned down to me. “Just like a kiss.” He whispered, then his tongue explored my mouth before releasing me. Licking my lips before filling my mouth with the tip, I caressed and gently stroked up and down, mirroring the actions of our hands. The taste of salt and his smell enveloped my senses as his hand tightened over mine, causing him to moan and pull away.

After helping me stand, he kissed me then lifted me off the ground as I wrapped my legs around him. Moving us to the bed, he laid me down without stopping the kiss, his hands brushing through my hair as I twisted my fingers in his long locks. He sat up long enough to pull my boots off then nestling down to my exposed breasts, kissing, sucking and gently tugging while unbuttoning my pants.

Groaning he knelt above me, frustrated because my pants refused to slide down my legs, forcing him peel them away. He looked at my pantaloons, untying the ribbons at my knees before pulling free the one at my waist. His lips found mine again with his finger skimming along my skin to the silk still covering my waist. Slowly, his hand began to explore my still-hidden body, never stopping the movements of his lips. He curled his fingers into the hair, moving down creating an unfamiliar sensation as the silk melted away, exposing my body.

He whispered, "You are so beautiful," then leaned in for a gentle kiss and shifting his body on top of mine. "Ky. I love you." I wrapped my arms around his back as we kissed. "Are you ready?"

"Yes." I paused. "I love you."

He pulled back just a little wanting to tell me something. His fingers softly caressed my cheek. "Have you ever been with a man?"

"What?" I looked away embarrassed by the question. "No. Why?"

"It may hurt at first." His eyes held so much worry.

"Hurt?" I stared at him, having second thoughts.

"Yes," he whispered. "I'll be as gentle as possible." He placed his lips tenderly against mine. "Do you still want this?"

"Yes."

"You're trembling again." Kissing me, his hand found mine; I squeezed it before he moved down my body. He took my womanhood into his mouth. I could feel his tongue entering me. He gently squeezed my hand as my body reacted to his touch until he pulled. He came up and kissed me again with an unfamiliar taste on his lips.

“Bend your knees. If it gets painful, wrap your legs around my back. Keep them up as high and as wide as you can.” He lowered his hips between my thighs, brushing the tip against the sensitive flesh. I squirmed. “Grab the bedrails. Don’t let go,” he whispered, kissing my cheek. “If it hurts, scream.”

“Why?” My voice trembled.

“You may want to, and it will also help you not to tighten up, which will only make it hurt more.” His voice matched the worry in his eyes just before the tip entered causing me scream. He pulled back, repositioning my legs and pushing himself deeper, causing me to scream again. My grip tightened on the bars as his hips moved slowly, while my tears rolled down my cheeks.

He paused once he got all the way in. He placed his hands on top of mine, bracing me for his quicker rhythm. The pain eased, turning my screams into moans echoed by his own. He kept the pace until my body trembled uncontrollably. I screamed again, when a deep throbbing pulsed within me.

“Ahh.” He sighed, breathing heavily. “I do love you.”

“You’re not going to leave me tomorrow?”

“Oh hell, no.” He slid out and laid down at my side, wrapping me in his arms before pulling the blanket over us. I felt safe and loved lying there in his warm embrace.

“You need to go home soon.” He spoke so softly, several hours later.

“I know.”

He leaned in, then moved on top of me again, touching me with his fingers. “Oh, still wet,” whispering as the tips slid inside me causing me to shake. Smiling, he brought his fingers out, then slipped himself inside again.

“Ugh,” I moaned.

“It will get easier,” he whispered, smelling my hair.

“You promise.” I wrapped my legs around him.

“I promise.” It didn’t take him long to find his rhythm after spreading his legs wider, forcing mine farther apart. He took my hands in his and kissed my forehead before he pounded our flesh together. The sensation grew again, and we moaned when he began to pulsate. This time he didn’t cuddle with me.

“You need to get up. We need to get you home.” He climbed off the bed, reaching out to help me stand. “We made a mess.”

I looked down at the blood and other fluids covering the sheets, then at Parker. “It’s not my time. Why is there blood?”

He smiled, walking over to a pot sitting by the fireplace. Dipping a rag into the water, “Come here.” I expected him to hand me the rag but he washed my legs. “Spread ‘em.” I couldn’t watch him wash my body, and I cringed at his gentle touch. “You are bleeding something fierce.”

“Shit. I don’t have anything.” I tried to turn away from him.

“Don’t worry. There’s some more pieces of cloth on the shelf. You should be able to find something that will work.” He kissed me tenderly. “Go get dressed.”

I nodded but turned to watch him wash himself off then put his clothes back on. Using some of the cloth, I redressed myself, glad my mother didn’t know when I bled, which it would make it easier to hide. I was half-dressed when he walked back to me.

He helped me get back into my corset. “How can you stand to wear this?”

“It’s either wear it or the girls will hang down to my knees when I’m fifty.” I smiled, tightening the ribbon.

“Finish getting dressed. I’ll get the horse.” He pulled his boots on then slid his shirt over his head before stepping out the door. I sat in one of the chairs to pull my own boots on while the cloth created an unusual sensation against my flesh. I slipped my shirt on, then grabbed my jacket and went to join Parker.

He helped me climb up into the saddle, but when I sat down like normal, I felt an unexpected sensation. “Ugh.” I leaned forward, taking the weight off my body.

“Ky?” He climbed up behind me. “Are you all right?”

“Just sore.” I leaned gently against his chest.

He wrapped his arms around me. “It shouldn’t last long. I hope.” He whispered the last.

“That is not comforting.”

“Well I hate to make it worse, but it is later than what we thought.” The first hints of daylights approached, dancing on the edge of the horizon. “We haven’t got much time. Hold on.” He kicked his horse into a run, causing me to moan softly, not wanting to distract him as he guided us through the trees. He tied his horse in the same spot as the previous night then his hand wrapped around mine and walked me toward the house. “Be careful climbing back up.”

“I will.” I stared at the smirk he had on his face.

“Would your father let me court you?” His thumb caressed my cheek.

“I don’t know, but you could try.” I doubted my father would even consider it.

He pulled me close. “I love you.”

“How can you love me after only two days?”

“I don’t know, but I do. I don’t want to be away from you for any reason.” We held each other for a moment longer. “Go, before we get caught.” I kissed him again, then ran quietly to the house, climbing up the trestle and through the window seconds before my father stepped out onto the porch below.

## Chapter 5

“Kylie, you need to get up,” Mama called from the doorway to my bedroom.

“Ugh.”

“Are you feeling well?” She walked in and put her hand against my forehead. “You’re not running a fever.”

“I’m not sleeping well. This bed is a lot harder than mine in Boston.” The rays of sunlight crept through the two south windows of my bedroom, forcing me to cover my head to obtain more sleep.

“Let me sleep a little more. I’m still not used to rising early,” hoping my mother would have pity on me.

“You sleep for a little longer. You did have a big day yesterday, and you had that spell,” she said, tugging on the covers down to expose my forehead, placing a soft kiss and leaving me.

I closed my eyes and ignored the noise of the hired hands herding the cows into the field north of the barn. I dreamed of last night’s events until my body pulsated and woke me. I sat up, panting while my body twitched and shook.

“What was that?” I whispered, pulling back the covers before rising and slipping into a dark blue silk camisole and matching pantaloons before picking up my corset, shirt and black

denim pants. Dressing quickly, I raced downstairs, darting through the kitchen, grabbing a couple of leftover biscuits on my way outside.

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Parker rode up the drive at half-past two in a white shirt with an embroidered collar and a black string tie. He also wore a blue vest with cream-colored pants tucked into his brown leather boots but no guns.

“Mr. Monroe. What brings you to our home?” My father stood on the porch near the hitching post.

Parker removed his hat, brushing his hair out of his face. “Mr. Bellows, I came to discuss your daughter.”

“Well, come in.” My father growled, leading my suitor into the parlor.

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I glanced at Parker after sneaking up to the window, just outside the parlor. His cool confidence seemed to have been severely weakened by my father’s scowl. I laughed, watching him fidget under my father’s intense glare.

“Mr. Monroe, what are your intentions toward my daughter?” my father asked.

“I would like to court Kylie, Mr. Bellows.” Parker watched his words very carefully. “I enjoy her company.”

“You have a questionable reputation. Why should I allow you near Kylie?” My father paused. “Your reputation maybe what’s keeping the other suitors from calling.”

“My reputation is fueled by the town’s gossips. I can’t change what people think of me, but I will not allow them to harm Kylie in anyway.” Parker shifted in his seat. “Kylie’s very strong and determined. No one can force to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”



“What do you mean by that?” My father’s voice grew stern.

“Kylie is smart, as I am sure you are quite aware. She is smarter than most of the boys around here, and they want a woman they can control, but Kylie won’t be controlled.” Parker’s voice held a matter of fact tone as his eyes met mine.

“You keep calling her a woman. She’s only sixteen.” My father folded his arms across his chest.

Giggling, I watched Parker’s eyes as he tried not to let my father in on our secret. “Mr. Bellows,” he began. “My mother was fourteen when she married my father. There have been six weddings this year so far in Carthage. The girls, if you prefer, ranged from fourteen to nineteen. Does a girl only become a woman when she marries?” Parker paused for a second, “I don’t see Kylie as a girl. I see an intelligent, friendly, and very beautiful lady.”

I giggled, then heard the creak of my father’s chair. Ducking back beside the window, I scooted along the porch out of sight. To avoid being caught eavesdropping, I hid behind a tree near the porch. Parker’s words kept echoing in my head while I waited. Another half hour passed before my father led Parker out of the house.

“Kylie,” my father called.

I peaked out from my hiding spot. “Yes.”

He motioned me to join him and Parker. “I am going to grant you and Parker one hour a day together, with conditions.” My father waited for me to protest. “First, you are only allowed to be on the porch or here in the front yard.” He paused. “Second, I want to see a foot between you at all times. Any questions?”

“No sir,” Parker said.

“Kylie?” My father stared at me.

“Yes, fine,” I managed to say.

“Your hour starts now.” With that, my father left us.

We walked out to the gazebo that my mother had insisted my father build for her. Parker smiled at me. “You almost got caught. I think you need more practice.”

“I don’t need more practice.” I frowned at him. “You looked like a scared rabbit.”

“Do you think you can get out tonight?” he whispered where no one else could hear.

“Wait for a signal that will tell you if I’m able.” I fought the urge to move some hair from his face.

“What will our signal be?” He blew me a kiss.

“I’ll tie my curtains across my windows if I can’t get away.” I fidgeted because I wanted to sit next to him and feel his arms around me.

“Ky. You need to stay still or you will give us away.” He frowned, making me look at my feet as my calves bounced against the hard wood of the bench. He laughed when I couldn’t stay still.

“Look at me.” He whispered with a tender smile. “You are more beautiful now than the day you arrived. After last night, I never want anything more than to be close to you.” Parker stayed silent for a moment, “Where did you learn to ride because I know it wasn’t your father?”

“At finishing school.” I grinned mischievously.

He laughed and jester for me to elaborate, but I just shook my head. He sat there, trying to get me to talk about Boston but now was not the time to share those secrets. He nodded his understanding and started telling me about the horses on his farm.

“Kylie, your time is up,” my father shouted from the porch.

“I’ll wait for your message,” Parker whispered, allowing me to step out of the gazebo and lead us to meet my father.

“Mr. Bellows, may I have your permission to kiss Kylie’s hand to properly thank her for a delightful hour?” Parker spoke in a respectful manor.

“You may,” my father nodded.

“Kylie, until tomorrow.” He lifted my hand to his lips, bowing, then placed a chaste kiss on my skin. “Mr. Bellows.” He nodded before climbing on his horse and riding away.

“I still don’t like that boy,” my father grumbled before going back in the house.

I joined my mother as she slaved away in her flowerbed, sitting down in the shade of a large oak tree. I picked at the grass near me while watching my mother pull the weeds that we both knew would return after the next rain. I displayed my lack of enthusiasm, so she would notice and do something to occupy my mind.

“Kylie. Why don’t you go write in your books or read one?” she suggested.

“I already wrote in my journal, and my books are in Boston.” I pouted. My lack of enthusiasm fueled my mother’s own distress and I forced myself to hide my smile when she went to talk with my father about letting me have my horse back. Having secured my father’s blessing, I was allowed again to ride my stallion, even though I couldn’t leave the area around the house. Much to my discomfort, my body still ached each time my stallion galloped across the field next to the barn.

“Kylie,” my mother yelled from outside the fence. I fought not to laugh at the frown on her face while she waited for me to approach.

“Since you are well enough to ride, starting tonight you will help Cassie wash the dishes after each meal and you will help her cook all the meals.” She showed her determination about teaching me to cook.

“Do you think it is wise to let me anywhere near the kitchen?” I cringed at the thought. “The school won’t let me near it.”

“You’re not at school, so it is my duty as your mother to make sure you know how to cook.” Her fists moved to her hips to let me know she meant what she said. “Go get yourself cleaned up. Cassie is in the kitchen starting dinner. Now put him up and move.”

I walked my stallion back into the barn, noticing that his stall needed cleaning, so I began to muck out the mess. Dust and hay shards danced around me, clinging to my hair, my clothes, and my face. I made sure it took most of an hour to clean out the stall and brush the stallion down before walking into the house to join Cassie in the kitchen.

“I’m here.”

“Kylie Ruth Bellows,” my mother scolded, “you go back outside and get yourself cleaned up. I want none of that mess in here.” She curled her nose, sniffing the air. “You smell like a horse. Get yourself outside and get cleaned up.” She pointed toward the well.

“Yes ma’am.” I smiled when my back was to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The hours of the evening crept slowly while I waited to meet with Parker and go to the cabin. The last of my family climbed the stairs, coming into my room.

“Kylie,” my father said.

“Yes,” I mumbled into my pillow, hoping to sound as though I had been sleeping.

“I don’t want you getting too close to that boy,” he said, “I’ll send you back up north, if I see it.”

“Mmmh-mmh.”

“Go back to sleep.” He closed my door.

I lay there until I couldn’t hear the creak of the wood floors under his weight, compelling me to stay in bed until he went to sleep. Finally, the sound of crickets outside filled my room. I dressed in silence then made my escape, smiling when my feet touched the hard ground. Parker stepped out behind the tree, motioning for me to join him.

I ran into his arms, allowing his lips to find mine, and his tongue to explore my mouth. “Come.” He took my hand, leading me to his waiting horse. We rode back to the cabin in almost total silence, enjoying the quiet warmth of each other, anticipating what we wanted. He held me around the waist while I rested my back against his chest, his nose buried in my hair, as he smelled it.

At the cabin, Parker kissed me again, then carried me inside as he had the night before, not ending the kiss until my feet touched the ground. I fought not to release him as he pulled on my arms.

“Ky, how sore are you?” His thumb brushed my cheek.

“Sore? Why would I be sore?” I hoped my smile didn’t betray me.

“Kylie.” He shook his head before grabbing me between my thighs then gently pressing. I squeezed his arm as he increased the pressure.

“You’re sore. Let’s go hunting.” I rolled my eyes at him. “What was that for?”

“What was what for?” I asked.

He put his finger under my chin, forcing me to look at him. “You rolled your eyes at me and I want to know why?”

“Because, I’m not that sore,” I frowned. “And I hate hunting.”

“Kylie.” He looked at me before sitting on the bed and leaning against the iron bars. He smiled then pulled me into his lap, kissing my forehead as I snuggled in his arms.

“Kylie, last night after I found out how sore I had made you, it has haunted me all day long. I won’t; no, I can’t hurt you like that again.” He paused, tilting my face where he could look into his eyes. He kissed me softly and tenderly melting me into his embrace.

“Don’t ask me to make love to you tonight. We can go fishing, or hunting, because if we stay here, we will want to make love and you are just too sore.” His finger brushed my cheek. “You decide what you want to do, but riding is out except to take you home.”

“Fine. Let’s go hunting, and tomorrow night, if I’m still sore, we’ll go fishing.” I didn’t want to argue with him, so I reached down toward his waist, but his hands wrapped around mine.

“No. Let’s go.” He pushed me up then grabbed his rifle, leading me out of the cabin. We sat hidden behind a dead tree waiting on some animal to cross our path. He put his hand across my mouth to prevent me from speaking, but I squirmed, breaking a few twigs under my feet.

“Can you not sit still?”

“Not normally, not even in my sleep.” I kissed him tenderly. “I warned you that I hate hunting.” He laughed at me, grabbing me then rolling until I straddled him and the buckle of his belt mashed against my sore body, causing me to lean forward. My hands tightened against his upper arms as I lifted myself up off buckle.

“You’re not sore?” Parker pulled me down to where I lay on his chest. “How sore are you really? And don’t lie to me.”

“It doesn’t hurt all the time, only when pressure is put against it.” I laid my head on his chest, listening to his heart race, matching the pace of my own. We lay in each other’s arms until I nearly fell asleep, and Parker made me get up so he could take me home.

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Parker kept to his word over the next two nights and didn’t touch me. He took me fishing both nights because he could hold me while waiting on the fish to bite. On the third night, he took me back to the cabin, consummating our relationship again. I had suffered anguish throughout the day until he touched me again.

I managed to spend my days avoiding the kitchen by scaring Cassie when she saw me try to cut a carrot into slices and nicking my thumb. I got out of cleaning up after meals by entertaining my younger siblings by juggling knives. My stallion enjoyed the time I spent playing with him, but he whined the whole hour Parker and I spent in the gazebo.

\*\*\*\*\*

The second Sunday since my return rolled around, and two of the boys who had attended my party invited me to join them and some of the other boys and girls along with the boys’ parents to a nearby lake. Parker’s scowling told me of he disliked the invitation, especially when my father gave his blessing despite my protests, which didn’t help Parker’s mood. It got worse when I changed into a pair of pants before agreeing head toward the lake. Frowns crossed the faces of my parents when I climbed up on my stallion; it was the first day my father allowed me to ride him away from the house.

The small lake lay south of Carthage in a clearing surrounded by several large hills covered in trees used for romantic walks. The peaceful afternoon dragged along because I had been told not to return home without my escort. My father wanted me to make friends with all the boys my own age. Resigned to the fate of watching the other girls giggle and scream as they waded in the water. I fought the desire to shout, “snake,” just to see how quick they would abandon their playing. They acted like children, making it hard for me to understand why or how they got along and glad that my friends up north didn’t act this way. Ignoring the squeals and screams, I sat on a blanket as Braydon stared at me.

“Kylie, why do you like Parker?” Braydon asked softly.

“You wouldn’t understand.” I smiled when three quick flashes of light hit the water. “Excuse me; I’m going for a walk.”

“I’ll go with you,” Braydon added.

“Fine, come on. You can wipe my behind when I finish my business,” I said flatly.

He looked embarrassed. “Don’t be gone to long. I don’t want to have come look for you.”

“Don’t bother. If I get lost, I can find my way out. I left him staring. After entering the tree line, Parker grabbed me, pulling me into his arms, and kissed me until my lungs gasped for air.

“I knew you would be close.” I held him around the waist, letting him lead me deeper into the trees. His blanket laid spread on the ground as he pulled me down so I lay next to him.

“Do we have time?”

“No. Braydon is on guard, you might say.”



“Well, we can still enjoy each other’s company.” Parker held me close, my head resting in the crook of his arm. It felt wonderful lying in the shade holding each other. With the peacefulness surrounding me, I closed my eyes.

“Ky. Wake up.” Parker nudged me.

“Kylie!” Braydon shouted, breaking up our moment of togetherness.

“Shit,” I said.

“If you want me to keep kissing you, you best stop saying that,” Parker scolded as he helped me stand, before wrapping me in his arms. “You best get back. Until tonight.” His lips embraced mine slowly and tenderly.

“Kylie!” Braydon called again.

“I’m coming,” I said, leaving the confines of the trees.

“I thought you got lost.” He moved up next to me.

“Nope, I just wanted a few minutes alone.” My body throbbed, wanting Parker close again. I spent the rest of the afternoon playing the girl my family wanted me to become. Braydon finally escorted me home late in the afternoon. My father’s face lit up when he invited Braydon to visit any time he wanted. I rolled my eyes, then walked up to my room and closed the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two weeks quietly passed because Parker had to spend most of his time working which meant I met him secretly twice. He only visited me a few times through the week, which thrilled my father, who hoped Parker would stop coming all together. This gave my father the time to arrange dinners with some families who had boys around my age who paid no attention to me. I suspected Parker had something to do with it, which thrilled me. They showed no

interest, and their mothers frowned when I took care of my horse. It thrilled me to annoy my father and the prospective suitors' families with my clothing and my lack of respect.

On my third Saturday home, the Worley family arranged to spend the day with us. My father demanded I act like a proper lady and show respect toward the wealthiest family in the area. My parents, like all the others in town, wanted their daughter to marry into the Worley family, which made me dislike them even more. They arrived around mid-morning with all three of their sons, Asa, Peter, and Samuel.

Peter was the acceptable husband-candidate and worst of all had attended my party with Asa. Peter turned sixteen in early April while Asa, a yank in all facets of the name, bragged about being a West Point graduate. Six years older than me, he was also a possible candidate. Thankfully, Samuel was only ten.

I refused to acknowledge either Peter or Asa and, in my opinion, both of them needed a nanny not a wife. I slouched in one of the big chairs in the parlor, showing my aggravation at their political righteousness, bragging, and Northern supremacies.

“If you gentlemen will excuse me,” I stood to leave.

“Kylie, is there anything wrong?” my father asked.

“No, I just want to get some air.” I finally escaped from the auction block on which my father had sat me once again.

“Maybe the boys would like to go with you?” he said, trying to keep my focus on the Worley boys.

“No. I don't think you would like them escorting me to the outhouse, unless you would like them to help me.” I smiled sweetly.

My father's face turned red, not from embarrassment but from anger. I walked out the back door and into the outhouse, knowing my father would control his temper in front of our company. I stayed hidden until the smell got the best of me, forcing me to peak around the porch to the place on the hill where Parker waited for me. Sneaking up the back stairs to my room, I changed out of the dress and into black pants and vest with a red silk shirt. After sliding into my boots, I quietly walked along the upstairs balcony and down the backstairs.

Three of our hired hands were working inside the barn when I entered with the doors standing open allowing fresh air and a cool breeze.

"That is a mighty fine piece of horse flesh," Asa observed.

Trying to ignore the fact he had startled me, I kept brushing the stallion. "Yes he is." I refused to look at him as began to saddle him.

"Where did you get him?" he moved closer to me.

"My father bought him from the Monroes for my birthday."

"Then he truly is a fine piece of horse flesh. They are a rowdy bunch, but they know horses." He paused. "I was out at Lullabelle's and I saw two of the boys with one of Lullabelle's girls on each arm." Lullabelle's was the local salon, with quite a few adventurous ladies.

"Asa, do you have a point?" I glared at him from my perch on a stool my grandfather had built to help me work with my stallion.

"Your father says you're sweet on Parker. I just thought..." He moved up, pinning me between his body and my stallion. "I just thought." He grabbed my arms, twisting my arms behind me and holding them in the grip of one hand while his other hand slid up my waist then squeezed my breast hard before holding my chin as he kissed me and made my lip bleed.

“Let go of me,” I shouted, struggling to free my hands and causing two of the hired hands to race to where we stood.

“Mr. Worley, I suggest you release Miss Bellows.” Marcus stepped closer to us.

“And who’s going to make me?” Asa asked.

“I am.” Parker cocked his gun, and pointed it at Asa.

“Well, it looks as if the rumors are true, Parker does enjoy your company too.” Asa laughed but didn’t release me.

“What’s going on out here?” my father shouted as he stormed into the barn, finding Parker pointing his gun at Asa, who still holding my hands behind my back while blood trickled down my chin.

“Asa. What are you doing?” Mr. Worley shouted.

“Oh, just trying to see if Kylie here is as tough as she acts.” Asa responded by loosening his grip on my arms. His hands hadn’t even dropped to his side when I pushed and kicked him hard between his legs, sending Asa to the ground while every man in the barn grimaced.

“Excuse me,” I said, grabbing my stallion’s reins and jumping down from the stool. I walked out between the men, making sure not to block Parker’s view of Asa. Tying the stallion’s reins to the fence, I began to finish tightening the saddle but deep down I wanted to take my knife to Asa.

“Parker.” My father tried to get his attention. “Lower your gun. Go escort Kylie on a ride.” He paused. “Parker.”

“This bastard tried to have his way with your daughter,” Parker argued.

“Yes, I know. I’ll take care of it,” my father insisted.

I looked toward the barn as Parker walked out. "Let me get this," he said, moving to finish strapping my saddle in place. "Here give me your foot." He couldn't hide how angry he felt as he lifted me up into the saddle.

I kicked the stallion. "Race ya."

"Kylie," he shouted, racing to get on his horse, which was running before he sat in the saddle. Holding back on the reins, I allowed him time to catch up. We turned into a field past several homes until a large field with a pond at the bottom came into view. Parker reached over and grabbed the stallion's reins from me, leading us toward the cool water.

He didn't speak or smile, even when he stopped by the edge and climbed down. Walking over to me, his face still showed his anger; I knew this face had scared so many others. I swung my legs over before sliding into his waiting arms, and I felt the tension in his muscles as he kissed me.

"Parker?"

He shook his head, taking my hand and leading me toward a small rise on the bank. He sat down, pulling me down between his legs as I draped mine over one of his, leaning against his bent knee so I could face him. He placed his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me closer and resting his forehead on mine.

"Give me a little bit." He held me quietly for several minutes before he spoke again. "I want to kill him," his voice trembled. "I want to kill him for hurting you, for kissing you." He paused. "I just can't handle anyone touching you."

"Oh, Parker." He touched my lips with his finger.

"I love you. I think about you all the time." He lifted my head and kissed me gently, tenderly, his anger subsiding and pulling me into a gentle embrace.

“Are you mad at me, too?”

He smiled. “No. I’m still hurting.”

“Hurting?” I stared at him.

He laughed, closing his eyes, hiding them behind the brim of his hat. “When you kicked Asa, it was so hard, I felt it.”

Shifting closer, smiling, laying my lips against his, “I bet I can make you forget all about the pain.” Continuing my exploration of his mouth, I slid my hand between his legs and squeezed lightly. I pushed him back tightening my grip until he lay on the ground.

“Ahh,” he moaned. “That will help.” We kissed as his hand worked its way down the back of my pants.

“Well Parker, seems you’ve found that pretty girl from the coach.” A man’s voice said from above us.

“Ugh.” He pulled his hand free.

“So, this is who you have been sneaking off to see.” The man laughed.

Parker didn’t seem concerned and placed a chaste kiss my cheek. “Kylie, this is my brother Vern,” he whispered in my ear. “Stay hidden and just wave.”

“Ah. Parker. You’re not going to let me see her.” Vern laughed.

Parker slid his hand to his gun. “Not now Vern.”

“Come on, little brother,” he said, trying to sound encouraging. “I know it’s the Bellows girl.”

Parker pointed his gun at his brother. “Vern, I will shoot you. So, I think you should go back home to your wife.”

“Ah. Parker.” Vern complained. “I just married too soon. Maybe I should have waited.” Parker pulled the trigger, causing the gun to fire behind my head. I jumped; the horses shifted toward the water, but Vern stood his ground and Parker didn’t move.

The gun cocked again. “The next one won’t be a warning.” The coldness in Parker’s voice made me shiver as I leaned into him. “Stay still,” he whispered but didn’t move as he kept his aim.

“See you at home. We’ll discuss it then,” Vern said before he rode off.

Parker relaxed, releasing the trigger, and put the gun away. “We need to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“If Vern’s out here then Cord and Luke are close.” He looked around for them. “I don’t relish shooting one of them.”

“Who are they?”

“My brothers.” He laughed, then stood up, still searching the area. “Come on.” I put my foot in his hand for him to help me up on my stallion. “You know where Freyer’s Pond is at?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll meet you there.” He patted my thigh.

I leaned over and kissed him. “What are you up to?”

“Getting rid of loose tongues.” We kissed once more, “ride as fast as the stallion can go.” Parker slapped the stallion, causing him to rear up. The stallion darted into a run before Parker climbed on his horse to follow.

Pushing the stallion and sinking low, I was almost lying on the stallion’s back as my hair whipped around in the air. It felt like heaven racing toward Freyer’s Pond, hidden in a thick grove of trees just south of my home. Slowing my elegant steed, we crept into the mass of tangle

of underbrush below his hooves, allowing him the time to cool off. The sound of twigs breaking behind me caught my attention, so I climbed off my trusted mount, pushing him on out of site, then taking a long branch that was lying on the ground, and I hid in the heavy brush.

The horse's footsteps slowed but moved closer, drawing back when its shadow showed along the edges of brush. I jumped, swinging from my hiding spot and trying to scare the rider, but he dodged and fell off the opposite side of his horse. The horse darted, running away from me and leaving the rider lying on the ground in front of me, laughing.

"Shit. Ky. You nearly got me."

"Parker." I dropped down to my knees.

He continued laughing. "Come here." I crawled up along his legs while rubbing my knees against him. "No one's around."

"Are you alright?" I laid my hand against his cheek.

"Oh. I think I'm in need of a little tender." He kissed me. "Loving." His kiss went deeper. "Care."

"Where?" I asked, unbuckling his gun belt.

"Oh, Yes." He leaned back as I released his penis and began to suck on it, causing him to moan, and placing one of his hands in my hair. "Wait." I looked at him, keeping his organ in my hand.

"Slide your legs this way." He couldn't hide his desires while I shifted my position then took him back into my mouth. He struggled with my boots but managed to get them off and had no problem getting me out of my pants and pantaloons. I moved until I straddled him, before driving his mouth between my legs. Taking our time, we lay there enjoying the comfort of each other's bodies.



Parker sank his fingers deep as his tongue teased my lips, and I struggled to maintain my grip on him but lost my control. Lowering my body on top of him, I fought back a scream. My body stiffened, and then dug my nails into Parker's legs when he bit my tender flesh, causing me to scream again.

I slapped at his arm because he wouldn't let go. "Parker!" He ignored my shouts. "Parker, if you don't quit I'm going to hurt you." I put him back into mouth, making sure he could feel my teeth until he released my soft tongue and allowed me to roll off as he lay there laughing. I kneed him in the ribs, causing him to moan but he still didn't stop; turning to look at him, his head rested against one of my thighs.

"What are you laughing at?" I braced my upper body on my hands to meet his eyes.

"You."

"Me? Get off me." I tried to get my legs free from him.

"No." He reached over rubbing my swollen folds between his fingers, causing me to twitch while trying to move away. He shifted, keeping me pinned under his weight, and sliding up my body, lowering himself as he entered fast and deep, only to pull back out and climb off me.

"Stand up." He offered me his hand.

"Why?"

"Come on," he whispered, taking his pants the rest of the way off after I stood up. Spinning me around against a tree looming over us, he handed me his vest.

"Keep this in front of your face."

"Why? What are you going to do?" I turned to see his face.

“This.” He lifted me up, placing my feet on the large tree roots sticking out of the ground before shoving himself deep inside my wet canal again.

My body, especially my thighs, slammed against the tree. “Ugh.” The bark pierced deep into my skin while his breath blew heavy and hot on the back of my neck with his rhythm. I leaned away from the tree, putting more weight against Parker, while he wrapped his arms around me as the spasms weakened my body.

He held me as he slid out. “How long will your father let me keep you?”

“Probably not long.” I paused when Parker released me. “He still complains about you when you leave.”

“I haven’t won him over yet?” He pulled his pants back on.

“No.” I picked up my clothes.

“Does he suspect you of sneaking out?” Parker’s eyes showed his fear.

“No. I don’t think so.” I looked down at my thighs. “I have bark in my legs.”

He laughed. “Come here.” He laid his vest on the ground for me to sit on. He leaned down to examine my legs.

“You’re right.” He moved to get his gun belt.

“Wait. What are you going to do?” I wrapped my arms around my legs curling them up next to my body.

“Sit still.” He tugged my legs down, taking his knife and carefully digging out a piece of bark, then he leaned down and kissed the wound, continuing the routine until he finished with both legs. He held the kiss on the last one, inhaling deeply.

“What are you doing now?” I ran my hand through his hair.

“Memorizing your smell.” He kissed my thigh again.

“Why would you do that?”

He lifted his head and smiled. “So if you’re ever with another man, I will know it.”

I stared in shock. “Move. Let me up.” I shoved him, standing then grabbing my clothes, sliding my pantaloons over my legs as Parker watched me.

“You think I would be unfaithful?” I shouted. “I have given you every piece of me.” I tied the pantalon ribbons before tugging at my pants. “I can’t believe you.”

“Ky.” He reached out to me. “Kylie. I do trust you. I can’t stand the thought of any man touching you.” He pulled me into his embrace. “I know you wouldn’t do anything, but I also know you can’t stop any man who forced you.”

I pushed against Parker’s chest, trying to break free of his hold. “I can take care of myself.”

“No. You can’t.” Parker’s voice rose for the first time since I’d known him and he released me.

“Yes, I can.” Anger filled my voice.

“You were doing real well with Asa.” The harsh tone of his voice also held worry. “He had you pinned. Tell me, Ky.” He turned to pace, trying to regain control. “How were you going to get your knife out of your boot?” I pulled my boots on and did not look at Parker.

“How, Ky?”

“I don’t know.” I finally shouted back at him.

“Ky.” He whispered, wrapping me in his arms as I began to cry. He rubbed his hand through my hair.

“I love you.” He gently kissed the top of my head. “Please be careful. I’m going to talk with your father about teaching you how to shoot.”

I looked up at him, “You’re going to do what?”

“With or without your father’s permission, I’m teaching you to shoot.”

“My father will not agree to that.” I reached up and kissed him.

“Let’s get you home. Remember, wash up.” He smiled. “You smell like me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Worleys had left when we raced up the drive. My father waited for us on the porch.

“You’ll never beat my stallion,” I taunted.

“Next time, I won’t let you have a head start.” Parker laughed.

“Kylie,” my father called, letting us know he wasn’t happy. “Parker, I would like to talk with you. Kylie, your mother has a bath waiting.”

“I’ll put my horse up, then go.” I didn’t want to leave Parker.

“No. You’ll go now. Marcus will take care of your horse.” My father gave me his “I’m in charge” glare.

“Fine.” I pouted, causing Parker to laugh. “See you soon.” I couldn’t resist winking at him.

“Goodnight, Kylie. Until next time.” Parker called back as I stepped inside the house and hid behind the door.

“Parker. I appreciate you stepping in and helping Kylie today. I also appreciate you taking care of her, while we sorted everything out with Asa and the Worleys.”

“Mr. Bellows, I’d do anything for Kylie.”

“I am glad to hear that.” My father paused scraping his boot against the hard wood of the porch. “Parker, you’re eighteen. Kylie’s sixteen. With what happened today, I decided that Kylie needs a man much older than she is.”

“Mr. Bellows. I turn nineteen in three months, and that makes me almost three years older.” I didn’t have to see the look on Parker’s face to know his anger.

“Parker, let me finish. You’ve been real good to Kylie, but it’s been decided that after church tomorrow we’ll announce Kylie’s engagement to Asa Worley.”

“He attacked her.”

“He said it was just an innocent misunderstanding. He also said he would be glad to have Kylie as a wife.” My father held firm. I growled knowing that my father had something to gain, if I married Asa.

“What? Kylie doesn’t have a choice in this matter?” Parker fought to keep control his anger.

“No. So I am asking you to step away from her and never see her again.” My father wouldn’t budge.

“Mr. Bellows.” Parker shifted in his saddle. “I’ll only stop seeing Kylie, when she tells me so.”

“Parker. I am her father!” he shouted.

“You may be her father, but you’re not the one who’ll decide who she marries.”

Parker almost laughed.

“You can leave now, Mr. Monroe.” My father’s own anger rose.

“I’d love to be here when you tell Kylie, for truly you don’t know your daughter.” I heard Parker ride away, knowing he wouldn’t go far. I raced to the kitchen for my bath. I agreed with Parker. No one would tell me whom to marry.

## Chapter 6

My curtains were knotted in the windows, letting Parker know that I couldn't get away because my mother and father took turns checking on me. The scraping of boots on the floor sounded outside my room. I lay quietly in bed hoping for a chance to escape until sleep finally claimed me.

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"You're all mine," he said.

"Who are you?" I asked, shaking at the rasping voice.

"I own you," the voice laughed, chilling me to the bone. "Everything you have is mine now. Your father gave it to me, when he sold you to me."

"What?" Why would my father sell me to this man? I'm not animal. I shivered again, causing a curl to fall in my face. I went to move it, but my hand didn't move. It was then I felt the ropes tying my body to the iron post of the bed rail.

"Let me go!"

"No. You are mine." He stood in the shadows, just beyond the light on the small night table next to the bed. I took a deep breath. I needed to think clearly. My knife. Yes, I needed my knife. I shifted my leg until it rubbed against my hand. What? No! I touched only flesh. I looked down at my naked body.

"Miss Bellows, you look exquisite today. Wait," he said. "Mrs. Worley. Yes, that sounds much better."

"I will never marry you!" I shouted.

“Ah, but you have,” Asa leaned down to face me, then smiled. He kissed me and tried to force his tongue into my mouth. “That will never do.” He stepped back then lifted his hand.

“No!” My scream echoed around the room as I stared at Parker’s head hanging by the hair around Asa’s bloody fingers. “No!”

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“Kylie. Wake up,” my mother’s voice sounded worried. “Please, wake up.” She gently shook my.

“No!” I screamed. “Get away from me.”

“Kylie.” Her hands held my face firmly, forcing me to open my eyes and look at her.

“Oh, Mama. It was so horrible.” I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, trying to bring my mind back to reality. Heavy footsteps stopped at my door.

“Is everything alright in here?” my father asked.

I looked up and climbed out my bed and close to where my boots rested against the wall. I slid my back down until my fingers felt the comfort of the handle inside the hard leather.

“Get out of here,” I said, fighting the trembling in my voice.

“Kylie, pull yourself together. We are announcing your engagement after services today,” he said.

“Abraham, this is not the time for this. Kylie’s not well,” my mother scolded.

My eyes darted from one to the other before they rested on the greedy smile on I saw on my father’s face. “It time you act like a lady. Wear that white dress you wore at the party. It seems appropriate.”

I tightened my grip as he turned away. His footsteps echoed loudly in my ears with his departure. I had to get away. What could I do?

“Kylie,” my mother’s voice broke through my terror. “Come clean up. You’re a fright after that nightmare.” She held her hand out to me and helped me stand. “Do you need my help?”

I shook my head, not looking at her while, I contemplated how to get out of this.

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Still nervous from my dream, I worked my stallion in long cutting strides, trying to clear the chaos running through my mind. I had to get back to Boston. It was my only chance of safety, but my heart ached with the thought of leaving Parker. I forced myself to focus on controlling my horse and ignoring the world around me.

My father came out shaking his head. “You’re about to be a married lady. You don’t ride horses to church.” He had revealed the planned details of my future. We were to have a big dinner at the Worley’s home after church to announce the engagement and to make all the arrangements for the wedding.

“I will die before I marry Asa Worley.” My voice hardened to make sure he knew I meant it. My anger fueled my determination to get back to my home in Boston, with the hope that Parker would join me.

“What? You would take that Monroe boy?” He stood below me with his hands fisted on his hips.

“Yes.” Narrowing my eyes, I glared at the man who thought he had the authority over me. “At least Parker has always been a gentleman around me.”

“You will marry Asa.”



“No. I won’t.” My voice hissed with my anger, I kicked my stallion, causing him to rear. Its front legs waved above my father’s head before lowering into a run. I wanted Parker, my thoughts filled with his warmth as I raced toward town. We would figure a way out of this. We would find a way to be together, and the thought of touching Asa or any other man made my stomach curdle.

I sat astride my horse, waiting for my family to arrive, and Asa and his parents walked past me showing their disapproval. I couldn’t resist licking the neck of my stallion causing Asa’s mother to shiver and gasp. Asa smiled at me, but I glared at him. “It won’t happen.” I thought.

If Parker would go to Boston with me, we would have a home, safety, and money. Closing my eyes, tears ran down my cheeks because I knew he wouldn’t go. Could I live without him? No, I didn’t think I could.

My father rode next to the carriage carrying my mother and grandparents; none of them spoke to me. My heart skipped a beat when Parker and his family appeared at the end of the short drive leading to the church. He patted his saddlebag, forcing me to look down at mine, and opening it, revealed a white handkerchief. I touched it. Parker nodded as I unfolded the cloth, uncovering a small gun, a Derringer. I looked back at him while he motioned down his shirt. I rolled my eyes; he just smiled and nodded. Jumping from my horse and turning my back so no one could see, I slid the small gun down between my breasts, hiding it in my corset, and struggling to get it totally hidden because of the tightness. The gun pressed uncomfortably between my breasts. I couldn’t believe he wanted me to carry it.

“Kylie, let’s go,” my father ordered. I could do this with my knife in my boot and a gun between my breasts: time to face my future husband. Which man would it be, the one who loved me or the one who wanted to own me? Or would I go back to Boston alone?

I sat next to the aisle, two rows in front of Parker. I ignored everything the preacher said because Asa kept turning around blowing kisses at me. My father nudged and smiled each time, trying to encourage me to be happy with his decision. I wanted to pull my little gun out and shoot Asa in the head.

Sweating by the time the service ended, I darted out the door with Parker at my heels. “Rip the back of the dress open,” I ordered as we walked toward my stallion while pulling my braid out of the way. Parker grabbed the back of the dress and pulled, sending buttons flying everywhere. I slipped the dress off and threw it into the carriage before Parker helped me on my stallion. Pushing my stallion into a hard run, I left everyone one staring as Parker took up the chase.

With the stallion’s nose down, I didn’t slow until I reached the far side of town. “Give me back the gun,” Parker ordered. “You don’t need one when I’m around.” I reached clumsily down my shirt, causing him to wince, “careful. The last thing I need is for you to shot yourself.” He kissed me as I handed him the gun.

We rode to the same small pond he took me to the morning after I arrived. Words failed me because I still couldn’t think. The sun sparkled over the water, enticing the fish to swim close to the top. I stared at the glistening ripples, wishing I knew how to be with my family without my father’s intrusion on my life.

“What are you going to do?” he asked, helping me down. I hadn’t even noticed he had tied the reigns of the stallion to a near by tree.

“Me?”

“Yes you,” he almost shouted.

“I’m not marrying Asa.”

He pulled me close. “I thought not, but your father seems insistent.”

I rubbed Parker’s arms, enjoying the comfort it gave. “He can insist all he wants.”

Parker leaned against a tree that overlooked the water, holding me, and gently playing with my hair with neither of us saying anything. I watched a water spider make circles on the pond until my stomach growled. Parker laughed.

“Let’s go get something to eat. I’m supposed to bring you home for dinner.”

“I don’t want to impose.” I snuggled tighter into him.

“Trust me. Imposing on my family is a welcome treat for my mother.” Parker tilted my head and kissed me.

We rode slowly to his house, neither of us wanting to share the other with anyone. I could see some activity going on around it; two men sat talking on the porch. Two younger boys played horseshoes while a young man, older than Parker, sat on a bench watching us.

“Well. The prodigal son returns.” The young man on the bench said.

“Parker, who is this nice young lady?” The younger of the two men on the porch asked as Parker helped me down off my stallion.

He took my hand and led me up the steps, “Daddy, Pappa, this is Kylie.”

“So this is the girl you have been disappearing to see.” His father smiled. “Can’t say I blame ya.”

“She looks just like Althea,” Pappa said.

“That’s because she’s Althea’s granddaughter.” Parker smiled.

“Hello,” I whispered shyly, causing Parker to laugh.

“Parker, you’re back and you brought a guest.” A woman stood in the doorway.

“Hello, mama. This is”

“Kylie. Kylie Bellows.” His mother interrupted him. “You are as beautiful as the day you were born.”

“Thank you.” I nodded.

“Are you two staying for dinner?” she asked.

“Yes.” Parker squeezed my hand.

“Wonderful. Becca, set another place by Parker,” she called walking back into the house. “Dinner’s ready.”

Parker held the door open, allowing me to go in before him. “You’re trembling.” He put his hand on the lower part of my back, guiding me into the dining area. The table took up most of the big room with enough chairs for everyone. We sat down near the far end before Parker introduced me to everyone, his hand massaging my back and trying to calm me. I sat between Parker and his youngest brother, Luke, with his father and grandfather claiming their rightful places at the ends of the table. His mother sat on the other side of Luke with Vern and Cord, his two other brothers, on the opposite side of the table, while Becca sat between them.

Parker’s father said the blessing, then the family welcomed me warmly with food and laughter. Dinner consisted of two chickens, deep fried, biscuits and gravy, corn on the cob along with several other vegetables freshly picked from the garden.

Vern couldn’t stop his teasing, especially when Parker loaded my plate down with almost the same amount of food that he had. Parker ignored Vern but put his hand on my back and kissed my cheek.

“Eat.”

I laughed then took a bite of my food, afraid to insult his mother if I left food on my plate. I ate until my stomach bulged, frowning at what remained, but Parker smiled as he finished it all.

“Where do you put it all?” I asked, staring at his tall but slender frame. “You got a bottomless pit?”

He laughed. “Be nice, or I’ll make you eat more.”

“Is anyone ready for dessert?” his mother asked.

“Yes,” said the family in unison. His mother rose to get the dessert while Becca picked up all the plates.

“Parker, does Kylie know how to cook?” Vern continued his teasing. “You better hope she does the way you eat.”

“Nope.”

“What?” Vern howled, “You’re gonna starve.”

“Vern, you leave Kylie and Parker alone. I bet there are things that Kylie can do.” Parker’s father said.

“I can only think of two,” Vern replied.

Parker stiffened. “Vernon Jr.” His mother shouted. “You leave them alone or you’ll get no dessert.” She sat a piece of chocolate pie in front of me. “I hope you like chocolate.”

“Yes, ma’am, I do. Thank you,” I answered.

“Kylie, what do you do up north when you’re not in school?” Pappa asked.

“I work with several businesses around town, but I also help on two horse farms.” I smirked at Vern.

“Is that where you learned to ride?” Cord asked, not waiting on an answer. “You should’ve seen her yesterday. She was lying almost flat on the black’s back, and he was in a full run.” He paused to get a breath. “No one could’ve caught her if they tried.”

“Yes. I help mostly with the horses.” I nodded, holding my next bite of pie on my fork. “The school banned me from the kitchen after it caught fire three times while I assigned to help with the meals.” I licked the chocolate from the side of the fork before I put the rest in my mouth.

“You set it on purpose, didn’t you?” Parker wiped his lips with a napkin.

“Now Parker, why would I do that?” I looked at him as he took a bite of his pie and tried not to laugh.

“See Vern, we’re all safer with Ky staying out of the kitchen,” Parker said. “But I bet she can shoe a horse better than most.”

“Parker, you say the sweetest things.” I laughed and opened my mouth to take another bite, but Parker had other plans. He drew me in for a kiss and filled my mouth with his bite of pie.

“Oh, that is so disgusting,” Vern stated. We just laughed, trying not to spit out the chocolate.

We finished dessert just as the huge grandfather clock chimed three. I stared back at it. “Oh, shit.” I got up from the table. “I’m so sorry. I have to get home. My father’s going to kill me.”

“She’s going to fit in here well,” Vern said.

“I’ll go with you,” Parker said.

“Mrs. Monroe. It was delicious. Thank you.” I looked over at Parker putting his gun belt back on. He held the door for me as we walked out to the horses.

“I don’t want you to go back. I don’t trust your father,” Parker said as he got on his horse. He had been quiet about what my father had told him. “What are you going to do if Worley is there?”

“I don’t know.”

Parker grimaced, “I’ll wait on the hill as usual, if you need me.”

“What will you do, come down shooting?” I didn’t hide the sarcasm in my voice.

He leaned over and kissed me as we rode slowly to my home. “If I have too.”

“I told you yesterday, I can take care of myself.” I glared at him before rolling my eyes.

“Yes, and yesterday, I told you that you can’t.” He matched my stare.

“Oh, you’re going to be a knight coming to protect the damsel in distress?”

Parker ignored me as he rode up the hill that overlooked my home. We had argued the whole ride, and he left me with only a chaste kiss as I rode up close to the house, an eerie silence hovered, with no hired hands or any of my brothers or sisters out playing. There was no sign of life, it felt strange, and even the animals were quiet. No wagons. No carriages. No Worleys. No one.

My stallion fidgeted by the hitching post between the stable and barn next to a large corral. I patted the stallion’s neck, trying to calm it, before finding father standing in front of me. He held a riding crop that I had given him for Christmas two years earlier. It had a silver horse’s head on the top with a steel rod that ran half way down and it was covered in mahogany with seven short leather strips coming out of the end.

“You whore!” He shouted, slapping his leg with the crop. I had never seen him so angry. “Asa saw you with that boy.”

“He saw what?” I whispered, trying not to make the matters worse. I was glad Parker watched from the top of the hill.

“He said that boy was very familiar with you. He had his hands all over you.” His face contorted from the anger within him. The veins in his neck pulsated from the blood being forced through them. My heart raced because I had never seen him this angry. He took a deep breath before he spoke again.

“Asa will agree to marry you, if I can get a handle on you.” His voice lowered to a whisper.

“You already know that is. Not! Going to happen!” I shouted, moving closer to porch to go inside.

“You will, even if I have to beat it into you.” My father blocked my way as he struck me across the shoulder with the crop. I managed to duck to keep the blow from hitting my face. I moaned from the pain, and my body bowed taking all the blows to my back and hips as they kept coming. The pain shot through me each time the crop struck, causing me to scream. The crop embedded itself in my back, tearing through my clothing. He yanked, ripping the silk threads, leaving only my corset to protect me. My father found a steady rhythm with each strike growing harder and going deeper. Blood rained down on the ground as the bones in the corset popped, breaking apart, and embedding themselves into my flesh under the force in his strikes. I fought to keep my head covered, trying to deflect any blow coming close. I dropped to my knees, fighting to stay conscious.



My mind raced in panic, unable to think past the pain. I closed my eyes and took a slow breath, forcing myself to ignore the pain, refusing to give my father the satisfaction of another scream. I had to think. Parker would kill my father. I hated myself, but I couldn't let that happen.

Reaching down into my boot, I gripped the familiar handle. Gathering the last of my strength, I shoved my father backwards as I held onto him around the waist, pushing until we crashed into the porch steps. My arms hurt from our combined weight when we landed on the hard wood. Somehow, I freed my knife, holding it at his throat, feeding off the anger and hatred now coursing through my own body.

"Drop the crop." Whispering from the pain, I shook from the desire to push the blade deep into his throat, increasing the small stream of blood. He stared at the eyes that only a few in Boston had seen. Eyes that had no love, no compassion, and no fear. Fighting back the tears and ignoring the pain, I lifted my aching body off his.

"You will never touch me, again." Standing on shaky legs, I stomped on the crop, breaking it before stumbling across the courtyard toward my stallion. Using the wood fence of the corral, I climbed into the saddle and kicked him into a slow gallop. Fearing to go any faster until I could reach Parker, I huddled low, using everything I had not to pass out.

Parker grabbed the reins from me, securing my stallion, then gently pulled my aching body into his lap. With his arm around me, he gently held me in place.

"Hold on, Ky." He kissed my forehead then kicked his horses into a run as he carried me away from my parent's home.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke lying on my stomach, with the top half of my clothes gone. A tightness around my chest made it hard for me to breathe.

“Parker, tell me again what happened?” the man asked.

“Her father beat her with a stick of some sort. I was too far away to tell for sure what it was.” His voice trembled.

“I don’t believe it.” The man continued. “I’ve never heard of him ever doing anything like this before.”

“Well he did.” Parker’s voice rose.

“Parker,” I called, trying to recognize my voice.

He knelt by the bed. “Ky.”

“Don’t let them send me back.” I managed to say, finding it hurt to talk.

He brushed away hair that had fallen into my face, then leaned down and placed a soft kiss on my cheek. “I don’t plan on it.” He turned back to the man. “She’s not safe here. I’m taking her to my home.”

“Parker, she’s in no shape to travel.” .

“I’m taking her to my home.” Parker ignored the man and gently rolled me so he could pick me up, keeping the blanket in place where it covered me.

“Ugh.” I moaned as he lifted me into his arms and started for the door.

“Parker. You have to keep her as still as possible. Many of the cuts are deep and will break open easily. Most important, you have to keep them clean.” The man moved into my view. Doc Reynolds shook his head while escorting us out the door. “Please be careful. She doesn’t need to lose any more blood.”

“Ky,” Parker whispered. I moaned. “I need you to get on my horse.” He lifted me up enough so I could slide my leg over his horse then pushed me up until I lay against his horse’s neck, straddling the saddle. I didn’t feel him climb up behind me until he pulled me back into the same position I sat in before.

“Parker, I’ll be out in the morning to check on her.” Doc Reynolds’s voice seemed softer.

“Thanks, Doc,” Parker said, urging the horses forward into a slow walk; one of my hands held on to the waistband of his pants while his arm gently brushed against me, holding me close. His soft whispers became screams when he shouted to someone, making me aware of my surroundings.

“Parker,” I said, aggravated by the noise and against the pain.

“Sorry.” He tightened his grip just a little, causing me to moan.

“Parker Monroe, what is all this shouting for?” His father stepped out onto the porch with his mother a step behind.

“Parker, what’s wrong?” his mother asked as she and his younger brothers moved out the door, followed by Vern and Becca.

“I need someone to bring bandages, food and anything else you can think of, out to the cabin.” The frantic tone caused his body to tremble.

“Parker?” his mother’s voice matched his tone, slowly moving closer to her son.

“I need to get her to the cabin. She needs to be lying down.” Parker ignored her questions because of his concern for me. I shifted, causing the blanket to fall from around my shoulder exposing my back to everyone.

“Ky, stay still.”

“Dear God. Parker you’re not taking her out to that cabin.” His mother came to stand next to us. “Get her inside the house. Vern, help him.”

“No,” Parker shouted.

“Parker,” I whispered.

“Parker, she’s bleeding. Get her inside.” His mother continued to ignore his insistence. She took my hand. “Kylie.” I didn’t have the strength to look at her. “Parker, she won’t make it to the cabin. Vern, come help him.”

“Just hold her in place,” Parker said, leaning me into his waiting grasp. I could feel the pressure of Vern’s hands against the cuts on my back. I screamed. Parker climbed down then Vern lowered me back into Parker’s arms, caused more pain, and I could do nothing but scream.

“Ky. I’m so sorry.” He whispered, holding me tight and carrying me up the steps into his home.

“Parker, take her to your room. Becca, go heat some water. Cord, Luke, there are a couple of sheets in the linen closet. Go get them and tear them into strips.” Her orders demanded an immediate response. “Becca, heat the potatoes and add water to make it a soup.” Mrs. Monroe moved quickly in behind Parker as she shouted more orders.

I moaned all the way up the stairs until Parker laid me gently on a soft bed before moving the blanket off my back. The room came into view as Vern walked around lighting the lamps.

“Damn,” Parker whispered.

“Parker, what happened?” his father asked, moving up beside the bed.

“Parker, hold her while I get these bandages off.” His mother began gently tugging on the ones Doc Reynolds had put on.

“You took her to the doc, I assume,” Vern stated.

“Yes,” Parker said as he held me.

“Vern, go help Becca with that water, Pappa, go help the boys with the bandages.” Mrs. Monroe continued barking orders while she gently unwrapped the bloody cloth. I breathed deeply then moaned as the last of the bandages fell away, and I didn’t stop moaning even when they laid me face down on the bed.

“Parker, come here and let your mother work.” His father pulled him away. “Tell me what happened.” Parker fought against his father’s grip. “Parker. She’s safe. What happened?”

“Her father beat her with a riding crop.” Parker kept voice low as he tried to control his emotions. “I couldn’t get to her. It happened too fast.”

“How did you get her away from him?” His father tried to keep him focused.

“I didn’t. She pulled a knife on him.”

“Parker, help me with her pants. Start with her boots,” his mother ordered.

Parker gently lifted my leg, causing me to cry out, before sliding my first boot off and moving on to the second. He turned me on my side, then began to undo my pants with no concern what it would mean to the others in the room. He moved back to where he stood by his mother, reaching across her.

“Ky,” he whispered softly.

“Yes,” I managed to say.

“Are you ready?” Parker brushed the hair out of my face.

“No.”

Parker smiled an unhappy smile, then rolled the top of my pants down enough so he could get a good grip on them. I grabbed the bed frame and screamed while he pulled them off

faster than expected. Tears streamed down my face from this new onset of pain; gasping for air, I wished I would pass out again.

“What’s happening?” Cord asked as he and Luke ran into the room, followed by Vern and Becca.

“Get out!” Parker shouted, grabbing for a blanket. “All of you out.”

“Becca, you stay.” His mother turned to the others. “I agree with Parker. All of you leave.” She put her hand on Parker’s shoulder, waiting for the door to close. “Parker, how close are you to her?”

“What?” he asked.

“How much of her have you seen before tonight?” She stared at Parker.

Parker looked over at me, taking my hand and gently squeezing, “Everything, more than once.”

“Do you love her?” she continued her questioning.

“Yes. I almost died because I couldn’t get to her fast enough.” Parker released my hand and softly caressed my hip. “I want to be with her the rest of my life.”

“You want to marry her?” Becca asked.

“Yes,” Parker whispered.

“That’s all I wanted to know.” His mother smiled then turned back to me. She pulled the covers back. “We need to get these off.” Parker reached over picked up my hand again and kissed it before he pulled my pantaloons down.

“What did that to her?” Becca asked. “Look at her thighs?”

“These are the riding crop.” His mother glared at him while she pointed at some of the lower cuts on the front of my thighs.

“I had to dig bark out of them.” Parker’s hand slid down my thigh but returned to my hip. I reached up and laid my hand on top of it. His words gave me hope because he loved me, but we had never talked about spending the rest of our lives together. He leaned over until his face was inches from mine.

“I love you.” He paused. “Please try to relax.”

“Parker, let her rest and help me clean these cuts again. You can also explain how she got bark in her thighs.” His mother paused. “No wait. I don’t want to know.”

They spent the next hour cleaning and bandaging my wounds, then made me eat a bowl of potato soup spiked with whiskey. Parker laughed when I made a face from the bitterness caused by the liquor. He eventually lay down on the bed next to me, close, but not touching, while his family talked just outside the door.

“He beat her with a riding crop?” Vern asked.

“Yes. Most of the blows are on her back but she does have some on her thighs and hips.” The door squeaked as she peaked in. “Parker said she would have probably died if she hadn’t had her corset on. It kept him from breaking her ribs.”

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Becca added.

“Are you going to let them stay in there like that?” Vernon Sr. asked.

“Yes.”

“Mama. You can’t mean that?” Vern asked.

“First, he loves her. Second, he wants to marry her. Third, she’s in no shape to do anything and fourth, Parker’s asleep.” She smiled. “Do you want to wake him?”

“No,” both men answered.

“Besides, I am going to be in there too,” she continued.

“Call if you need us,” Vern said. “Night, mama.”

“Night.”

I finally began to relax as sleep crept up on me after a few more doses of potato soup and whiskey. Parker squirmed next to me with his hand draped across my thigh, gently squeezing it in his sleep. I wiggled to get closer to him, but the pain prevented any effort to adjust my body, forcing me to be happy with laying my hand on his arm. With that small amount of comfort and safety, I fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How is she?” Becca tried to keep her voice down.

“They’re both asleep,” Mrs. Monroe tried not to wake me but failed.

“Parker,” I whispered, gently squeezing his arm.

He smiled sleepily, then leaned in and kissed me. “I love waking up next to you. I just wish the circumstances were better.”

“Me too.” I frowned, feeling the humiliation of the circumstance. “I need to pee.” Parker began laughing, nearly falling off the bed as he stood up. “Quit laughing and help me up.” He kept laughing and picked up the chamber pot.

“Parker?” Holding up the pot, he answered his mother’s unspoken question. “Becca, go down stairs and start breakfast. I’ll be there shortly.” Shutting the door behind her, she came back to my side. “Kylie, how do you feel this morning?”

“I don’t know, and I’m a little scared to find out,” I answered, still feeling the tightness around my chest.

“Parker, pull that stool over here,” Mrs. Monroe ordered while caressing my cheek. “You’ll be weak, so take it very slow.”



He moved a stool close to the bed, placing the chamber pot in the center of it before coming back to me. “Put your arms around my neck.” He rolled me off my stomach before he lifted me slowly and cautiously. I fought the urge to scream from the pain, but I felt better when I stood up and wondered whether my legs would hold me. Feeling embarrassed because I stood naked except for the bandages in the presence of Parker and his mother. Parker made it worse when he refused to turn his back while I sat on the pot. I smiled when he helped me to the bed as the pain flared through my body.

“You’re bleeding again in a couple of places,” he whispered, trying to figure out where to touch that would not cause me any more agony. Once he had covered me up, he moved back to lie down on the other side of the bed.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked.

He watched his mother go out the door with the chamber pot. “Mama, close the door.” She looked at him, then nodded. We could hear her barking instructions before she got to the bottom of the stairs. Parker turned to face me, “Why would I be mad at you?” He brushed several loose strands of hair away from my face.

“Because of what happened yesterday.” I fought the urge to cry.

Parker stroked my cheek with his hand. “If any one should be mad, it’s you who should be mad at me.” He paused. “I should have never let you go back by yourself.”

“You had no idea what my father would do.” I closed my eyes, releasing a tear before looking at him. “I’ve never seen him do anything like this before.”

“I should have.” Parker kissed me. “I should have protected you better. I wanted to run off with you, but I backed out. I thought we had more time.”

I reached over and touched his stubble covered cheek. “You need a shave.”

Parker's eyes got a twinkle when he grabbed my face, sliding his whiskers across my cheeks. I squealed, trying to move away, but Parker kept it up until laughter filled the room. It felt good, but it didn't take long for the laughter to turn to crying. Parker pulled me into a tight embrace, holding me and letting me cry until I fell back asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Parker. Parker, wake up." His mother's voice sounded soft and tender.

"Mama," Parker whispered.

"Doctor Reynolds is here," she said.

"Ky. Wake up." Parker nudged me then kissed my forehead.

"No."

"All right," he whispered in my ear. "I'll just let you keep dreaming that the cold hands about to touch your naked body are mine." Parker tilted my head up to allow his lips to touch mine. "Be right back." He left me lying alone in his room, going over all the things in my life that had changed since my return home; my father wanting me to marry Asa, the beating, and my love for Parker.

"Ky." Parker jumped over me, pouncing on the bed.

"Parker." His mother shouted making him laugh.

"Well, Kylie how are you feeling today?" Doc Reynolds asked, moving into the room.

"Fine, as long as I don't move," I answered, causing Doc Reynolds to laugh, while Parker chuckled from his side of the bed.

Mrs. Monroe shut the door and leaned against it while Parker and Doc Reynolds moved the covers off me, exposing my thighs to the doctor for the first time. "What are those?" He stared at the knife pricks.

“I danced with a tree and lost.” I fought against embarrassment at the situation when Parker burst out laughing. I could hear his mother giggling behind us.

“Well, she has her sense of humor,” Dr. Reynolds stated. “You are keeping them clean as well?”

“Yes,” Parker answered.

“Kylie, I hate to do this but let’s get you up and look at your wounds,” Dr. Reynolds continued. “I didn’t see these last night.” He pointed at more wounds on my hips. “Kylie, can you stand? I want to make sure I haven’t missed anything else.”

“With help,” I answered as Parker leaned, down letting me hold onto his neck as before. It felt good to stand while Dr. Reynolds examined every inch of my body. Parker kept one hand around my back and another holding my arm to keep me from collapsing. My body began to tremble while waiting for Dr. Reynolds to finish his examination and then apply the bandages again. The wounded muscles caused Parker to tighten his grip, while Doc Reynolds recruited Parker’s mother to help finish.

“Kylie, you need to rest. It may take several weeks before some of the cuts completely close.” He paused, turning to Parker. “You need to make sure she stays inside and in bed most of the day. I don’t want her getting stiff, so let her move around a little, but no where near the barn or fields until she’s not bleeding.”

“Yes, sir.” Parker nodded.

“Martha, keep her food light, but have her eat several times a day. She’s very weak, and it may take a few days before she is able to eat more.” Dr. Reynolds began to gather up his instruments. “Oh. I don’t know how close you two are but there will be no intimate relations at least for the next few weeks. It’s too dangerous for Kylie. She’s too weak,” he said, taking a

deep breathe, “Does anyone have any questions?” We just shook our heads. “I’ll be back in a couple of days to check on you, unless something changes. Kylie, get some rest.” I nodded knowing these four walls would be my companions for a while; at least the bed was soft.

After Dr. Reynolds left, Parker fed me some chicken and vegetable soup spiked with more whiskey. This hid more of the whiskey taste, but I could eat only a small bowl before the pain of me sitting up and the whiskey forced me to lie back down.

## Chapter 7

I walked slowly across the porch, watching Parker and his brothers working with the horses, smiling each time I caught him staring at me. Four days had passed since my father attacked me, and parts of my wounds itched from healing. I spent my days at the main house under the attentive eyes of his mother and sister-in-law. At night, we stayed in the privacy of the cabin.

I borrowed pantaloons from so she could wash mine, and I had no need for a corset. Parker ignored my suggestions about retrieving my clothes. Because of my wounds, I wore only pantaloons and a shirt borrowed from Vernon Sr. My knives, safely secured inside my boots, offered a little comfort but Parker assured me, he planned to add a gun. He schooled me during our evenings on gun use and care. He laughed each time a rifle kicked me into him while he stood behind me.

The quiet morning moved along peaceably, and I embraced the sun from my seat. Parker insisted I not wander far from the house. Resting was the only time no eyes kept constant watch over me; it had become the only escape from my boredom. I wanted to read, which would

occupy the hours of nothingness, but the only book the Monroes kept in the house was a very old family Bible, and I feared that touching it would cause it to crumble. I asked Parker to take me to town to get more but lost every discussion we had on the topic.

“Wagon,” someone shouted, interrupting the silence.

“Ky. Get inside,” Parker shouted, moving to block the drive, his gun held tight in his hand. “That’s far enough.”

“I came to get my daughter,” my father stated.

“She’s not leaving here.” Parker stood his ground as his brothers, father, grandfather, and hired hands gathered behind him.

“That’s her choice,” my father insisted.

“Have you told Mrs. Bellows why she’s here?” Parker turned to my mother.

“What do you mean?” My mother looked from Parker to her husband.

“Cord. Fetch Kylie,” Parker ordered his brother, who turned and ran to the house. I stood watching with Mrs. Monroe hidden behind the door.

“Parker wants Kylie to come out to him,” Cord managed to say between breaths.

I moved away from the door, my body shaking in the same rhythm as my head. The thought of returning to my parents’ home hadn’t crossed my mind because of the protective bubble of the Monroe farm. Mrs. Monroe hugged me, giving the comfort I needed.

“He won’t let them touch you again, and neither will any of the men behind him.”

“No.” I pulled away, putting myself against the back wall of the dining room. “No.”

“Kylie.” She put her hands on my cheeks, forcing me to look at her. “Do you trust Parker?” I could only nod. “Then trust him to keep your father away from you.” She hugged me again.

Staring out the window again, I wished I had laid down when he suggested it. He didn't look at me but waved for me to come out. His mother helped me down the steps, then escorted me slowly across the yard.

"Did he tell you Asa tried to have his way with her?" Parker's eyes stared at my mother. "Mr. Bellows, you've called my family mean and ruthless, but..." He reached his free hand out, never looking at me. Trembling, I wrapped my fingers around the warmth in his calloused grasp.

"Kylie," my father commanded.

"Kylie, what's wrong?" my mother's voice softened with fear and confusion but frowned at my lack of clothes.

Parker leaned down, whispering in my ear, "Face me and drop the shirt." He let go of my hand and gently pulled my hair to one side, holding it out of the way. I looked up at Parker, tears filling my eyes.

"Kylie?" my mother whispered.

Parker kissed my cheek. "He's never going to touch you again." I unbuttoned the shirt and let it fall to the ground, exposing the blood-covered rags still tightly wrapped around me. I clung to Parker's waist sobbing.

"Oh. Dear Lord." My mother's voice quivered. "Kylie, what did that?"

"Why don't you ask who?" Parker suggested.

"Kylie?" she asked again.

"Yes." I gasped, tightening my grip on Parker's shirt but didn't turn around.

"Who? What?" She whimpered while I continued to sob uncontrollably, forcing Parker to tighten his grip to comfort me as best he could. Her voice softened to a gentle whisper.

"Kylie?"

Parker stiffened and kissed the top of my hair. “You need to tell her.” I took a deep breath, looking up at him and he kissed me again.

“I love you.”

I took another breath to get control of my voice, “You were gone when I came home. Parker was up on the hill on the south side of the barn. I rode up to the house.” I paused, taking a shaky breath and leaned my forehead on Parker’s chest. “I tied my stallion to the post and walked toward the house. My father, your husband,” stopping and turning slowly, pulling Parker’s arm across my chest, covering up as much of my exposed breasts as I could. “My father came out screaming, calling me a whore, and swinging his fancy riding crop.” I stared coldly at my mother. “He beat me and beat me, over and over.” My voice rose with anger, “ranting that he had to get me under his control so I could marry Asa.” My mother shivered from the hate in my eyes and the tears on her cheeks.

Parker scowled at my father. “You need to leave.” Parker paused while I crossed my arms over my chest; he leaned down and picked up the shirt, shaking it off before helping me put it back on. Wrapping me in his arms, we turned and walked away from my parents.

Parker helped me up onto his horse, but I couldn’t help myself and looked down the drive as my father drove away. “Are you all right?” Parker asked, climbing on behind me.

“Take me home,” I said, relaxing my back against his chest while feeling the comfort of his arms.

“I’ll send some food down,” Mrs. Monroe told us.

The horse slowly guided us away from the others while Parker sniffed my hair, keeping me in a loving embrace as I cried. He held me even after we got to the cabin until my sobbing eased before he climbed down.

“Let’s get you inside.”

“No. Put the horse up.” I forced a smile. “He doesn’t deserve to be uncomfortable because of me.”

“All right.” Parker led us to the small stable and quickly relieved his steed of its burdens. “Come here.” He tossed the saddle over the fence then wrapped me tight in his arms and kissed me deeply. His tongue played against the top of mine before pulling back.

“I’ve got to stop before...” He paused.

“Before?”

Smiling and picking me up, he carried me into the cabin, laid me on the bed, then climbed up beside me. He gently pulled on the ribbon holding my pantaloons up. My shirt lay open. He took my exposed breast into his mouth circling, the nipple with his tongue.

Moaning, I shifted closer to Parker. His smile made my lower parts of my body throb, while I rubbed my hand along his back. He pulled more of my breast into his mouth while he slipped his fingers into my pantaloons.

He changed breasts, putting more weight on his elbow, while playing in the curls until I separated my legs, inviting him in, driving his fingers deep inside me until I moaned and tried to close off the opening. Parker pushed my legs farther apart with his booted feet while I twisted my fist in his clothes. He continued his assault, making my body shake, filling me with intense pleasure until I screamed.

The door to the cabin burst open, Vern, Cord and Luke stood in the doorway with their guns drawn. Parker looked over his shoulder but Vern expressed what crossed both their minds.

“Shit.” Moving in front of the younger boys Vern ordered. “Out. Get out.”

“What? Is Kylie all right?” Cord asked, fighting against his brother



“Why did Kylie scream?” Luke continued, stepping outside.

“Parker will tell you in a minute, now get out.” Vern shoved them through the door then latched it closed.

Parker rolled onto his back, releasing his grip on me, leaning over, and kissing me. “Cover up.” He got up and washed his hands in the water basin warming by the fire, smiling at me while he dried them. He opened the door and stepped out.

“Parker, is Kylie all right?” Cord asked, followed very quickly by, “Is she hurt?” from Luke.

“Ky’s fine,” Parker stated.

“Then why did she scream?” Luke asked.

Vern howled with laughter.

Before Parker and Vern could stop them, Cord and Luke burst back through the door. “Kylie,” they both shouted. “What’s wrong?” Cord asked. “Why did you scream?” Luke added. I just laughed at their innocence.

“Well, Ky?” Luke asked.

“Her name is Kylie.” Parker stated harshly.

“Parker.” I glared at him.

“Sorry, Kylie. Sorry, Parker.” Luke sounded sad.

“Well?” Cord asked.

“Well?” Vern smirked.

“I am fine.” My mind raced to fine an acceptable answer.

“Why did you scream?” Luke asked again.

“Parker,” I paused, “was tickling me.” Vern and Parker both fought to conceal their laughter, forcing me to glare at them and pointing for them to go outside. I could hear them laughing even after the door shut, but Luke and Cord seemed unfazed by their brothers and accepted my answer before turning my attention back to the younger two brothers.

“What are you doing here?”

“The food,” they shouted, running to retrieve the lost basket and racing back to talk with me more.

“I’ll take that,” Parker said, keeping the boys out of the cabin. “Go back to the house.”

“Can’t we stay and talk to Kylie?” Luke asked.

“No.” Parker stared down at him, then carried the food inside and sat it on the small table. Vern, with a devilish smile, and the boys stood in the doorway.

“Say good-bye to Kylie.”

“Bye, Kylie.” The younger boys waved as Parker closed the door.

Vern stuck his head back in the door; he grinned. “You need to teach Becca how to scream.”

“Vern out!” Parker shouted, causing Vern to howl with laughter. “He’s so jealous,” Parker said as he shut the door and smiled proudly before taking a seat on the bed. “I’m going into town tomorrow. Do you need anything?”

“Yes. My clothes.”

“Your clothes look nice to me.” Parker pulled the front of my shirt out away from my chest. I slapped him with a pillow; laughing, he crawled over me, forcing me to lie back on the bed until he straddled me. He leaned down slowly and barely touched my lips, tracing them with his tongue.

“Vern wants Becca to enjoy his touch as much as you do mine.” Parker kissed me deeply.

I frowned when he moved away from me. “Vern’s so unkind to Becca, and I’ve never seen him kiss her.” My eyes met Parker’s. “I wouldn’t be in your bed if you acted that way.”

“I know,” he smiled, giving me a chaste kiss and offered me his hand. “Sit up. Turn around and take the shirt off.” He placed a basin of clean water in a chair beside the bed before climbing up behind me. “There’s still so much blood on these bandages. You need to be careful not to do anything that will break these open.” He removed the old ones, cleaned the wounds, and then started putting new ones.

“I don’t know how I am breaking them open. You won’t let me do anything.” I groaned when he tightened the clean bandages. “I would like to breathe.”

“You can breathe. Now up. I want them tight. I’m hoping that it will help them close.” He kissed me, then started setting the food out on the table. We sat across from each other eating the bread, ham, and beans, followed by some blackberry cobbler.

“You need to rest.” Parker held his hand out to me, laughing because I rolled my eyes at him. “I don’t want to hear it. Do you need to go to the outhouse first?” He smiled. “Oh, and you only get three trips tonight.”

“What, you’re telling me when I need to pee, now too?” I shouted.

“Yes, because of the seven times, I took you out last night, you only actually peed twice. So, yes.” He laughed, holding the door open for me. I elbowed him in the stomach when I walked past him, making him laugh more.

Parker kissed me chastely after we went to bed because he refused to touch me. I curled up with my back to him, making sure that my hips rubbed against him. I could feel him hard against the thin fabric of my pantaloons, letting me know he still wanted me.

“Ky. Quit wiggling.” Placing his hand on my hip, he leaned in as though to kiss my cheek, “or you’ll be sleeping alone.” I gasped, trying to sound innocent, but he tightened his grip around my waist while he laughed. I stopped moving, because he meant it, and I didn’t want to be away from the safety of his embrace.

## Chapter 8

“Ky, get up.” Parker pulled his boots up over his work pants. “Ky. Now.” I heard the cabin door open. “Be up and moving by the time I get back.” I continued to lie in the warm bed, ignoring Parker, because I didn’t want to be up at the main house without him, and had no desire to be slaved over any more. Forgetting his instructions, I fell back asleep.

“Ky.” He swatted me lightly on the behind. “You’re supposed to be getting up.”

“I’m staying here.” My arms curled around Parker’s soft pillow.

“Get up. I have things that I need to get done today”

“Go. I’ll be fine. I’ll join you out the main house, once I get more rest,” I said, covering my face with the blanket because the sun shone down in my eyes from the open door.

“No. I am not taking that chance. Now get up.”

“No.” I couldn’t resist the urge to pout, trying to convince him I was capable of taking care of myself. Parker jumped onto the bed, making me squeal; laughing, he yanked the covers

off me then patted my hip. I glared at him, but his soft blue eyes held so much love. I wondered how many girls had fallen for that look as he knelt beside me, holding out his hand.

“Sit up and take your clothes off. I still need to doctor your back.”

“Ugh,” I screamed. “You just want me out of bed.”

“Truthfully.” He stretched out across the bed with his body tight to mine. “I would rather lie here with you all day.” He nudged me. “Get up.”

I relented, leaving the warmth of the bed. “You won’t reconsider letting me stay out here would you?” Standing in front of him, my hands touched his smooth cheeks, bringing him up so I could kiss him.

“No.” He began to remove the bandages before moving the water basin to a chair near him and wetting the rag. “Pantaloons, Ky.”

“Doesn’t it bother you when I undress in front of you?” I watched him ring out the rag.

He quietly laughed, causing his eyes to twinkle. “Oh yes, but with just the little bit we did yesterday, we broke part of the cuts back open.” He pulled me down into a kiss. “So I have to be careful; most of the ones on your legs and hips are almost healed, but several of the ones on your back are so deep they keep breaking open.”

“Can’t Becca come out here and stay with me?” I tried to turn and look at him.

“No.” He forced me to keep looking away from him. “Becca has chores to do.” The cool rag felt good against the soft flesh between the wounds. “Besides, Dr. Reynolds is supposed to be out to the main house later.” Parker finished with my legs then put the rag back in the water before placing both his hands on my hips; closing his eyes, he gently touched one of the cuts with his full lips kissing it ever so tenderly. He turned me around, “Ky.” A soft whisper crossed my ears, “will you be my wife?” Tears glistened in his eyes as he stared at me.

I didn't answer him but wrapped my arms around him. We kissed as he held me close enough to feel his penis grow hard. "Oooh." I whispered.

"I love you." He touched my cheek. "Do you have any clean clothes out here?"

"Yes." I rolled my eyes at his determination to stay away from me.

"Good. Put them on." He stood, fidgeting with his pants while watching me get dressed. "That shirt needs to be washed." I leaned down to put my boots on. "Sit." He took my boots and socks then proceeded to slide them on my feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

I borrowed one of Vern's shirts so I could wash my clothes but Mrs. Monroe scolded me when she caught me helping with the wash. I slept most of the morning, not because of my wounds but from boredom, waking in time to watch Dr. Reynolds ride up the drive.

The exam ended more quickly than all the previous ones. After giving Mrs. Monroe a report on my condition, he wrote down new instructions for Parker. "Kylie. I don't know what happened between you and your father, but he is truly sorry." Dr. Reynolds said.

"He can just be sorry." Parker stated as he entered the room.

"Oh, Parker. I didn't hear you." Dr. Reynolds turned to face him.

"Are you finished?" Parker asked, visibly upset.

"Yes. I've written some instructions down. Kylie is doing well." Dr. Reynolds seemed a little nervous. "I'll be going. Kylie, you should be able to go to church tomorrow. Just take it easy."

"Can I ride my horse?" I smiled hoping.

"No," Parker declared.

"She'd run it, wouldn't she?" Dr. Reynolds asked Parker.

“Yes.”

“No,” I told them, but they both laughed.

“I’ll leave that up to Parker to decide.” Dr. Reynolds walked out with Parker, but I went to the kitchen to help set the table for dinner. I took some plates out of the cabinet.

“Ky.” Rolling my eyes, I stared at Parker because I wanted to help do something, anything. “Mama, how long till lunch?”

“About ten minutes,” she replied.

“Ky.” He smiled and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close, then kissed my head before leading me to a secluded bench surrounded by his mother’s flowerbed filled with tulips and irises, separated by a line of fragrant rose bushes.

I sat down on the bench while Parker knelt in front of me. “You didn’t answer me earlier.” He reached into his pocket before taking my left hand in his. “Ky, from the day I saw you pull up on the coach, I have been in love with you. Will you consent to be my wife?”

I touched his cheek with my free hand. “I would love to be your wife.” Parker took out a gold ring with a diamond that danced with rainbows in the bright sunshine. I had only ever seen them on the hands of wealthy ladies in Boston.

“Where did you get that?” I paused, looking at him. “How can you afford it?”

Parker laughed, sliding it on my finger. “Don’t worry about it.” He leaned up and kissed me. “We’re sleeping in the main house tonight.” He continued kissing me as he sat on the bench beside me, pulling me into his embrace. We stayed in the tender embrace until we heard the dinner bell.

After dinner, I sat in a rocker on the front porch watching Parker and his brothers carry in the supplies they had brought from town. They grumbled and complained about the weight of a

trunk they carried until I noticed it was one of mine. My clothes. They had retrieved my clothing, all six trunks. I smile and danced a little happy jig to have my possessions back. I could and would spend the rest of the day sorting through the trunks and organizing them once again.

“Kylie, I don’t know of any one person who needs this many trunks,” Vern teased.

“I didn’t know clothes could weigh so much,” Parker added, letting me wrap my arms around his neck after they put the last on in the bedroom upstairs.

“Thank you both very much. I was beginning to feel lost without my things,” I kissed Parker then nodded at Vern.

Parker wrapped me in his arms, “You have fun. I have more things to take care of.” He kissed me again. “I love you, and if you get tired get some rest.” I rolled my eyes. “Stop that,” Parker said, as he swatted my behind.

“Fine. Go do whatever it is you feel you need to do,” I whispered, dancing around and looking at all my trunks. I opened the first one and growled at the way it was packed. All my pants filled it, wrinkling almost every pair. I knew this would be an all day job, because it took me three days to get it all organized to bring back from Boston. I sat down and began to empty the trunks one at a time. Once I emptied the trunks, I lined them all up along the far wall to be repacked later. It didn’t take me long before a small path separated all my clothes, which lay stretched out to help get rid of some of the wrinkles. I still had two trunks to go.

I rubbed my neck to relieve some of the aches from spending so time sitting on the hard floor. I had a stack of my camisoles, corsets, pantaloons and stockings surrounding me because some one mixed the cottons with the silks. I preferred all the cotton items in one trunk; they didn’t go in with my silks. I groaned just before someone knocked on the door.



“Hello.” I said.

“Can I come in?” Becca whispered.

“Sure. You can keep me company while I sort through this mess.” I smiled, stealing a bite off my plate. “You look like something is bothering you. What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Becca answered. “Can I see the ring? I’ve never seen anything but a gold band. Vern didn’t even get me one of those.” I lifted my hand with the diamond ring glimmering in the lamplight. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It is. I have only seen three others, and they were all in Boston.” I looked at it. “I wonder where he got it.”

“Parker has his ways,” she paused. “No one crosses Parker, but you challenge him all the time. Aren’t you scared of him?”

I looked at her. “No. I see the way the others react to him, but I’ve never been scared of him.”

“We were all surprised that day he saw you in town on the coach.” She laughed. “Vern teased him about the red haired girl.” She smiled at me before continuing, “When he took the stallion over to your folks, he saw you in your window. He came home only to pick up a few things, then he went back to your house.”

I turned to say something snide but the look in her eyes was so sad. “What’s the deal between you and Vern? Don’t you love him?”

“I guess I do.” She paused. “I’ve been with him for four years. He’s never treated me the way Parker does you.”

“Do you know why?” I asked.

“My father lost to Vern in a poker game. My father couldn’t pay, so he offered me to Vern.” Her whole face filled with more sadness.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” I felt ashamed for embarrassing her.

“It was Mama who insisted we get married or send me back to my folks.” Tears began to fill her eyes, “so to keep her happy, he married me.”

“Aren’t you happy? Now?” I asked.

“I’m happy enough. After Vern came back last night, he went on about Parker tickling you and making you scream.” She smiled sadly at me but I couldn’t keep from laughing.

“When Parker made me scream, Vern, Cord and Luke burst through the door.” Laughing harder, I saw her really smile. “We just stare at them in shock.” She finally giggled, with her smile touching her eyes.

“Oh my,” she held her hand to her lips. “Will you tell me what Parker does to you?”

“Does to me?” I realized Vern never made love to her. I didn’t know what I could tell her.

“Yes. What does he do to make you scream?” she turned her head to hide her embarrassment.

“Oh, is this Vern’s idea?” I wondered.

“No. I thought if I learned how to scream; he might treat me as Parker does you.” Her face showed her fear.

My heart wanted to break, seeing her so sad. “How do you feel when you’re together?”

“It hurts. He’ll flip my gown or dress up. Climbs on me, then when he finishes he turns over and goes to sleep.” She paused. “Tell me about how Parker does you. We all know he

bedded you even before he brought you here.” She looked away, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I touched the charm that hung around my neck. “Parker gave me this charm for my birthday. It was also the first time for me,” I said, taking a deep breath. “It really hurt that time, but the more we were together the more enjoyable it became.” A smile crossed my face, wanting to feel Parker close to me. “I miss his touch now. Parker gets upset when my cuts break open.” I leaned close to speak in a soft whisper. “I love it when he makes my body quake.”

She looked astonished. “Your body quake? How?”

I laughed. “Different ways. He was using his fingers when Vern walked in.”

“Please tell me how,” she truly wanted to know.

“Parker starts with a kiss; he swells when he wants to make love to me. He puts my breasts in his mouth, and sometimes he slides his hand down my pantaloons, other times he kisses me there.” I couldn’t believe that Becca blushed even after four years of marriage. “He plays with me, twisting the flesh of my folds between his fingers.” I shivered at the thought.

“What?” she asked.

Taking another breath before continuing, “I sometimes fight against the feeling even though it feels wonderful. When I do that, Parker holds me down, then that brings on the screams.”

We both giggled. Her curiosity got the better of her. “Have you ever touched it?”

Covering my face with my hands, I knew the color matched my hair, “Yes.” Leaning in to whisper, “I have put it in my mouth and made Parker scream.”

“Really?” her smile lit up her face finally.

“Yes,” I told her as Parker walked through the door.

“Well, a hen fest. We were wondering where you were, Becca,” Parker frowned.

“I best be going. Goodnight.” She stood quickly, not looking Parker in the face.

“Goodnight, Becca. We’ll have to do this again.” I smiled up at her.

“I would like that. Goodnight, Parker.” Becca ran out the door.

“Goodnight.” Parker closed the door still frowning.

I slapped his leg, hitting the leather of his boot. “Be nice.”

“I was nice.” Parker stared at me, sitting in the midst of all my clothes.

“Right, that’s why she darted out of here as soon as you stepped in,” looking up at him.

Parker helped me off the floor and looked around the room at all my clothes. “We have a long day tomorrow.” He kissed me.

“I need to finish cleaning up this mess,” pointing at the piles of cloth.

He put his hands on my cheeks, so I would stare at him, “Leave them.” He drew me into a gentle kiss.

I pulled back. “What’s happening tomorrow?”

“You’ll find out. Come to bed.” Parker sat down and started taking off his clothes. I placed my hands behind his neck, forcing him to look up at me. “What were you two crones talking about?”

“Crones.” I stared at him, leaning in close. “For a man who wants to make love to me, calling me a crone won’t help.”

He smiled, “Ky, take your clothes off and come to bed.”

I slipped quickly out of mine after Parker dropped his clothes beside the bed. He lay back on the bed, propping pillows behind him, then helped me to straddle his legs. Leaning down, I took his tip in my mouth causing him to moan. His hands wrapped around my arms,

pulling up toward his chest. I licked his nipples before moving to his lips, teasing his tongue with mine.

“Not yet,” he whispered, when I tried to position him under me.

“Why?” I asked, licking his lips.

“You’re not ready.” Parker wet his fingers, then took mine into his mouth. He lowered our moistened fingers then pushed them inside the tender folds of my flesh, slowly caressing me while I moaned.

He joined them with his penis and found a subtle rhythm. Parker embraced me, pushing my breast against his face, then he slid his finger in my anus and began wiggling it.

I could feel the pressure of everything moving in and out of me as Parker played with my nipple. Fighting not to scream, Parker grabbed my head, drawing me down into a deep kiss as he pulsed in me, making me quake again. He cleaned us up, then curled up next to me while holding me close, our nude bodies still pulsing with the deep satisfaction.

“I love you so much.” Parker kissed my cheek, pulling me into a tighter embrace.

## Chapter 9

I woke to a banging on the bedroom door. “Parker. Kylie. Time to get up. Breakfast is almost ready,” Mrs. Monroe shouted from the hallway.

Parker’s hand slid down my hip, while softly kissing the back of my shoulder. He moved his body closer, wrapping me in a warm embrace. I tried to turn over so I could kiss him, but he kept a tight hold on me. I could feel his growing need as he placed gentle kisses along my neck and back, until someone banged on the door again.

“Parker. Kylie. Breakfast is ready.” Vern’s voice bellowed before he tried the latch.

“Stay out, Vern.” Parker shouted.

“I’m supposed to make sure you’re up.” Vern sounded almost cheerful. “Mama doesn’t want to be late today.”

“We’re coming,” Parker said, before turning back to me. “We’ll finish this later.” I rolled into his arms and we embraced in a long, slow heart felt kiss. I felt a little lost when he stopped and climbed out of bed. “Get dressed.”

I started fumbling through my stack of pants while Parker dressed in a white shirt, a light blue silk vest, and dark brown leather coat, with his black pants tucked into his boots. He looked at me, his expression showed his disapproval but didn’t say anything; reaching down at the pile of silk corsets on the floor, he picked up a silky light blue one that I hardly wore and tossed it at me.

“This one.” He also picked out matching pantaloons and camisole before helping me lace up the corset, which tied in the back. A greedy smile crossed his face when he inspected the fit. “I like this one.” He leaned down and kissed my almost completely exposed breasts.

He turned toward the pile of dresses and inspected each one, then tossing them into a new pile. He spotted a dress wrapped in paper. He removed the package, then stared silently and touched the light blue silk teased by lace trim that ran across the low front. His face lit up.

“Wear this one.”

“No.” I paused. “It’s a bad luck dress.”

Parker laughed then sat on the bed. “Why?”

“I spent a lot of money on that dress for a dance, but my escort never showed. I found out later, he took Mary Sinclair. I hated him. I hated her. I almost ripped it to shreds, but I swore I would never wear it again.”

Parker took me in his arms. “He was a fool and I’m glad. Now you’re here with me and I love you.” He took my hands in his, kissed me then left.

I sat on the bed and began to unbutton the dress. “Kylie.” Becca knocked on the door. “Parker sent me up to help you. Can I come in?”

“Yes, come on in.” I looked at her when she came through the door. She was smiling. “You look happy this morning.”

“Oh, this is so beautiful,” Becca stated, looking at the dress. “I wish I had something that beautiful.” Her dress showed the wear of the fabric around the seams; it hung loose and a little baggy. I couldn’t believe that Vern wouldn’t buy her a better-looking dress.

I smiled, “Go get us some breakfast and bring it up here.”

“Be right back.”

I laid my dress on the bed, then went to my piles of corsets, dresses, and undergarments and picked out a red silk dress I had worn to another party. With Becca’s dark brown hair, the dress would look beautiful on her. I went back to my dress while waiting for Becca to return with breakfast. We ate our food, then I shut the door and braced it with a chair.

“Take that dress off,” I told her.

“Why?”

I pointed to another chair with the paper laid over it. “That’s for you, if you want it.”

“For me?” she whispered.

“Yes.” I nudged her ribs.

Reaching down, her hands trembled as she lifted the paper off the dress. “It’s beautiful.”

“Well let’s get you into it, then maybe Vern will look at you differently.” She smiled and turned a light red. “What?”

“I kissed Vern last night.” She paused. “Down there.”

I rose to my knees, wanting to hear what happened. “Well? What happened?”

“He made me quake.” She smiled. “And you were right. It didn’t hurt.”

Parker banged on the door. “Get dressed and quit gabbing like a couple of old crones.”

“Parker, if you call me an old crone again, you’ll be sleeping in the barn.” I shouted, followed by Vern’s loud laugh.

“How do you do that?” Becca asked.

“What?” I glanced up at her as I finished unbuttoning the dress.

“Talk to Parker like that?” she asked, looking up from her dress.

“He’s harmless.” I paused. “Now, let’s get dressed.”

“Oh, and you might like to wear these too.” I lifted a pillow off the red silk pantaloons, corset, and camisole.

“Kylie.” She looked at me, “how rich are you?”

It shocked me that shy Becca had asked me about my money. “I have my own home in Boston and enough money with me to stock this place, four times over.”

Becca sat down on the bed. “How?”

“I’ll tell you while we dress.” I pulled my dress over my shoulders, then began to tell Becca how I got started breaking horses at age seven. Becca quickly took off her worn clothes and slipped into the silk. I enjoyed seeing her face brighten up but didn’t know whether it was



because of the clothing or because I told her about becoming a partner in a horse farm, before acquiring more businesses that were having financial problems.

The dress fit her perfectly. She twirled around, causing the skirt flare. We laughed, then began fixing our hair, before adding the final touch, a dab of rouge to our lips and cheeks.

“Ky,” Parker hollered from the bottom of the stairs.

“We’re almost ready.” I shouted through a crack in the door. “We’ll be down as soon as you bring up the horses and carriages.”

Becca and I took one last look in the full mirror, before I peeked out to make sure no one stood near the door. I could hear everyone else out on the front porch.

“Let’s go.” I led her to the main room and looked out the window.

“Kylie. Let’s go.” Parker called to me.

I again peeked out the door. “If you ever want me to look like this again you best learn to be patient.” I walked out into the gentle spray of sunlight.

Parker smiled and held his hand out. I accepted, then he gently lifted mine to his lips. “You’re beautiful.”

“Come on you two.” Vern complained. “Becca, we’re going to leave without you.” He turned back to his horse.

Becca stepped slowly out the door. “Becca!” Echoed from all the others, causing Vern to turn toward the house. He grabbed his hat, pulling it off his head, before moving up to the steps where he stood speechless and dumbfounded.

Parker laughed. “Vern, take your wife’s hand and lead her to the carriage.” The Monroe’s two carriages sat waiting. Parker led me to the other smaller Phaeton carriage where he smiled and laughed.

“I’ve never seen Vern look at her that way.” He paused. “He’s always treated her as a possession.”

“And how do you see me?” I wrapped my arm around his while I cringed at the swaying of the carriage, not wanting to ruin this day.

“You will find out after church.” He snapped the reins to urge the horses to keep going.

\* \* \* \* \*

The church bustled with people, including my parents; sitting in the same pew as the week before. The rest of the congregation whispered as I walked in with my hand clutching tightly to the tense muscle in Parker’s arm. I tightened my grip when Asa turned to face us. Parker stepped slightly in front of me as the rest of the Monroe men filled in around us. Asa’s father pulled him into their pew, breaking the tension.

“You’re trembling.” Parker pulled me close as I sat between him and his father, while Vern, Becca, and Pappa took the seat in front of us. Several of the Monroe’s hired hands filled the pew behind us, encasing me in a protective barrier.

“No one can hurt you,” Parker whispered, kissing my forehead. “I won’t let Asa or your father near you.” He held me around the waist as the congregation stood singing from the hymnals. My body trembled by the time Reverend Harris told us to be seated. During the sermon, Parker held my hand, while playing with the ring on my finger. He made me giggle with his fidgeting.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” he whispered, kissing my ear.

After the service, my grandparents hugged me and told me how beautiful I was. I also got hugs from my brothers and sisters.

“Mr. Monroe, Parker, are you ready?” Reverend Harrison stood at the front of the church again, after shaking hands as everyone else exited.

“Yes sir, we are,” Parker answered, taking my hand and leading me up to the pulpit as our families, except my father, gathered around us.

“Face each other. Take each other’s hands,” the reverend began. “Parker Ambrose Monroe, do you take Kylie Ruth Bellows as your wife?”

I began to shake. “I do.” His words embraced me as his arms had done on the little bench in his mother’s garden.

“Kylie Ruth Bellows, do you take Parker Ambrose Monroe as your husband?” he continued.

“I do.” I whispered as the first tear ran down my cheek. Parker squeezed my hands as he smiled down at me.

“The ring please,” the reverend ordered. Parker reached in his pocket, pulling out a gold band. “This ring symbolizes your pledge to each other, to love, honor, and cherish each other, until death do you part.” He paused and turned to Parker. “Place the ring on Kylie’s finger.” Parker took the ring. I noticed his always-steady hands were shaking slightly as he slid the ring on my finger.

“Parker, do you promise to love, honor, and cherish Kylie, being loyal only to her, till death do you part?”

Parker tightened his hold on my hands, “I do.”

“Kylie, do you promise to love, honor, and cherish Parker, being loyal only to him, till death you do part?”

“I do.” More tears ran down my cheeks.

“Then I pronounce you husband and wife. Parker, you may kiss your bride,” the reverend finished.

Parker smiled, gently touching the sides of my face, wiping away my tears. Leaning down, he hovered just above my lips, “I love you.” Then he kissed me. I could hear his family cheering and my mother crying while he pulled me closer, finding it hard to break away. He kissed me again but barely touched my lips, a smile covering his face, and then he escorted me down the aisle to our waiting families, who smothered us in hugs and congratulations.

“Parker, Kylie, one more thing,” Reverend Harris stopped us. He led us to a small table at the back of the church where he began to write on a piece of paper. “Parker, put your signature here.” Parker took the pen and very slowly scribbled his name. “Kylie, sign right here.” I took the pen and dipped it in the ink. I stared at the childish looking writing where Parker signed. I felt odd adding my flowery signature next to his but realized Parker’s schooling had been spent working on the farm and I had spent my days in a classroom.

“Congratulations to you both,” Reverend Harris shook Parker’s hand.

“Thank you.” Parker smiled and wrapped his arm around me, leading me out to the carriage. Parker touched my cheek, drawing me in for a private kiss as our families pulled out.

“You set this all up yesterday.” I wrapped my arm around his. He grinned, and then flicked the reins to get the horses moving.

“What else do you have planned?” I nudged him in the ribs.

“It’s our wedding day, and I want it to be special.” Parker pulled into the town’s hotel, one of the largest buildings in town, which sat off the main road surround by trees, creating a peaceful atmosphere. He helped me out of the carriage and held my hand as we walked up the gravel path decorated with flowers on both sides. He kissed me lightly before opening the door

and we stepped in to a large room to shouts of congratulations. My mother and grandparents stood smiling, with my brothers and sisters screaming my name; Dr. Reynolds leaned against the small bar applauding I looked around the at all the guests, glad that my father did not attend.

Across the room stood a huge table filled with food, and a huge white cake sitting at one end. I stared up at my husband, amazed at how he had a way of getting the things he wanted.

“Are you surprised?” he asked while I reached up to him, his face soft to the touch, and kissed him.

“You have plenty of time for that later. People are hungry!” Vern shouted.

“Can I shoot him?” I whispered, causing Parker to laugh and take my hand; he led us up to the table where we filled our plates with pieces of baked chicken, green beans, mashed potatoes, and an assortment of raw vegetables. We sat surrounded by our families eating and laughing.

Vern finished eating first and had to wait patiently, “Cut the cake already! People want dessert.”

“Can I shoot him, yet?” I turned to Parker, who helped me stand.

“No.”

We joined our mothers, who stood by the cake with Cassie at their side with the three of them telling us how to cut the cake. Parker ignored them as we cut a small piece of cake and fed it to each other.

“Miss Kylie.” Cassie turned me to face her. “I told you. You would give me more gray hairs.” She hugged me as Parker frowned but didn’t say anything as we moved back to the table, waiting for the others to receive pieces of the cake. Parker kissed my forehead, keeping me safely tucked in close while we both ate.

I cringed when the music started, but Parker held his hand out to me, then escorted me onto the floor as a slow waltz played. He held my hand, pulling me close, with his other hand at my waist.

“Are you ready to go?” he whispered as we glided around the small dance floor.

“Yes.” I did feel tired.

“I’ll let Vern know.” Parker’s smile caused his eyes to twinkle. “I can’t wait to get you home.” The song ended. “I’m going to get a drink. Do you want anything?”

“No, just to sit down.”

“Are you feeling all right?” Parker escorted me to an empty chair, kissing my hand while he stared at me.

“I’m fine,” I said.

Parker nodded, then walked over to the bar. “Whiskey,” he ordered, standing by Vern.

“How’s she doing?” Vern asked.

“She’s trying to hide it but she’s getting tired.” Parker smiled at me then downed the whiskey in one gulp. “I need to take her home.”

“Have another whiskey on your brother.”

“What?”

“I don’t know what Kylie said to Becca, but last night was amazing.” Vern laughed. “I almost made her scream.”

“Congratulations, Vern. Don’t forget to tell her how beautiful she looks.” Parker reminded him.

“Oh, done that several times already.” Vern downed his own whiskey.

Parker raised his eyebrow at his brother. “It’s a shame that it took my wife to make you see it.” They toasted each other and downed another shot of the whiskey. Patting Vern on his shoulder, Parker smiled then walked back and knelt in front of me.

“I know you’re not feeling well.”

Vern interrupted before he could say more. “Ladies and gentlemen.” He paused, waiting for the room to get quiet. “Parker and Kylie want to thank you for joining them here and making this day so special. As you all know, Kylie’s had a difficult week and isn’t feeling her normal obnoxious self.” The room filled with laughter. “So, Parker has decided it’s time to take her home.” He smiled suspiciously. “Personally, I think it’s something else.”

“Vern,” his mother shouted, causing even more laughter.

“Parker.” My mother stood up and walked over toward us. “I know you didn’t have to invite our family here today, but I wanted to say thank you and also to say thank you for making my daughter so happy.” She hugged him. “Kylie, I don’t know how to ask for your forgiveness. I also wanted you to know that I was crying because you looked so beautiful.”

“Mama, what happened isn’t your fault,” I stated, hugging her.

“I could’ve told him no, because I didn’t want him to force you to marry someone against your will, but I didn’t. I only ask that I be able to come see you.” She held me in her embrace. “I love you. Take care of your husband.”

“I love you too and plan to take care of Parker,” I said, winking up at Parker.

The room stood empty as Parker held his hand out to me, leading me outside to join the revelers, waiting to throw all kinds of seeds on us as we ran to the carriage decorated with ribbons and bows. We laughed at the old shoes and an iron teakettle tied to the back. Parker

helped me to the seat before he climbed in, kissing me softly; all the chaos disappeared in that kiss.

He flicked the reins, sending us rattling down the road with me leaning my head against his shoulder, allowing me to rest on the ride home. I closed my eyes and blocked out the town as the carriage rolled slowly forward. My husband stiffened, forcing me to sit up with a gentle push of his arm. Parker pulled his gun out from under the carriage seat, laying it across his lap while he held it. I finally saw what bothered him. Asa stood against a tree in front of us.

Parker tightened his hold on the gun, while Asa maneuvered for a good shot. “When I tell you, jump. I don’t want you to get hurt.” Parker whispered. I slid and held on the carriage seat while Parker and Asa stared at each other; one or both would die in the next few moments. I prayed Parker was faster and could shoot straighter. A gun appeared behind Asa. My father stepped into view; Parker relaxed slightly, breathing a sigh of relief after we rode past them. He kept the gun on his leg but his hand lay on my knee as we continued our journey to our new life together.

## Chapter 10

The house felt lifeless as we entered; Parker held my hand all the way to our room. “Pack a few clothes and get changed into something comfortable.” He quickly replaced his with his everyday work clothes, including his gun belt, then threw a small bag on the bed and filled it with more clothes. When he finished, he looked at me still in my dress.

“Kylie?”

“What?”



“You haven’t changed.” He frowned.

“No, but I did put some clothes on the bed.” I smiled.

“Get changed. I want to be gone before they get home.” He cocked his eyebrow up.

“I could use some help.” I stared at him.

“I’m sorry. I forgot your…” he said, moving to help me, “dresses aren’t that easy to get out of.” I turned around, pulling my hair out of the way.

“Shit,” he stammered when he saw all the buttons. “How many?”

I tried not to laugh, “Sixty.”

“No wonder you took forever getting dressed.” Laughing, he started unbuttoning the dress as I stood patiently waiting. He groaned before I heard the slip of leather.

“Get that knife away from my dress,” I demanded.

“I still have at least forty more,” he protested.

“If you put it against this fabric, it will damage it.” I held my hand to him. “Knife.”

“Ugh,” he moaned, handing it to me. It took him a while before he finally finished.

“Now, I know how come you don’t like wearing dresses,” he said as he helped me pull it over my head. “Get dressed.” He turned to leave.

“Parker.” He turned too looked at me. “You’re not done.”

“What?” His protest showed on his face. “The dress is off.”

“The corset.” I stared at him.

“Why, it looks good?” He smiled as he stared at my breast, before leaning down and placing a gentle kiss on the top of each.

“I’m not wearing this corset in the woods.”

“You’re doing this on purpose.” It only took a few moments for me to change after Parker unlaced the ribbon. I dropped my hand to my side as my husband laced up the front tie corset. I sat on the bed to take off my shoes but left my matching stockings on when he snarled. The denim felt good when I slid my pants on. I jerked my boots on before my shirt, but didn’t bother to tuck it in.

“Are you ready now?” His patience hovered on the verge of anger.

I pulled him down. “Yes.” I kissed him, touching his lips with my tongue.

“Save that thought.” He pulled away from me. “Let’s go.” We ran down the stairs and out to the barn, where our horses waited already saddled. “Follow me.” I grimaced, trying to keep the stallion at a slow pace behind Parker. I wanted to feel the air blowing through my hair, but I watched Parker’s hips wiggle slightly with each step of his horse. My body ached when the cabin came into view, which caused me to struggle with my own patience. I shifted my weight, trying to show my anxiety, while Parker took his time unsaddling the horses, glancing frequently at me while I waited, holding the bag of clothes, and trying to ignore the throbbing between my thighs.

Walking hand-in-hand to the cabin, I could hear my pulse beating. He stopped us outside the cabin door. “Stay here.”

I felt that my heart sounded like a drum as I voiced my complaint. “Parker.” I added a pout and leaned against the wall.

His lips barely touched mine. “Trust me.” He kissed me again then he disappeared into the cabin. In a few minutes, he walked back out. “Well, Mrs. Monroe, how does it feel to be my wife?”

Smiling lovingly at him, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” His face showed his shock.

“No.”

“Why not?” Aggravation echoed in his voice.

“Because you haven’t made love to me yet.”

Parker face lit up when he carried me inside. “That’s about to be remedied,” he said, kissing me as we went. Still holding me, he shut and latched the door, never taking his lips from mine then he laid us on the bed.

He pulled away and began to remove his clothes; I turned on my side to watch. My mouth watered as his muscles flexed with his movements, but I resisted the urge to reach out and run my fingers along the curves of his body. He turned and stared down at me, erect and all mine.

“Ky.” Parker held his hands out to me, helping me stand. Our hands gripped together as he lifted them to his lips, kissing them softly, then he looked at me as if he was seeing me for the first time.

“What?” looking into his eyes because he wasn’t moving to undress me as I expected. I took my hand laying it gently against his cheek, “Parker?” He placed his hand over mine; closing his eyes, he kissed it. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he whispered as I reached to take off my shirt. “No.” He continued to stand there staring at me.

“What?” I kissed his hand.

“I want to look at you.” He smiled as our eyes met. “This is the first time I’ve seen you.”

“Parker.” I rolled my eyes, “You have seen every piece of my body. You have touched every inch. Why is now different?” The blue in his eyes so warm, it made me melt.

He smiled. “You were forbidden, a treasure to be conquered, but now.” He stopped, but kept looking at me. “Every inch of you, you have truly given to me.” He paused. “Besides, we have a lifetime together. I don’t want to rush.”

He slowly lifted my shirt off before pulling on the corset string until it fell to the floor. Kneeling in front of me, he slid my right boot off before moving to the left. With the same slow precision, he undid my pants and gently folded them down my legs, so I could step out of them. My stockings came off when he pulled the ribbon that held the pantaloons on my legs. He never looked away from my face when the ribbon holding them to my waist fell to the floor.

His lips kissed the crease that joins my right thigh to my right hip, causing me to flinch. A smile crossed his face while his moist tongue created a sensation of its own and repeated the action on the left. He lifted my camisole, moving up my body and kissing me, starting with my belly button and avoiding the few remaining bandages before standing, bringing the camisole with him, and allowing him to stare down at me. “I want to make love to you,” Parker whispered, kissing me and lifting my trembling body in his arms, then laid me gently on the bed.

We lay there in each other’s embrace, our lips never leaving the comfort of the other’s; my fingers twisted in his hair. His hand caressed my cheek and finished in my curls before pulling away and shifting one of his legs to lie across my body, then lifting himself up to lean on his elbow, running his finger over my chest.

I lay there, feeling the gentle touch while still playing with his hair, “Parker, what are you thinking?”

“How beautiful you are.” He kissed me so tenderly.

“I want to thank you for today and for inviting my family.” I touched his lips with the same tenderness.

“You’re welcome,” he said, moving again so he could kiss me while squeezing my breast. His tongue explored every inch of my mouth until his hand slid to the tender places between my legs. He pushed my legs farther apart with his foot making for his hips, but keeping his weight on my right leg behind his back.

I lightly caressed the tight muscles along his shoulders as we kissed. Parker set a slow pace, holding his lips just out of my reach.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” I opened my mouth, inviting him back. Parker adjusted his position while I draped my legs over his as he gently slid inside. He found a rhythm as he moved my arms above my head. He rotated his hips, causing me to moan and my body to shake at his gentle touch.

Parker tightened his grip but maintained a steady pace, making me moan while I fought to free my hand. I wrapped my legs around his back when he quickened his movements, driving him deeper and causing me to moan. I squeezed my muscles together, escalating Parker’s heavy breathing, which increased his speed until I screamed, when he pulsated within me.

He laid his head beside mine, keeping all his weight on top of me, still holding my hands as we both gasped for air. He smiled. “Next time, you’re on top.” He said, then placed a gentle kiss on my lips. “Are you hungry?”

“No. Just thirsty.”

He lifted off me, causing me to moan as he slid out and adjusted his position, lowering his tongue, tickling the sensitive flesh. “Parker,” I gasped, making him pull back laughing as he

climbed off the bed. He walked over to a pitcher and poured a glass of water, drinking half before refilling it then taking a seat beside me and helping me scoot closer to him.

Wrapping his arm around me, he handed me the water. “You look tired Mrs. Monroe,”

“I am a little, but I really need to go visit the outhouse.” He laughed but escorted me to the outhouse, both of us naked. Once we back inside, Parker pulled back the covers on the bed, allowing me to crawl into his loving embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

The low light from a lamp shone in the cabin when I woke; Parker sat in a chair just looking at me. He smiled, but I could tell he was worried.

“We broke some of your wounds open.” He moved up to the bed. “I was worried that I’d wake when I cleaned you up.” Frowning, I tried to sit up. “Don’t get up.”

“How long have I been asleep?” I rubbed my hand down his chest, angry that I failed him.

He placed his hand over mine. “I think you overdid it yesterday.”

“Would I be able to go to the outhouse?” I smiled sadly at him.

“Yes.” He kissed me. “Hold onto me.” I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“What’s wrong with me?” I asked; my muscles felt weak as I tried to stand.

“You just overdid it.” Parker lifted me up, causing me to scream. “Slowly.”

“I thought I was past this part,” I said as tears slid down my cheeks. “What happened to me?” I looked down at my pantaloons, camisole, and new bandages. “You dressed me. How did we break the wounds open?”

“We got a little too aggressive.” Parker grabbed a lantern before we walked out the door to the outhouse.

“How long did I sleep?” I asked.

“The rest of the day and most of the night.” Parker held the lantern up while I opened the door to the outhouse. He placed the lantern on a small shelf by the door then proceeded to help me lower my pantaloons before helping me sit on the hard seat to conduct my business while he stood by the open door until I finished. “Stay there a minute.”

A cool breeze blew over me while sitting there listening to him relieve himself just beyond my sight. Bracing myself against the rough walls, I pushed myself up slowly, creating a sharp pain across my back and shoulders, which increased as I leaned down to pull up my pantaloons. I held my breath to keep from moaning and bracing myself on the rough door when I scrapped my hand on the splintered wood.

“Ow.”

“Ky, sit down!” Parker yelled, “I’ll be done in a minute.”

I looked at my hand; even in the dim light, I could see long splinters. “Shit,” I whispered. “What time is it?”

“Sun up is a few hours away, yet.” Parker came back around the corner still buttoning his trousers. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes. Have you been up all this time?” I watched him finish pulling up my pantaloons and tying the ribbon.

“No. I did sleep for a few hours, then I got up and noticed your back and cleaned you up, ate a little, and then sat in the chair to keep an eye on you.”

He took my hand in his. “Owww.” I jerked it away.

“What?” He held the lantern up and frowned.

“I scraped it on the door.”

Laughing, he wrapped his arm around me as we walked back to the cabin. “Sit down here.” He washed our hands with a rag before filling me a plate of food. His mother must have sent it down while I slept. “You can eat while I look at your hand.” After lighting two more lamps, he knelt in front of me, allowing me to place my hand on his cheek.

“I’m so sorry; I wasn’t a proper wife to you.”

“Ky.” Parker took my hands gently in his. “You’ve been through so much this past week. You just overdid it, and I didn’t pay close enough attention. I wanted you so much.” His lips caressed each one of my knuckles.

“How bad did I bleed?” I had to fight back the tears caused by the worry in his eyes.

“I had to change back to the old sheets. The new ones were covered in blood,” he answered.

“The sheets were silk before.” Parker tightened his grip as I continued. “You went to so much trouble and I ruined it. I’m truly sorry.” I looked around the cabin looking for the sheets. “Where are they? They need to be cleaned quickly.”

“I’ve already sent them to the house. Eat.” He took out his knife so he could dig the splinters out.

“Why do you put up with me?” I asked between bites.

He looked up from my hand. “What do you mean?”

“For the past week you have slaved over me, making sure my wounds were clean and bandaged. You could’ve had one of the slaves do it but you did it. Why?” I felt famished as I chewed on a chicken leg while looking at him.

“Because I love you, and I don’t trust anyone to care for you. He smiled, and then went back working on my hand but I wiggled. “Don’t fidget, or my knife might slip.”



I ate slowing trying to hide my anger because it had been our wedding day and we should've made love more than once, but I had let him down. I stopped eating and thought back to the day he made me a woman, remembering his gentleness; the feel of him inside the first time, and now my failure today; he deserved more.

“What?” He kissed me from my cheek to my ear then down my neck, rubbing his whiskers along the path and making me flinch. “What’s wrong?” The hairs tickled as he continued his whiskered assault until I squealed.

I turned to face Parker pushing him away from me. “Stand up.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong.” His soft blue eyes stared into mine.

“I failed you.” I leaned into kiss him. “I should’ve been able to make you happy more than once yesterday.”

“Ky. I’m not going to have you thinking you failed me.” Parker walked away from me, running his hand through his hair. He shifted from one foot to the other nervously, before taking a deep breath and kneeling in front of me.

“Ky.” He whispered softly, putting his hand on my cheek, then playing with my hair. “You could never fail me. I’ve been in love with you since I saw in the coach.” He smiled sweetly. “On your birthday...” his smile grew. “I knew I wanted you to be my wife. You have never disappointed me but yesterday, when you became my wife, I became the happiest I have ever been in my life.” He pulled me close and kissed me. “I told you I didn’t want to rush. I meant that. You still have several wounds that break open easily. Dr. Reynolds said that it might take another week before they completely close. He warned me to not go overboard on the wedding arrangements.” Love filled his eyes as he gazed at me. “Ky. If anyone failed, it’s me who failed you.”

“No Parker. You’ve given me more than I deserve.” I touched his cheek. “Stand up.” I undid his pants, lowering them and his longhandles to the floor. Drawing him closer and pulling the skin back from the head, I kissed it lightly at first before wetting my lips and taking him into my mouth, sliding along his ready shaft as deep as it would go. Parker moaned, running his hand through my curls, then holding my head, forcing himself even deeper. I relaxed and let it go; I wanted Parker to do more than moan. Gripping him tighter when his moans grew louder, my hands began to cramp, but I refused to stop and found a quick pace until he pulsed against my tongue.

“Oh, Ky,” he gasped between breaths.

I kept sucking, with his body quaking against my touch, pulling back then driving him deep as he grabbed my shoulders and leaned down. I slid my tongue over the head before continuing to give my husband his well-deserved reward, even though my shoulders ached from the pressure from his grip. I sped up my rhythm while he dug his fingertips even deeper into my flesh.

“Ky!” he screamed, pulling away from me, scooting to the bed before collapsing; he lay on the bed unmoving, his breathing shallow and eyes closed.

“Parker?” I stared at him; bracing my hands on the table and the seat of my chair, forcing myself to stand. He didn’t move; he just lay there.

“Parker?” My fingertips ran up his thigh, lightly touching his penis, where it laid limp on his leg. He grabbed my hand and struggled to hold a tight grip; sitting on the bed beside him, brushing some hair out of his face.

“Are you all right?” I laid my lips gently against his. “Please answer me.”

He smiled. “I can’t move.”

“I’ll go get Dr. Reynolds,” I said, trying to figure out a way to stand.

Parker’s smile grew. “Ky, just give me a little bit, then I’ll be fine.”

“I thought I hurt you,” I said as I ran my fingers down the edge of his hair.

He couldn’t hold back his laughter until I began to explore his mouth with the tip of my tongue. His arms wrapped around me, drawing me closer.

“Where did you learn to do that?”

“You taught me.”

“I didn’t teach you that.” He chuckled under me.

“Did I do it right?”

Parker laughed more, finally opening his eyes. “It was amazing. You are hiding some secrets from me?”

“Parker.” I slapped his chest and tried to pull away.

His laughter grew louder, but stopped when he began to kiss me again. “I know you have secrets.”

I lay across his chest as he pulled the pillows together under his head. “What secrets do I have?”

“The secrets of Boston. You’ve hinted, but you’ve never told me.” His hand caressed my arm.

“Well, I believe you have a few secrets of your own, Mr. Monroe.” I smiled, but he laughed. “Well dear husband, what secrets do you want to know?”

He reached up stroking my cheek. “Your clothes tell a much different story from the one you tell.”

“I’ve told you all you asked.” I tried to frown.

“Yes, I know your family has some money but your silk dresses and the amount of clothes you brought with you tell a different story. You have more clothes than anyone I know.”

“Well, Mr. Monroe. What do you really want to know?”

He tucked a curl behind my ear, “What do you have waiting in Boston?”

“Well, to start with, I have money, among other things.” It was the first time he asked about my life up in Boston.

“How much? And what other things?” He cocked his eyebrow up to me.

“A lot, more than my father ever thought of possessing. I told Becca I’ve enough money here with me that I could stock the farm four times over.” I struggled not to smile but failed.

“Shit, Ky.” Parker smiled. “What are the other things?”

“I have part ownership in two horse farms, one general store, one fabric and dress shop that specializes in silk, along with six other businesses.” My smile grew as I watched Parker’s expression change.

“How?”

“I am very convincing.” He laughed as I continued. “I had several people who believed in a young girl and were willing to help guide her on how to make a life for herself. They taught me how to work hard and save my money. I brought several businesses back to life by becoming a part owner and helping the owners until they didn’t need me for anything other than a silent partner. I receive a percentage of the profits.” I smiled, “So, if you ever need my help, I will gladly loan you some money.”

Parker laughed, then changed the subject. “I’m going back to town this afternoon.” I pulled back from him. “What’s wrong?” he asked. Grabbing my mouth, I ran out the door with Parker only a step behind me and leaned against the nearest tree, throwing up what I had eaten.

Parker pulled my hair out of the way and wrapped his arm around my waist for support, holding me until after the dry heaves stopped. He picked me up and carried me back inside, laying me on the bed. He gave me a small glass of water, which I gargled then spit it into a small bowl.

“Are you all right?”

“No.” I turned away from him.

“Ky.” Parker pulled on my arm.

“I don’t know what’s wrong. Why are these things happening to me?” My voice shuttered. “I never get sick.”

“It doesn’t matter. You just rest.” Parker drew the cover up over me before cleaning up the few dishes, then crawling into bed. “Are you feeling any better?”

“Yes. I just keep wondering, what’s going to happen next.”

“We are going to go to sleep, and I am going to hold you close until you do.” He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest with his comforting touch.

## Chapter 11

“Ky,” Parker whispered, nudging me. “I’m going to the main house for a little bit. While I’m gone, you lay there and rest.” I nodded, then felt his lips against my forehead.

Waking a little while later, I held my hand over my mouth and ran outside. Bracing myself against a tree, I threw up thick goop until the dry heaves began, and I gasped for air while the trees around me swam.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ky,” a voice in my head called.

“Kylie,” a different voice echoed.

“Ky.” The voice grew louder. “Kylie.” Arms grabbed me roughly, turning me over before hands brushed the dirt and leaves out of my face. “Ky.”

“Parker, bring her inside,” the other voice called.

He carried in then laid me on the bed. A water basin appeared in a chair by the bed, before he wiped my face with the damp cloth.

“Ky.” I opened my eyes as the cool rag brushed against my face.

My eyes fluttered open as the coolness brushed my cheek. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just found you outside on the ground.” Parker’s face showed his worry.

“I got sick, again.” I paused. “I’m hungry.” Parker smiled, looking away toward his mother.

“I’ll make her a toast,” she said.

“Can you sit up?” Parker asked.

“I think so. Why?” I looked at him.

“You’re bleeding again.” Parker helped shift so my back would be toward him before he removed the bloody bandages.

“Those are looking much better,” his mother observed.

“I’ll be glad when they finally heal.” Parker dabbed the wounds with a rag.

“Kylie, we have some apple butter, pear preserves, and grape. What kind would you like on your toast?” Parker’s mother asked.

“I just like plain butter, Mrs. Monroe,” I replied.

“But we have these good jams and jellies,” she continued.

“Butter’s fine, Mrs. Monroe.”

“Kylie, call me mama, mother or, if you must, Martha. You’re a part of my family now. I’m not Mrs. Monroe to you.” Her stern voice but soft features made me feel I belonged to the Monroe family.

Within such a short time of knowing the Parker, it didn’t seem right to call her “mama” or anything like, and as I thought about what I wanted to call her, settling for “Martha.”

“That will do for now,” she responded.

“Mama, Kylie likes butter. Plain butter,” Parker insisted as he continued cleaning my back.

Martha brought me a piece of toast and a cup of milk. “Thank you.” I held the milk and began nibbling on the toast while Parker tightened the bandages. “Not so tight,” I complained.

“Hush.” Parker ignored my feelings. “You’ve been throwing up. I don’t want you to break them open while I’m in town.”

I took another bite as he pulled on the bandage again. “Parker!” I shouted.

“Quiet.” Parker leaned over and stole a bite and the glass of milk. We laughed, chewing on the bread. “Do you want some water?” He smiled, knowing my dislike for milk, and poured me a glass of water. “I’ve got to go. Mama’s going to stay here with you.” Parker stole another bite of my toast. “Don’t argue. I want you to rest. Dr. Reynolds will be out in a couple of days, but I plan on speaking with him.” Parker winked, then took the rest of my toast.

“Parker.” I frowned when he went to leave. “If you walk out that door you’ll end up in the barn.”

He stopped, looked at me, and then smiled. "Sorry. I love you." He kissed me tenderly then departed. Martha made me another piece of toast; after eating, I laid back down while she took up a vigil in the chair by the bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How long has she been asleep?" I heard a man's voice ask.

"She slept for about an hour then woke, throwing up again. She tried to eat something else but threw it up." Martha told him. "She finally fell back asleep."

"Ky," Parker whispered, rubbing his hand gently over my cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"Like death."

Parker chuckled. "Dr. Reynolds is here. He wants to check on you."

"Kylie, can you sit?" Dr. Reynolds put his bag on the table.

"Yes." Parker helped me sit up before removing my bandages, then moved out of Dr. Reynolds way.

Dr. Reynolds took several minutes, touching the main cuts. "Parker these are healing nicely. There's no sign of infection. So there must be another reason Kylie's ill." He continued the examination before looking from me to Parker. "Kylie." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I need you to take off your pantaloons, then lie across the bed with your feet up."

"What for?" Parker demanded.

"Parker, let him do it," Martha said.

"I can't find anything wrong but I need to check for something else," Dr. Reynolds said.

"Between her legs?" Parker shouted.

"Parker!" I shouted. I had been humiliated and didn't need him making it worse.

"Ky?" He looked worried but his voice softened.



“If you can’t control yourself, go outside,” I ordered, looking into his horrified face. It was all right for Dr. Reynolds to see the wounds but nothing more personal.

“Fine,” he whispered.

“Help me.” He untied the ribbons on my legs before helping me stand while I loosened the ribbon at my waist until the pantaloons fell away. He held my hand as I laid back, covering my face. Dr. Reynolds slid a chair closer, then looked at Parker before sliding two fingers inside me and mashing on my lower stomach. I moaned, then heard a gun cock.

“That’s enough. Get your hand out of her.” Parker pointed his gun at Dr. Reynolds.

“Parker Ambrose Monroe! Get out!”

“Ky?”

“Out.” Parker stared at me when I shouted again. He walked out, but kept the gun in his hand. Martha didn’t say anything as she quietly giggled behind me. Dr. Reynolds took a deep breath before continuing.

He finally pulled back, moving to the basin, and washed his hands. “I’m sorry, Kylie.” Slowly crossing the cabin to the door, he took a deep breath and opened it. I slid my naked body under the covers while Parker stood in the doorway, gun still in his hand, waiting. He wanted to come in but didn’t want me to get angry again.

Holding the covers over my chest with one hand, “Parker, come here.” I held my other hand out to him; he walked slowly toward me.

He took my hand as he asked. “What’s wrong with her?” Parker tightened his grip.

Dr. Reynolds looked at him and took another deep breath. “I need to know how long you two have been intimate.”

“Why?” Parker asked.

“Because it will help me in my diagnosis.” Dr. Reynolds stared into Parker’s harden eyes.

“On her birthday, the third of June,” Parker stated.

“Well it seems Mr. Monroe; you gave her an unexpected present.” Dr. Reynolds smiled. “I guess you need new congratulations, you’re to be a father.” Martha squealed, interrupting Dr. Reynolds. “Around in February, I suspect.” Dr. Reynolds turned back to me. “You may be throwing up for some time. If something hurts don’t do it, and that includes taking care of you husband.” He paused, then looked back at my husband. “I’ll be back in a week. Parker, you’ll need to get used to the examination. It is the only way I can thoroughly check on the baby.”

Parker walked over to the doctor, “I owe you an apology. I know you were just looking out for Kylie.”

“Parker, you’re very protective of Kylie and with what she has been through I might have done the same thing.” Dr. Reynolds held his hand out to him and smiled when Parker took the offered hand. “Now Martha, didn’t you say something about a cherry pie.”

“Yes. I’ll send some down later for you,” Martha said.

Parker closed the door behind them then moved to sit beside me. “I’m sorry. I was a fool.”

I touched his cheek. “I still love you for it though.”

He kissed my hand, a slow smile sliding across his face. “A baby. Happy Belated Birthday.”

We laughed then kissed each other. “You were determined to make sure I belonged to you.” I whispered softly in his ear.

“Oh yes,” he said and pulled me into a tight embrace.

We held each other for most of the day; Parker stayed quiet as he gently stroked my arm with his thumb. His attitude had clearly changed from the boy I first met to the man I dearly loved. Our pleasant day broke apart when I got sick again.

Parker's face showed his fears but he didn't say anything. "I'm moving you up to the main house tomorrow."

"But I like our privacy out here," I protested.

"Ky. I can't be here all the time, and you need someone with you." His face went stern.

"Parker, I'm fine. I'll be fine," I told him.

"No, Ky. You're not," he whispered.

"I am going to have a baby. Women do it all the time," I stated.

"Kylie." His voice rose just a little. "We found you passed out on the ground. Do you know how long you were there?" I just looked at him not answering. "Ky? How long?"

"I don't know!" I looked away from him.

"Pack your stuff up tonight," he instructed as I grabbed my mouth, racing toward the outhouse. I threw up with Parker in the same position as earlier, his arm around my waist, his other hand keeping my hair out of my face. After the dry heaves, I stood up, leaning against him.

"Parker."

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke up in a room filled with the scent of musty irises. My husband sat next to the bed where I had found him so often. Rustling skirts caught my attention.

"When did you find out she's pregnant?" a woman's voice asked.

"We found out earlier today," Martha answered.

“How is she handling it?” The woman continued her questioning.

“She can’t eat without getting sick.” Martha paused. “Those two have been through so much. I’ve never known my son to care for anyone, the way he caters to her.” She laughed, “I saw something today I thought I would never see. Libby.”

Libby? My Mother? What was she doing here? I stayed quiet as the women continued to speak.

“What, Martha?”

“Dr. Reynolds was examining Kylie, causing her squirm and moan. Parker drew his gun. Kylie got mad. Furious. She screamed at him and told him to leave.” Martha laughed.

“Did he go?” Libby asked.

“Yes and wouldn’t come back in until she reached out for him.” Martha laughed some more. “Parker’s done what he wants, when he wants, with no concern for anyone else. He’d die to keep her from harm. He loves her so much.”

“That is what Dr. Reynolds keeps telling us. When he came by today, he said there was no need to worry about Kylie.” Libby’s voice went soft. “He said it was rare to see Kylie without Parker close by. He did say Kylie holds her own with him.”

I watched Parker walk to the door so softly I couldn’t hear him. “If you two old crones are finished talking, my wife’s awake and hungry.”

“Parker. Be nice,” I scolded.

He turned and bounded on the bed, causing me to squeal. He began to wrestle with me, making me laugh before wrapping his arms around me. His lips covered mine in tenderness as he drew one of his legs over mine. We lay there kissing until our mothers interrupted us, each

carrying a tray, but my mother nearly dropped hers when she saw Parker's hand sliding over my breast.

"Parker!" His mother shouted.

He just laughed, then went back to kissing me. He touched my face. "You really scared me." He drew back. "Sit up so you can eat."

I looked at my mother. "Parker, Martha would you mind giving my mother and me some privacy."

"Yes," Parker said as he scooted closer to me, stealing a bite of bread.

"Why?" I frowned at him.

He took another bite of bread. "Ky, you know that after two or three bites you'll get sick again. So no, I'm not going any where."

"Well, maybe this might help. It won't stop it but it might keep it from happening so often." My mother handed me a cup. "Drink this."

"Augh," I complained after taking my first sip from the disgusting liquid. "What is it?" My frowning made Parker start laughing, so I hit him.

"Hey now." He teased.

"You taste it." I glared at him.

"No thank you." He scowled.

"Kylie, just drink it," my mother ordered. I took another sip, making another face, which sent Parker howling again, so I decided to drink the whole thing at one time.

"Kylie." My mother shouted as the last drop ran down my throat. "Not all at once." I pulled the cup away from my lips as my mother gave more orders. "Parker, grab her." My mother grabbed the water basin and laid it on the floor in front of me. Martha took the food tray.

Parker held me on the bed while I leaned over and threw up in the basin. The drink tasted worse coming back up.

They gave me some water once the dry heaves stopped. “What is that?”

“It’s a bitter tea. It helped me when I carried you.” My mother wiped my face down with a cool clothe. “There are a few rules, first, drink it with food; drink it only in small sips. Lastly, and you found this out already, don’t gulp it.”

Parker laughed. “That was a hard lesson.” I just glared at him. “Do you feel like eating?”

“Only if I don’t have to drink any more of that.” I couldn’t get the taste out of my mouth.

“Maybe a little honey or sugar in it,” Martha suggested.

I curled my nose up but agreed as Parker handed me a piece of toast. Our mothers walked out to get another cup, while my husband fed me a bite of food then took one of his own. Waiting on my next bite, I surveyed the room where I lay. “Where are we?”

“We’re in Pappa’s house. He gave it to us.” Parker munched on a piece of ham.

“What’s my mother doing here?” I asked.

“Mama wanted to talk with her on how she dealt with the sickness that comes with having a baby.” He ate more of the food. “I do hope you get your appetite back soon.”

“Why?”

“Because I am eating yours and mine.” Parker smiled.

“Parker Monroe, are you afraid of gaining a round belly too?” I couldn’t hold back my sarcasm.

“No. Because when you’re well, I’ll starve to death.” He laughed when I growled at him. We kissed, feeding each other from the bites of food in our mouths until our mothers interrupted us.

“You two are too free with your affections.” My mother voiced her disapproval.

“If you don’t like it, leave my home,” Parker stated firmly.

“I’m sorry,” she said, but he just frowned at her. “Here Kylie. Drink it slow.” She handed me another cup and I couldn’t help but notice the once soft face had deep lines from worry. Taking my first sip, I felt like a spectacle with all three of them staring at me in anticipation of what might happen.

Parker relaxed as we waited, then he finally said, “I’m going to go get our things from the cabin. I want you to stay in bed.” He pointed his finger at me before exploring my mouth with his tongue. “I love you.”

Running my fingers down his unshaven cheek, I said, “I love you too.”

“Libby, I am going to take these dishes to the kitchen,” Martha stated. “You and Kylie have a nice talk.”

“Ky,” Parker drew my attention away from my mother, “Drink some more tea while I’m gone.” I frowned, while he whooped and hollered down the stairs as Martha followed slowly.

My mother and I sat staring at each other before I took a deep breath. “Mama.”

“Dr. Reynolds said that you’re a little over a month, which means you need to start making plans for a nursery, nurse maids and...” she stopped.

“And?”

“And.” She took a deep breath, trying to decide whether she wanted to finish her thought. “It’s high time you start acting like a lady. Which means no more pants or knives, and

you need to learn to cook.” I rolled my eyes but she ignored it, placing her hands on her hips. “Kylie Ruth, you’re about to become a mother. For pity’s sake, you’re a woman now. You need to act like one.” She walked toward the window; I could tell she wasn’t done. Her voice lowered, “People are going to talk.”

“Let them talk.” I raised my voice.

“Kylie, you’re expecting a baby by a boy who you have barely known a month. Yes. You did marry him, but that’s not the point.” She turned to stare at me. “It’s bad enough that you married him but you were pregnant first. That means you were sleeping with him before you even knew anything about him.”

“Mother.” I forced myself to stand. “I was born to you, but you choose to ship me off to Boston every year since I was seven. I haven’t spent a Christmas or Easter with my family in over nine years. You have no reason to call yourself my mother.” My voice sounded harsh and full of anger, releasing all the feelings from years past. A sense of relief filled me. “I’m not home a month, and my father decides to marry me off to a man who smelled of alcohol, only so he could gain some more prestige. When I refused; he beat me with a damn riding crop that I gave him.” I remained standing, even though my back hurt, and took a slow deep breath to gain control over my temper. “All Parker has ever done since I met him was fall in love with me. He’s been kind, gentle and-”

“And?” She asked with tears running down her cheeks.

“And he wants nothing from me but to be with me. You, yourself, can’t say that.” I looked at her; the muscles in my face twitched as I refused to give in to the newfound anger building up inside me. “I think you should go help Martha.”

“Kylie-” she started to go on.



I held up my hand. “No. I don’t want to hear it. Just go.” Tears ran down my cheeks as her footfalls echoed in my ears. I looked around the room for some clothes screaming, when I couldn’t find any, then closed the door. The lock clinked in place, echoing through the silence; curling my tired body under the covers, I cried until the tears dried up. Lying there unable to sleep, just holding a pillow, my eyes stared at nothing; my mind thought of nothing and my feelings felt nothing.

Someone knocked on the door but I didn’t answer it. Whoever knocked tried the doorknob and found it locked.

“Kylie. Kylie, open up. It’s me, Becca.” She pounded on the door. “Mama sent me up to check on you.” I ignored her. “Kylie, you’re worrying me. Please open the door. You’ve been in there over an hour.” When I didn’t respond, I could hear her voice tremble. “I’m going to get help.” I could hear her shouting as she ran down the stairs. “Mama. Kylie’s locked herself in the room.”

Becca barely touched the bottom steps when she, Martha, and my mother raced back up. They stood outside, knocking, calling my name, and pleading for me to open the door. I continued to lie there, drained of all my energy and not wanting to talk with anyone. I ignored the pounding, even with the women near hysterics.

“Becca, go get Parker,” Martha ordered.

Her footsteps pounded like drums in my head and the slamming front door made it worse. “Parker. Come quick,” her shouts, sounded in a gentle breeze through window.

“What’s wrong?” Parker’s voice echoed on the stairs.

“Kylie’s locked herself inside,” Martha stated, moving away from the door.

“Ky!” he shouted and grabbed the doorknob, twisting it as he slammed his shoulder against door. It burst open; he pulled me into his arms. “Ky.” He fumbled with my hair.

“Tell them to leave,” I whispered.

“All of you out,” he said.

“Parker, is she all right?” my mother asked. “This is my fault.”

“I’m fine,” I whispered.

“She’s fine. Now get out.” His harsh voice cracked.

“Kylie, I’m sorry,” my mother went on saying.

“Out!” Parker shouted again, then laid me back on the bed, before pushing our mothers out of the room. He grabbed a chair to hold the door closed before coming back, wrapping me in his strong arms. “Ky.” He kissed my forehead. “What happened?”

“It was nothing.” I didn’t want to talk about it yet.

“Ky, tell me,” he whispered, laying his cheek against my head while brushing my hair away from my face.

“Make love to me. I needed to feel loved,” I pleaded. Tilting my head, forcing our eyes to meet and drawing me into a soft tender kiss, he lowered me back on the bed. Our lips embraced for several moments before he just held me.

“How about we go for a walk when you feel better?” he whispered. “You don’t need me to make love to you for you to know I love you.”

I began to cry with his refusal, because of the fight I had with my mother. I didn’t know how to stop all the feelings overwhelming me.

“Shit.” Parker tightened his embrace and allowed me to cry. His hand kept a soothing rhythm, rubbing over my back. “Ky, talk to me.” He kissed my forehead. “Please talk to me, honey.”

I took a cleansing breath after calming a little. “Parker.”

He laid his lips against my hair. “Yes.”

“I don’t know what came over me.”

“Are you feeling better?” His lips caressed my earlobe.

“Some.” I paused. “I just don’t have any control over myself anymore.”

“We’ll figure it out. Do you feel like a short walk?”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Let me get you some clothes.” He climbed out of bed and ran out to the barn, grabbing the bag off the horses, then returning to me.

I got fully dressed for only the second time since we were married. We walked downstairs avoiding any questions from the women in the kitchen. Parker led me into the woods beside the house, holding my hand and not saying anything. It made me feel more like myself, especially with my pants tight against my thighs and my knives safely tucked inside my boots. All I needed was my corset to hold my breasts in place, but the unforgiving bandages did a lot of its work.

Parker finally asked, “What happened after I left? What did your mother say to you that made you so upset?”

I cuddled up next to his arm. “She is glad we got married since I’m expecting a baby.”

“That’s not all though.” He glanced down at me keeping us at a slow pace.

“She thinks I need to be more of a lady. Learn to cook, clean, sew, all the things she does.” I squeezed his tight muscle.

“And? You’re avoiding something.” I didn’t know how but he knew.

“And only wear dresses.” I snarled.

Parker stopped our walk, turning to look at me. “Raise your shirt.” I started to pull it over my head. “No. No. Just to your waist.” Parker strode around me, running his hand over my behind until returning to face me again. He smiled then slid his hand down the front of my pants and gripped me between my thighs.

“It would be harder to get to you.” Squeezing, he caused me to crumble to his touch. “What do you want?”

Looking at him, I fought to remain standing while he continued to tighten his grip. He smiled when I dug my hands in his shirt, struggling to speak.

“I want my pants.”

Parker leaned down still squeezing me as our lips opened to each other. “I hoped, you would say that.”

I couldn’t help myself. “So, I can get rid of all my dresses.”

“No.” He released me then we began our walk again.

“Why not?” I gripped the flexed muscle again.

“Because, I like to see you in them.” He kissed my head but I frowned. “You do more with everything when you wear them.”

I rolled my eyes. “What, I don’t look good?”

“Oh. You look good but when I saw you that first day and then again yesterday, when you walked out on the porch, you looked like an angel.” Pausing, he looked away for a second.

“Yesterday was the first time in a long time that most of the townsfolk didn’t run from me. I was treated as a gentleman, and that is all due to you.” He gently kissed me before placing my free hand on the swelling beneath his pants. “I get this way each time I think of you walking out on the porch.”

“You get that way every time you kiss me.” I giggled.

Parker laughed softly, “Oh. Yes.” Our lips found each other again, then we turned to continue our walk. The unfamiliar terrain led us to a small pond with a spring feeding it from high above, creating a small waterfall. The water so clear you could see the fish swimming where the sunlight hit it. A leaf danced across the top, reminding me of a ballroom where couples twirl along the polished floor, as the trees, grass, and the purple wild flowers applauded.

I sat down under a tree that overlooked the pond while I relaxed with my surroundings. “It is beautiful down here.” Parker nodded as he lay between my legs, resting his head on my stomach. I played with his hair. “You’ve been awfully quiet. What are you thinking?”

“That I need to really teach you how to shoot, not just to point and hope you hit it.” He paused, tilting his head so he could look up at me. “I went into town to get some supplies to do just that. You mean too much to me to let anything happen to you.”

Lifting his hand and closing my eyes as I kissed it. “You know I never planned on getting married.”

“Me either.” He looked up at me again. “How were you planning to avoid marrying Asa?”

“Well,” I said as smirk crossed my face, “I have enough money in a bank in Boston to disappear and live very well. What were you planning to do to Asa?”

“Kill him if I had to, but take you away from here until you agreed to marry me. Which is what I did?” He patted my calf.

“Parker, did you plan on me getting pregnant? Did you do it on purpose?” I stared at the pond, not sure, I really wanted to know the answer.

“No.” His voice softened. “I wanted time with you. A baby never crossed my mind like it had with all the others.” He played with the strips of leather around the top of my boot.

“All the others?” I paused. “How many others?”

“Don’t ask, because you don’t really want to know.” He went very still.

“Fine, then just tell me how often? How old were you?” I paused. “And when was the last time?”

“Ky.” His voice rose just a little. “Why do you want to know?”

“It was something Asa said to me.” I paused. “I don’t know? I guess I am worried I won’t be able to keep you happy.”

“Kylie Ruth Monroe.” He sat up scooting closer to me. “I didn’t want them. They got paid for what they did.”

“Ugh.” Disgust sounded in my voice. “You went to those places?”

“Yes. I have.” Parker leaned in closer to me as I pulled back. He smiled, moving even closer, forcing my head against the tree where he kissed me so tenderly. “Ky, the day I saw you was the day I wanted no other woman.” His lips hovered over mine for a second then kissed me again. “No more talk of this.” He lay back down.

“One more question?” I pleaded.

“Ky.” He glared up at me. “What?”

“Do you know what I would do if you ever went back to a place like that?” I asked softly.

He looked back up at me. “What?”

“She’d be dead, but you would only be able to father the child I’m carrying.” I stared at him as my hand slid the knife out of his gun belt before he noticed. He lay perfectly still while the point made an imprint close to his penis. “I may not be able to shoot, but I am very talented with a knife.” I held it there for a few seconds more then laid his knife on the ground next to his hat.

Parker lay unmoving for a moment before he burst out laughing. “Shit.” He sat up smiling, pulling me into his arms, kissing me with enough passion to make my body ache. “I don’t have to worry about anyone crossing your path.” He laughed again.

We stayed under the tree until the shade left us. It would be time for dinner soon. We went back to the house to face the worried women, who had moved from the kitchen to a small gazebo that sat between the houses. Walking up the flowered path that led to it, he held me close.

“Mama, Mrs. Bellows, Becca.” Parker tipped his head.

“Kylie. Parker.” Martha replied, but Becca and my mother only nodded.

“I am going to leave Kylie in your capable hands.” Parker kissed me then started to walk away. “Oh. Ky. Were we going to burn the dresses on a bonfire or throw them in the barn to use as covers for the horses?” Winking at me, he kissed me chastely then walked off.

I sat under the gazebo with hand over my mouth trying not to howl, while the three women stared at me in disbelief that I would even consider getting rid of all my dresses.

## Chapter 12

I began to feel I could make Missouri my permanent home because of the welcoming arms that greeted me every morning and held me every night. To keep me safe, Parker had me practicing to shoot all the guns on the farm. He did complain when it took both my hands to pull the trigger, leading to his decision to go to town and find me a gun to fit my hands.

Parker also planned a trip back east to Atlanta, to sell some of his horses, and I asked if I could go. He laughed, “Ky. I have no intentions of leaving you behind.” I did have more trouble convincing him to take me on to Boston after the delivery but did get my way after several bouts of pouting and a little womanly persuasion.

The night before our trip to town I wrote to my best friend in Boston, Matty, with whom I shared everything. In the letter, I told her about marrying Parker and informed her that we would visit Boston in a month.

I also wrote another letter to Heidi, my mother, if only in our hearts. This letter was shorter, but I did tell her about Parker, which would make her cry when she read it then she would tell Andrew, her husband, and my cook, Betsy. I could hear Betsy now, “Oh I can’t wait to wrap Ms. Kylie up in my round body.” I couldn’t count the times she would pick me up and swing me in her arms. My excitement of the trip to Boston put Parker on edge because he had never traveled more than one-hundred miles from home.

The sun shone high above us as we rode into Carthage with the townsfolk staring at me as I sat upon my stallion. I loosened my grip on the reins so he could show off his spirit, gaining me a scolding from Parker.



“Ky. If you don’t want to ride back in the wagon, you best control him.” He had also told me to be polite and not mouthy to the townsfolk but I set my determination to have a good time today in spite of him. With my wounds almost completely healed. I didn’t want to control myself, because this was my first trip to town since my wedding day.

We entered the general store because it carried most of the supplies that anyone might need. Martha and Becca gathered up goods for the house while I shopped for anything to fill my days until Parker would let me around the horses again. I checked my vest pocket for reassurance I had the letters to drop at the post office. Parker had already told me he had several places he wanted me to go with him.

“Ky,” Parker called, as I wandered around the store picking up the things I wanted. “What is all that?” he asked as I began placing the three books, five tablets of writing paper, two inkwells along with a bottle of extra ink and pens on the counter.

“These are the items I need to write in my journal,” I stated.

“Those aren’t.” He pointed at the books.

“No. Those are so I can have something to read. All my books are still up at my place in Boston,” I complained.

“Your place?” He turned to look at me.

“Oh! Did I fail to tell you that?” I winked at him, which caused him to smile.

“Ky.” Parker shook his head. “Here I want you to try this gun; it’s a Beaumont-Adams.” I rolled my eyes because it meant nothing to me, causing him to frown. “It’s a little smaller but with the some adjustments it might fit you better.” I took the gun, holding it in my right hand. It felt like any other gun to me, and it still took both hands to cock it. I switched hands and tried it in my left. “How does it feel?” he asked.

“It’s harder to cock.”

“Just pull the trigger,” he told me, smiling when it clicked easily under my fingers. “How does it feel in your hands?”

“It’s just like all the others. I’m still stretching my fingers,” I said, handing it back to him.

Parker looked around at the gun belts finally picking one that had two holsters and two knife sheaths. “Come here.” He slipped the gun into one of the holsters then secured the belt around my hips, but it fell down to my thighs. I felt like a rag doll as he shifted, tugged, and pulled, which reminded me of being fitted for clothes. Once satisfied, he took it off and carried it back to the counter.

“Well, Parker, what do you think?” Mr. Jameson, the storeowner, asked.

I went back to wandering through the store while he and Parker talked. Walking to the back part of the store, I couldn’t believe my eyes that in this little general store sat a rocking chair, baby bed and cradle all made out of cherrywood. It actually made me think the baby without having Parker reminding me.

“What are you looking at?” Parker asked, coming up behind me without making a sound.

“I wish you wouldn’t do that?” I didn’t look up from the cradle.

“You don’t need one of those.” He made a funny sound with his lip while looking at the furniture. “There’s one at the house.”

Leaving him standing there, I said, “I’m going to the post office.” I walked out the door, only to find myself smiling at the women gawking at my pants. The men gave a quick glance before looking behind me, where I could hear Parker’s footsteps. My mind raced with how to obtain the furniture, even if I had to buy it with my own money.

“Good morning,” Mrs. Perkins said as I walked into the post office. Mrs. Perkins had taken it over when her husband died over ten years earlier.

“Good morning, Mrs. Perkins.” I smiled, placing my items on the counter, “I have these two letters I would like to mail.”

“Let’s see.” She smiled and read the address. “To Boston.” She turned to get the stamps. “It’s a shame that you won’t be going back there to find a good man.” Mrs. Perkins never kept her opinions to herself.

I smiled at the face she made when Parker walked through the door, “I have a better man than all the ones I know in Boston.” Parker laid some change on the counter but I didn’t acknowledge him, walking out the door with him just behind me, not quite ready to forgive him.

I leaned against one of the posts holding up the roof outside the post office door. Parker came up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist.

“Why are you mad at me?” I didn’t say anything. “Ky. You don’t need that furniture, at least not yet.” He made me turn around but I stared at his chest, refusing to raise my head. He put his hand under my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Ky. If all else fails, I will build you one.” I began to laugh. “What? You don’t believe I could do it?”

“Parker, you can handle horses. I have seen you build fences. You’re good with a gun, but I don’t see you as being a craftsman.” I tried to pull away but he held onto my chin.

“What is it about that chair and cradle?”

“It matches my home in Boston.” I pouted, causing him to laugh. “Don’t laugh. All the furniture in my house is made of cherrywood. You’ll see it when we go up there.” I pushed my bottom lip out more.

“Ky. You’re amazing.” He leaned down and kissed me.

“I love cherrywood. You don’t know how long it took me to find it all. The cradle, the chair, and the bed are made of cherrywood.”

He laughed at me again. “And who do you want to pay for it.”

“I have my own money,” I said.

“But?”

“But, if you really want me to be happy, you...” I tried to pout a little more.

“Ky.” A smile spread across his face. “That’s not going to work.” He kissed me again. “Let’s go.” He released my chin then took my hand and led me to his next errand, at the local gunsmith. I noticed he carried a rifle and a cloth bag as we entered; I stared at all the guns in different sizes and each in different amounts in disrepair, while the smell of the gun oil nearly made me ill.

“Hey Parker.” A young man’s voice called out from the back.

“Royre.” Parker’s voice held excitement in it. “When did you get back to town?”

“Got in yesterday.” Royre walked up and gave Parker a man’s hug. “Who is hiding behind you?”

Parker smiled as he moved out of my way. “Royre, I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Kylie.”

“Wife!” Royre howled. “Pa said you’d made a few changes, but married?”

“Married and with a baby on the way.” Parker’s face lit up as he said baby.

“Shit! A baby!” Royre scooped me up and spun me around.

“Royre, I wouldn’t do that.” Parker told him, but Royre continued to hold me off the ground and finally lowered me to the floor only when Parker raised his eyebrow at him.

“Ky, back away from Royre and hold up your right hand.” Looking at Parker, I backed away with him nodding again; I lifted my right hand that held my knife; blade pointed at my wrist, ready to strike.

“Shit! Parker! Can I have her?” Royre howled.

“No!” Parker laughed.

“Where did you find her?” Royre moved to stand in front Parker.

“Kylie’s a Bellows.” Parker smiled.

“You stole old man Bellows’ kin?” Royre’s face filled with excitement.

I stared at Parker but he only continued to smile. “Not his kin, his oldest daughter.”

“Shit!” Royre howled again.

A little disgusted I turned to Parker. “Does his vocabulary only extend to such vulgar words?”

“Ky, be nice.” Parker smirked. “You can put your knife up.” I rolled my eyes but he just laughed; it was nice to see him so happy and laughing because he had been so worried for the past couple of weeks.

“Parker. Royre, why didn’t you tell me we had customers?” A medium built man with broad shoulders walked in.

“Mr. Harper, how are you today.” Parker smiled

“I’m very well. What can I do for you today?” Mr. Harper asked.

“I need some gun work done,” Parker answered.

“What kind of gun work?”

“Parker, I thought you did your own gun work?” Royre quipped.

“Ky.” I walked up next to Parker.

“Now that you’re an old married man did you forget how to do your own gun work?”

Royre taunted.

Parker laid the bag and rifle on the counter, ignoring Royre. “I need these handles adjusted and I also need to order two more of these, pointing to the Henry rifle and pulling out the Beaumont-Adams handgun he had purchased at the general store. “I also want three more of these.”

“Parker, you arming yourself against any man who might want to steal your wife?”

Royre reached to grab me again but the cock of the gun I held stopped him. “Ugh. Parker,” Royre stammered.

“Ky, put it back, but if he tries for you again, you can shoot him but not kill him.” Parker said not looking away from the guns on the counter.

“She carries a gun?” Royre asked.

“No. Not yet.” Parker looked at his holster.

“Shit! I didn’t see her move.” Royre laughed. “Is she faster than you?”

“Yes,” Parker said in a matter of fact tone.

“Royre, leave her alone. Parker, what changes do you need?” Mr. Harper asked.

“I need these to fit Kylie. Royre was lucky her finger didn’t slip the way it usually does.”

Parker glanced at Royre drawing his attention away from me.

“Parker, I swear you’re a damn fool. Especially for teaching her how to use a knife, let alone a gun,” Royre stated.

“Can’t take credit for the knife, she came with that.” Parker smirked. “Ky, show Mr. Harper your grip.” I moved and took the handgun, wrapping my fingers around it.

Mr. Harper examined my hand as I held the gun. “Parker, I am assuming you want the rifles fit for her too.”

“Yes, sir.” Parker smiled.

“Mrs. Monroe, come here and hold it for me,” Mr. Harper instructed.

I poked Parker in the ribs as I walked past him. “Hey now, woman,” Parker grimaced.

I looked back at him. “Don’t call me woman! I have a name, which you use quite, frequently!” Royre bellowed behind me.

“Ky.” Parker tone went a little harder.

I blew Parker a kiss and winked at him, which made Parker and Royre laugh and move away from the counter, ignoring me. I grabbed the rifle; it felt heavy in my hands.

Royre slapped Parker on the shoulder. “You married a wild cat. Where did you find her?”

“Riding in on the coach,” Parker answered.

“She’s fast with the draw, but can she shoot.” Royre and Parker continued their conversation, making me feel like a spectacle. It thrilled me when Mr. Harper told me he didn’t need me any more; I thanked him and left without Parker seeing me.

I thought back to my days in Boston with the brick streets clanking under my boots. Depending on the area in the city, I could go unnoticed by everyone, but here in Carthage everyone knew me, mostly because of marrying Parker. Some hollered and waved; others whispered to each other.

Staring into the town’s only dress shop made me think about my shop in Boston, which made these dresses look antique. I began inspecting the material that they had in stock, noticing

mostly gingham, wools, linen, and some heavy denim used for pants. I frowned they had no silk. “What kind of shop doesn’t carry silk?”

“Kylie!” A girl’s voice called. “Kylie Bellows!” A blonde haired girl appeared from behind one of the dressmaker’s dummies.

“Leigh Anne!” I smiled, wrapping my arms around her.

“You look amazing.” She exclaimed. “When did you get back? I got back yesterday.” Leigh Anne loved to talk, and since she was my closest friend in Carthage, I didn’t mind. Her parents’ place sat across the road from Parker’s.

“I got back over a month ago.” I smiled.

Leigh Anne’s hand slid to mine, her fingers brushing over my wedding ring. She lifted my hand. “What’s this? You’re married? Who was it? That Tucker fellow, the musician or I know, it has to be that Frenchman. Oh! What was his name?”

I cringed; she knew all about Boston from the letters we sent to each other every month. “No. It’s not any of them.”

“I go to London for a year and come back and my best friend is married.”

“And expecting a baby,” I whispered.

“A baby!” Leigh Anne’s voice became a shrill, like it did when she got excited. “Who? Who is he?”

“Ky!” Parker called from the doorway. “Hello, Leigh Anne.”

“Hello, Parker.” Leigh Anne stepped back just a little. She always spoke of the boys who lived across from her, but I had never seen or met them before this summer. Last year we complained about our parents not allowing us to ride near Parker’s place.

I looked at both of them. “Parker, you know Leigh Anne?”



“Yes.” He glanced at her then back to me. “We’re loading the wagon. You have about a half hour before we head home.”

“Well, you go load the wagon. I’m hungry and I’m getting something to eat.” We smiled at each other. “Leigh Anne, come with me. We have lots to talk about.” I took her arm heading out the shop door.

“Ky!” I heard him following us across the porch. He grabbed the waistband of my pants drawing me back. “You forgot something.” Parker smiled as he slipped the gun down the back of my pants. I tilted my head back to look at him, but he kissed me instead while he pulled my shirt out far enough to cover up the gun.

“You don’t trust anyone.” I whispered.

“I don’t. Stay in the open where I can see you.” He kissed me again.

I looked over at Leigh Anne, her eyes were nearly bulging out of her head, and her mouth gaped open. “Let’s go.” I took her arm and led her to Miss Opal’s diner. We sat down at one of the tables outside but away from every one else, where I could see Parker.

After her shock wore off, the questions started flying, but they stopped when Miss Opal asked what we wanted to eat. Her first question after Miss Opal left was, “Kylie, you’re married to Parker?”

“Yes.”

“How? When? Where?” She asked while we waited on our pies. After she took her first bite, she asked, “What’s he really like?”

I smiled. “He’s very protective sometimes, well, most of the time. Since I got back he’s the only person who actually cared.”

“Why? What of your folks?”

“My father beat me with a riding crop and wanted me to marry a man who attacked me.”

I took a bite of my chocolate pie and smiled.

“What?” She paused. “Did you marry Parker to get back at your father?” I didn’t answer her while I looked over at Parker, helping load the wagon. He smiled when he saw me.

“Kylie?” Leigh Anne looked at me then turned around to see Parker; a smile crossed her face when she turned back to me. “You’re in love with him.”

“Yes.”

“When did you two meet?” She wanted answers, not pie.

“We saw each other, the day I arrived home. You might say we ran into each other the next day, then he rescued me on several occasions.” I took a deep breath. “He took me home with him after my father beat me, almost never leaving my side; he doctored my wounds and has kept me safe ever since. We got married this past Sunday.”

Her face lit up with a surprised look. “What was it like the first time?” She leaned in whispering.

I smiled as I ate another piece of pie. My body twinged from the thought. “To be honest, it was on my birthday. Parker has a cabin in the woods. We were there. He was very gentle but it hurt.” I curled my lip pausing. “Parker warned me that it would, no matter what we did.”

“How often do you two, you know?”

I knew we had no secrets and she knew all about Boston. I just laughed but did not get a chance to answer her because Parker walked up. He took my fork and cut himself a piece of my pie. “I’m getting the horses. Finish your pie.” He said with his mouthful, then kissed me, and threw some money on the table to pay for the pies then he left.

“Is he always like that?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t help smiling with the warm feelings from that kiss. “It nearly killed him watching my father beat me. He was on the hill behind the barn, too far away to help. He-” I stopped. “Leigh Anne, go inside.”

“Why?”

“Just go.” I stood up gripping the handle of the gun Parker had slipped down my pants.

“Well, well, well. It’s the little whore,” Asa stated. I ignored him, trying to push Leigh Anne toward the diner, but Asa stepped in my way. The smell of alcohol that surrounded him turned my stomach. “Hey, little whore. I’m glad I didn’t marry you.”

Refusing to give him any satisfaction, I turned toward the street when he grabbed me. Spinning, he stared at the cocked the gun pointed it at him. “Don’t touch me! Don’t ever touch me again!” Loud whispering echoed all around us. He brought his freehand up and brushed his knuckles across my cheek. I shivered. He leaned in closer.

“That should be my baby,” he whispered. “It will be one day.”

Two more guns cocked before Sheriff, Will Dayton, joined us. “Kylie is there a problem?”

“Asa’s drunk,” I said, staring at Asa’s almost colorless eyes, “If you ever lay another hand on me again. I will kill you.”

“That’s enough Kylie. I think you have made your point.” Will stated, but he was a fair man and didn’t like any trouble. “Parker, take Kylie home.”

Parker walked up still holding his gun pointed at Asa. “Ky.” Parker put himself between me and Asa then moved up next to Will, who still had his gun pointed at Asa. Parker glared at Asa before he turned to Will.

“If he comes near Kylie again he’ll end up dead. When he sobers up, make sure he knows it.”

Vern brought up our horses; Parker led me to them but never took his eyes off Asa. He helped me up on my stallion before mounting his own. He began to relax when Will escorted Asa to the jail.

“You know, he’s not going to be happy about that,” Vern said. “He’ll be trouble.”

“He’s already trouble,” Martha stated.

Parker leaned over to me. “Are you all right?” He kissed my forehead.

“Yes.” Placing my hand on his cheek, I kissed him tenderly.

### Chapter 13

Life on the Monroe farm finally started to go back to normal, except that I still wasn’t allowed to do anything. Parker would only let me watch him breaking some of the horses. Bored, I walked out where three horses waited away from the others. I picked up several apples from under an apple trees and made my way to them, singing softly. I fed them small pieces of cut apples before untying them one at a time and leading in small circles. Guiding them away from the others while still singing, I rubbed my hands over every inch of their bodies.

“Ky.” I heard Parker shout from the corral. Waving back at him, I kept working with the horses, eventually adding my stallion to the trio; he showed his enjoyment of the tenderness and especially the apple pieces. I spent the rest of the morning repeating everything until leading them into a smaller empty corral as the lunch bell rang. Parker strode toward me as I massaged

my stallion but held up my hand for him to wait. I fed the horses another bite of apple, kissing them all before walking out of the corral and into Parker's waiting arms.

He greeted me with his tender lips. "Where did you learn to do that?"

"In Boston. I spent most of my time on one of my farms and working with the horses. I even slept with them on weekends." I smiled at the memory.

Parker laughed. "Don't get any ideas of sleeping with those three. I want you to be careful. No riding them."

"When do you have to have them broke?" I embraced him as we stared at all the horses gathered.

"Three weeks, then a week to take them back east."

"You're still planning on letting me go and then going to Boston?"

"Yes and yes." He gently squeezed my waist. "Have you eaten anything?"

"No." I ran my fingers down his chest. "But that's not what I want." Parker scowled at me, knowing he couldn't make time for me. "You have been so tired lately. You don't seem to be interested in me."

"Not interested?" Parker slid my hand to the front of his pants, allowing me to grip his swollen organ as he kissed me. Martha calling for us to come to dinner interrupted our tender moment. Parker grinned, "I promise I will take care of you tonight, but I have to get the horses broke."

"Let me help." I suggested.

"I don't think so." Parker looked down at me.

"Why, because I'm a woman?"

"No, because you're going to have my baby."

“I broke ten horses while I had a sprained ankle once. I don’t break them like you do.” I complained.

“Ky.” Taking my hand, he escorted me toward the house for lunch.

“Parker, give me fifteen of the fifty, and by this time tomorrow I will have all of them following me around like the three this morning but...” I paused.

“But?”

“It won’t be a fair challenge unless they are the most spirited of the herd.” I squeezed his hand.

“Kylie. No,” he said as we walked through the door.

“Parker’s telling Kylie no. That’s a first.” Vern blurted.

“Stay out of it, Vern,” Parker told him.

“Parker, I think you’re scared I’ll make you look bad,” I continued.

“Ky, don’t be foolish.” He looked at me as he filled his plate.

“Parker, you saw what I did with the other three.” I thought for a moment then looked at Parker. “I have a thought.”

“Here we go,” Parker said.

“You can be such a Plug-ugly sometimes,” I said, putting some food on my plate. Parker gagged trying not to choke on his food while Vern and the others just laughed. “I am eating elsewhere.” I picked up my plate to leave the table.

“Ky. Sit down and eat.” Parker looked at me, placing his hand across my back. “What’s your thought?”

“If I don’t have the fifteen horses following me around like the three by lunch tomorrow. I’ll leave them all to you.” I tried my “I-so-love-you” smile.

“Eat and I’ll think about it,” he said with a mouthful of food.

“What do you have to lose?” I persisted.

“Ky.” He paused, finishing his bite of greenbeans. “I said I would think about it.”

“Parker.” I wanted an answer now but had to contend with his stubbornness.

Leaning down to kiss me, he whispered in my ear, “If you want anything tonight, let this go for now.” Then he kissed my cheek.

I tightened my jaw, then turned back to the toast, sliced ham, and fried potatoes in front of me. “Fine.” Parker just smiled and took a large bite of my toast.

“Shit,” Vern said. “Kylie, keep your willfulness away from Becca.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Vern.” I looked at him.

“Ky,” Parker whispered.

“It wouldn’t hurt for Becca to be a little more willful. Who knows, Vern? You might get a little more attention if you gave in to her once in a while.” Parker nudged my leg under the table. “Who knows what might happen?” Parker nudged me with a little more force. “Don’t do that.” I hit Parker’s arm.

“You don’t want anything,” Parker whispered.

“Ugh,” I moaned my complaint as he continued to eat.

We finished eating and I drank my bitter tea, which seemed to work except at night. Parker didn’t complain but it showed with dark circles under his eyes. “Are you finished?” He asked.

“Yes.” I frowned, pushing my plate away.

“Come with me.” He kissed my hand then led me out onto the porch. We faced the corral, and he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me so tight that I could feel him hard against my back. His mind thought of the horses but his body thought of me. “There are some rules for letting you do this.”

“Rules?” I scowled.

“Yes,” his voice went stern. “Any sign of them getting out of hand, you get out of there, and no riding them.”

“Then how am I to break them?”

“Vern or I’ll ride them,” he continued.

“No. I don’t like the way he breaks horses,” I said bluntly, pushing my back into my husband’s chest.

“Thank you very much, Ky,” Vern scorned as he walked by.

Parker stiffened; I knew he would have it out with Vern later. I looked at the men working around the corral; Parker kept me away from most of them. “I’ll use Cornell.” He was a hired hand on the farm. “And that young black boy.”

Parker stiffened more, “As long as you stay near the corral.”

“Deal.” I looked up at him, smiling and pulling him into a kiss.

We walked out to the corral before Parker drew me close. “If they touch you, I’ll kill them.”

“I think they know that.”

“Boomer. Cornell,” Parker called. “Come here.”

“Parker, be nice,” I whispered.

“Vern, you and the boys cut out fifteen horses,” he continued, ignoring me.



“Make sure they’re mean ones,” I added.

Parker scowled at me. “You two are going to help Kylie. You’ll do what she tells you.”

Slipping his hand down the waistband of my pants, he gripped tightly.

“If she gets hurt.” I elbowed him. “Ugh.” He jerked on my pants. “If she gets hurt, you will pay.” I went to elbow him again but he caught my elbow.

“Yes. Mr. Monroe,” they both answered.

“Now, go help them cut out those fifteen horses.” He held onto me as the other men left.

“Ky, if I didn’t love you so much, you wouldn’t get away with that.” He turned me to face him.

“Be careful and stay where I can see you.” He kissed me. “I love you.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I love you too.” He accepted my invitation; his tongue explored my mouth with gentle strokes. He circled the tip of his around mine with such tenderness.

“You know, there are others present,” Vern shouted.

Parker pulled back just enough so he could speak. “We are doing this tonight.” His lips found mine again. “Go have fun.”

“Thanks.” Turning away to go to the horses, Parker swatted me on the behind causing me to turn to scold him.

“Tonight.”

I couldn’t wait, but I had a bet to win. Focusing my mind on the horses, I instructed Cornell and Boomer, showing them exactly how I wanted things done. I needed to have all eighteen horses following behind me with saddles on them before lunch tomorrow. I started by feeding them small pieces of apples. We had nineteen horses to work with: my stallion, the three

from earlier, and the fifteen. I added three more, when they started following me, then another three until I had all nineteen following me.

I had the two men fetch some grain and feed bags from the barn as I began to rub down my stallion, touching him as before. Glancing up from my work, Parker stared at me while Vern could not resist teasing him for allowing me to distract him. The men followed my instructions on massaging the horses while I fed my stallion some of the oats then moved to the next horse, singing and rubbing until all nineteen relaxed to our touch.

Parker walked over smiling. “Ky, that is going to take you forever. You’ve been on your feet to long. It’s hot and you need to go rest.”

“I have been resting for too long; if I get tired, I’ll sit down. I could use something to drink, though.” Walking up to him after I finished my current horse, grasping his shirt, I yanked, sending every button flying. I laughed then kissed his nipple, sinking my teeth into it as I began to suck, until he made me pull away. “Parker, can you get me something to drink, please?” My tongue tasted the sweat on his chest. “I’m sorry but I have work to do.” Biting down again before I walked away.

We had finished rubbing down and feeding all the horses when Becca rang the supper bell. We tied the horses to the fence, then I walked into Parker’s awaiting arms. I kissed his chest but he pulled away. “What?” I asked.

“You have to wait. Let’s go eat.” He smiled, wrapping his arm across my shoulder as we walked up to the house. Parker smelled my hair. “You stink.” I pushed him away but he pulled me back into his embrace and kissed me.

“Parker. Mama says Ky needs to eat,” Vern shouted.

Parker stiffened in my embrace, taking my hand, leading me to our awaiting meal. At the top of the steps, Parker grabbed Vern by the shirt, letting us know he was angry.

“Her name is Kylie. Don’t forget it.”

I didn’t say anything but intended to speak with him about it later. Parker held the door open for me but when the smell of freshly cooked cabbage overwhelmed me, I grabbed my mouth and fell off the porch, landing on my knees, throwing up in the dirt by the steps. Parker knelt behind me; it was the first time he didn’t have to hold my hair or waist. His hand lay on my hip, lost.

“Ky, are you all right?” he whispered, but I just held my hand up trying to breathe.

“Parker. Here’s some tea for her.” Martha set a cup on the porch.

“Thanks, Mama,” Parker said.

“Becca’s bringing out some cool water,” Martha continued.

Parker nodded and then massaged my back and hips. “Ky?” I still couldn’t get up or talk because I threw up again, then waited for the dry heaves to come.

I finally gasped, hoping it was over. “Parker,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“Can you get me some clean clothes?” I still found it hard for me to speak.

“In a little bit,” he whispered.

“Then help me up. I don’t think I can get up.” He grabbed me around the waist and lifted me up; straightening my legs caused them to hurt because I had hit the ground hard. Parker helped me sit down. “I really could use a change of clothes.”

“In a minute.”

“No. Now. If I don’t get out of these clothes. I will be throwing up again, and I don’t think I can walk to the house.” I frowned at him.

“Fine.” Parker picked me up and carried me home and straight up to our room. He sat me on the bed kneeling and pulling my boots and stockings off, then helped me stand for my pants. He kissed my stomach before taking my shirt over my head. I ran back down the stairs and out the door, heading for the outhouse with Parker behind me. I cried when nothing but the dry heaves came and because my body hurt while Parker held me in the comfort of his arms.

“We need to get you some tea.” Parker whispered, escorting to the front porch of the main house where my bitter tea waited. We stepped over a fresh pile of dirt covering my mess and I took a seat in a chair near the far end of the porch. I smiled as Parker brought me the cup of tea.

Quietly, I sipped it, wearing only my pantaloons, corset, and camisole with Parker hovering guardedly. Cord and Luke burst out the door and stared before running back in the house shouting. “Mama. Mama. Kylie’s outside and she’s naked.” I laughed hearing them, Parker just grinned, as he leaned on the porch rail. Vern and Becca rushed out, followed by Martha carrying a blanket.

“Shit. She’s not naked,” Vern said.

“Well, she’s close enough.” Martha scowled. “Kylie Ruth, you may be married but that gives you no reason to walk around in your underclothes.” Martha’s unhappiness echoed across the porch. “Cover yourself up.” She draped the blanket over my shoulders. “And you, Parker Monroe, you should have had the decency to cover her up.”

I had never seen Martha so mad and could do nothing about it until I finished my tea while she marched around the porch. Handing Parker my cup, I went to her.

“Martha. I am sorry. We weren’t thinking.”

“Thank you, Kylie.” She hugged me.

“I have got to go get some clothes on so I can finish with my horses.” I hugged her back.

“Ky, I’ll meet you in the barn.” Parker said. I nodded, leaving everyone staring; I went back to my house. After dressing, I went to finish my work with the horses.

“Kylie. Don’t you stay out too long, you still need to eat,” Martha called from the porch.

I waved at her and kept walking when someone grabbed me from behind. I tried to scream but a hand clasped over my mouth. Struggling against the hands, I lifted my right boot to get my knife but couldn’t reach it, so I kicked the inside of my captor’s leg. The grip relaxed enough for me to grab my knife before kicking again. I slammed my knife into my captor’s leg, causing him to scream.

“Drop her.” Vern’s voice came up behind me. “Parker, are you all right? Parker?” Vern’s voice conveyed his fear but it stayed steady. “Let Kylie go.” He paused. “Becca, check on Parker.” I heard two more guns cock.

The arms around me tightened even with my knife still embedded in his leg. I slid it sideways then yanked downward, making him cry out. My captor refused to let go so I shoved my knife into the arm that held me.

“Peter Worley. I will-” A gunshot interrupted Vern; Peter fell to the ground, dragging me with him.

Looking up from where I fell, blood ran down the sides of Parker’s face. Vern grabbed Parker while Becca and Martha help me up.

“Ky.” I wrapped my arms around Parker’s neck, covering both of us in blood. His hands held me while my body trembled.

“Boomer. Cornell. Lead the horse as before. Rub them down and give them more grain, then put them in the corral. Be out here before the rooster crows, starting it again.” I turned to Parker. “I still have a bet to win.”

I helped Parker to our bed and began to put pressure on the cut while he held my legs, trying to keep himself steady. The cut ran along the side of his head just above his ear. He moaned when I pressed too hard.

“Kylie.” Martha said as she came to the door.

“Yes.”

“How bad is it?”

“It’s still bleeding. We need bandages.” I held a rag against it. “I’m having trouble getting it to stop.

“Be right back.” She disappeared back down the stairs.

“Parker,” I whispered. “How are you doing?”

“I’ll be fine.” His voice sounded strained.

“Don’t lie to me.” I wrung the rag out then put more pressure on the wound.

“Ky, it hurts.” The trembling in his voice scared me.

“But?”

“But I shouldn’t have let him get the drop on me.” Parker looked up at me, his face still covered in blood. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.” I kissed him, getting more blood on me.

By the time, we got Parker’s head to stop bleeding and bandaged, Will Dayton had arrived to pick up the body. “Kylie. Parker. Will wants to speak with you.” Martha led him

through the bedroom door. “Will, is there anything I can get you?” He shook his head, so she turned back to me, “Kylie, I am bringing you some food.”

“Thanks, Martha,” I said. After she left, we told Will everything that happened, while the blood covering our clothes and skin dried. “Will, I hate to cut this short but I haven’t eaten much today and the smell is about to make me ill. So, if you don’t mind can we talk tomorrow?” I asked. Will just nodded then went downstairs, meeting Martha carrying a tray of bread, cheese, a slice of ham and my bitter tea. She gave me strict instructions to finish everything.

I helped Parker remove his clothes and began to wash the blood off him. He tried to hide the pain but his blue eyes made me hurt to look into them. Once I had him clean, he lay back on the bed.

I began to wash myself, relishing the coolness of the rag; we didn’t speak but Parker watched me. When I couldn’t get the blood out of my hair, he sat up and helped me while tears ran down my cheek as his trembling hands touched me. I had never been so scared. Once clean neither one of us felt like putting on any clothes. I threw the bloody clothes into the hallway before curling up next to Parker as I ate. He pulled me close after I finished, so I could cry because another had taken our night of being together.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I woke the next morning, the roosters still slept, Parker’s moaning kept waking me up but now he lay quietly sleeping. Turning over and lightly kissing him, I tried not to wake him, because he usually woke when I moved away from him. Carefully crawling out of bed, I prayed his injury would keep him asleep, kissing him again before grabbing some clothes and sneaking across the hall to get dressed in the other bedroom. I looked in on him before leaving our home with a rifle in my hand.

Moonlight lit my way to the barn, causing me to tighten my grip on the rifle. I shuddered moving past the place where Peter died. I lit the lantern just inside the door, and the smell of dried blood mixed with urine and hay caused me to step outside to keep from throwing up. On the ground by my foot lay a large circle of darkened ground where Parker had fallen. Closing my eyes, I tried not to imagine how close I had come to losing him.

Focusing on my bet with Parker, I began gathering all the blankets that could be found in the barn. Tossing them in the back of the buckboard separating the stalls, I turned my search to acquire all the saddles in view and to put them in the buckboard as well.

“Kylie girl. You know it’s not wise for you to be out here alone after last night.” The normally cheerful voice held worry. Pappa’s face, covered with hard whiskers that never seemed to grow, showed what he thought when he saw Parker’s blood.

“I guess Martha forgot about cleaning up in here.” He turned back to me. “What are you doing out here without some protection?”

“I brought protection, Pappa.” I pointed to the rifle, lying within my reach.

“Does Parker know you’re down here?”

“Parker’s asleep, where I want him to stay.” I looked at Pappa while I loaded the nine saddles. “Pappa, I need three more blankets and ten saddles. Do you know where I can find any?”

“You’re still planning on breaking those horses?” He looked into the back of the wagon.

“Yes. I have till lunch to get all of them used to saddles and blankets.” I dug through all the stalls.

“Why so short of time?”



“Because Parker won’t let me finish unless I prove I know what I am doing and he is in no condition to break any.” I said, trying to hide my concern.

“Parker’s condition has nothing to do with why you want them used saddles,” he said.

I smiled. “Pappa, do you know where any are?”

“It’s no wonder he fell in love with you so fast, Kylie girl.” His face softened.

“Why’s that Pappa?”

“You have different methods but you both go after what you want.” Pappa’s smile grew. “You remind me of my wife. She knew what it took to get what she wanted.” His face showed how much he missed her before he turned to leave. “Well, are you coming?” I followed Pappa to a large shed behind the barn, where we met Boomer and Cornell.

“Good morning,” I greeted them; they just nodded. “I need you to go hitch up the buckboard. Load a barrel of grain and empty feed sacks then bring it back here. Also get two spades.”

“Yes’m,” they both said.

“Kylie girl. How long have you been breaking horses?” Pappa asked as he helped me rummage through the shed.

“Since I was eight.”

“Eight?”

“Yes,” picking up a blanket and saddle, “I worked on a farm in Boston and started with five horses of my own before moving on. By the time I was ten, I owned half that farm and part of another.”

“Owned?” He stared at me. “Kylie girl, you wouldn’t lie to an old man?”

“Yes, Pappa. Owned. We have seventy-five breed mares at one farm and one-hundred, thirty-five at the other last count.” I carried out another saddle.

“I thought Parker had good horse sense.” Pappa picked up a saddle he found. “Do your folks know about the farms?”

“No, and I have no intentions of telling them either. Parker knows, but he doesn’t know how big they are.” Another saddle thumped onto the ground. “We found five saddles and the last three blankets.” I saw Cornell, bringing up the buckboard with Boomer walking behind it. “Cornell, go find me five more saddles. Boomer, load these.” I threw the three blankets into the wagon. “I’ll meet you all by the corral.”

“Yes‘m,” Boomer replied.

“Pappa, you coming?” I moved away from the men.

“I wouldn’t want to miss this for anything.” His smile reminded me of Parker’s.

By the time Boomer and Cornell got back with the buckboard, I had six of the horses tied to the fence. We laid out all the saddles and blankets with mine next to the place where I would tie my stallion. Leading my horse out of the corral, I began singing to him, then saddled him with the men following my actions, including taking out a feedbag and filling it with a few pieces of an apple and grain before draping it around the horse’s head.

“Gentlemen. I want all these horses getting used to the blankets before breakfast.” The men just nodded.

“I guess you could use an extra pair of hands,” Pappa said, moving into help us and waved me off when I went to show him what to do. “Kylie girl, do you think no one was watching you yesterday?” He leaned down, “and my grandson couldn’t stop. I have seen Parker

get three horses broke in a day. Yesterday, he didn't get one." Pappa just smiled. "We have work to do."

I could feel my stomach grumbling when I heard the breakfast bell ring. "What do you think, Pappa?" I moved up next to him.

"I think my grandson is a very lucky man." He smiled so tender. "When do plan on riding them?"

"Not for at least four days, maybe five." I wrapped my hand around Pappa's arm. "Pappa, I'm going to go check on Parker. Tell Martha to save me some food."

"Sure will." He nodded. I ran over to my quiet house then snuck up to our bedroom, where Parker was still sleeping, The sheet lay off the bed, exposing almost every inch of his nude body. Fighting the cravings of wanting to touch his body, I pulled the sheet up, covering him completely.

His hand found mine. "Where've you been?" He whispered, as he looked up at me.

"Working." I kissed him, causing him to moan at my touch. "Still hurting?"

"Yes."

"Go back to sleep. Your mother will be in to check on you later. I'll be back at lunch." I kissed him again, then he turned to go back to sleep, allowing me to join the others for breakfast. I drank my bitter tea while the jibes and banter made breakfast enjoyable. Before returning to the horses, I snuck another quick peak in on Parker and found him sleeping peacefully.

I aligned the saddles behind every horse. I explained what needed to be done to Pappa and the others, and we proceeded in a joint venture to win my bet. I welcomed the short break, when Becca brought out water for the others and bitter tea for me. With all my attention focused on the horses, Parker came up without me seeing him. I smiled when I saw him talking with

Pappa, wearing a clean bandage on his cut. After finishing with the horse in front of me, I went to see how Parker felt.

Pappa's smile filled his face. "Well Parker, are you going to tell her or am I."

"Pappa, I'll tell her in my own time." Parker embraced me while I wrapped my arms around his waist. I couldn't stop smiling, seeing him up on his feet with a smile on his face. We kissed, our tongues caressing the others with our desires growing fierce but he pulled back. "Come with me."

"I need to finish first. We still have five to go." I hated telling him no.

"I believe they can do it." Parker looked at Pappa and the others.

"No. This is my bet," I insisted.

"You've won. You proved you know what you are doing. Tell them what to do then come with me." Parker placed his hand on my cheek and kissed me lightly. Calling to the others to join Pappa and myself, I explained what needed to be done while Parker went to talk with Vern. When I finished, I wrapped my arms around him from behind.

"Geez Kylie. You really think that these horses will be broke before ours?" Vern asked.

"Vern," I smiled as Parker moved his arm over my head, keeping me close, "I have broken over a hundred and fifty horses this way in three weeks before."

"Parker. I'm sorry but she's lying. She has to be," Vern argued.

Parker laughed. "Ky, how long will it take you to break the eighteen?"

"We will have them ready to ride in five days at most," I answered giving Parker a gentle squeeze.

"Parker, you know she's lying now. You can't break them that fast yourself." Vern smirked at me.

“Vern, I’ll make you a bet. If I can’t get them ready to ride in four days, I’ll buy you and Becca a new large feather bed with silk sheets that comes all the way from Europe.” I felt Parker trying not to laugh.

“You’re on.” Vern smiled greedily.

Parker tightened his grip on me. “Let’s go.” Leading me back to the main house, we gathered up some food and my bitter tea from the kitchen then went to our house. We sat at the table and ate only enough to curb our hunger, while Parker tried to hide the fact that his head still hurt. We left the dishes and strolled up the stairs with me holding onto his arm. His lips found mine before we reached the top as he picked me up and carried me into the bedroom. I could feel the hot summer breeze blowing through the windows.

Parker dropped my legs but kept his grip on my waist while working his gun belt off and then let it crash to the floor. I sat on the bed so he could take off my boots, which he tossed across the room. After jerking my pants off, he pulled my shirt over my head while helping me stand. He found my lips again and took the ribbon out of my corset, dropping it at our feet while his hands ripped my camisole apart.

He dropped down to his knees, drawing my breast into his mouth and sucked aggressively. His hands gripped the waistband of my pantaloons, yanking them down and nearly taking me with them, but he bit my breast to keep me standing. I screamed. He adjusted his hold on my breast and bit again, eliciting another scream. Parker laughed as he slid three fingers inside me.

The quick caressing inside my now wet canal forced me to grab Parker’s shoulder and the bed frame. Finding a hard fast rhythm, his arm braced me at my waist while his mouth kept time

by pulling, biting, and sucking on my breast. With the pressure building in my body, he held a steady thrum as my body tightened. I dug my fingers into his shoulder and screamed.

Parker released my breast but kept his fingers deep inside me, lowering me onto the bed. He got up then rubbed his fingers that had been inside me over my lips until I let him put them in my mouth. I could taste my juices, sucking on them until he took them away. Standing above me, he pulled me to where my head draped slightly off the edge of the bed. He kissed me gently. “Do you trust me?” He kissed me again.

“Yes.”

“I love you.” Whispering while he tied a handkerchief across my eyes then lightly touched his lips to mine. He took my left hand, stretched it across the bed, and secured a piece of silk around it and repeated with the right. Moving, he lifted my leg up until he had it in the position he wanted before tying it with another piece a silk, only to repeat the action with my hands. Not resisting the urge, I tugged on my hands but the silk would not give. Distracted by the restraints, I didn’t notice when he stood over my head again. He kissed me letting his tongue caress mine and followed it with a chaste kiss.

I could feel him maneuver his body over mine while laying his penis against my lips. I began to lick before drawing it into my mouth. Parker shifted his hips so he could slide deeper as his fingers entered me again. My body was still so wet and wanted more when he pulled my lips apart as he bit down on my flesh. I couldn’t scream because he forced himself farther into my throat.

I lay there while his fingers and mouth played inside me. He bit me again, causing me to push against him, but he held me, only increasing the thrust in my mouth. He nibbled and played in the same rhythm he used in my mouth. Feeling the pressure building, he bit me again, sending

me over the edge. He pulled out of my mouth, then crawled off me until I could feel and smell his breath as he hovered just inches above my face.

“Ky.”

“Yes.”

“Are you ready for more?” He kissed my nose.

“Yes.” I wanted Parker inside me any way he wanted for as long as he wanted, because once the baby started growing, making love would become difficult, and I didn’t want him looking at any other woman. His calloused hands slid down my legs while he kissed his way up my stomach to my chest, where he teased my nipples. He raised my head so he could kiss me with my juices still fresh in his mouth. He pushed himself into my slick canal causing me to moan.

Parker took his time finding his rhythm as I fought against the restraints. I wanted to hold Parker, to rub my hands along his back and hips, moaning my frustrations only to be met with a kiss. He stretched his hands out until our fingers tangled together, squeezing tight then slamming himself deep into me.

Moaning and gasping with each thrust, I could hear Parker’s own breath becoming short until he had built the pressure up in both of us. He kissed me, bringing us screaming into each other’s mouths. Parker kept his strokes going several more times, as he pulsed within me.

He collapsed on his side, his body still linked with mine, trying to catch his breath. His hand slid up and untied the restraint closest to his head before removing the blindfold. He kissed me as he untied my other arm. “I love what you let me do.” He whispered as he lifted off me. Smiling as he released my legs and helped me adjust to a new position on the bed. He crawled in

behind me, both of our bodies still naked as he held me close and we lost losing ourselves to an afternoon of naked slumber.

## Chapter 14

I spent the next few days getting the horses ready to ride. Parker kept up with breaking his own style but watched me very carefully. After breakfast on the fourth day, I expressed the need for six more riders and other supplies, so Parker went to town and got me all the blankets, saddles, and riders I needed. It surprised him that I didn't ask to go with him.

Martha made a large lunch for all the riders. After they ate, I walked up in front of them with all nineteen horses following me calmly. "Gentlemen, I see your disbelief that this training will work, but I assure you that long that as you follow my instructions you won't be thrown." Vern and a few of the others laughed.

"Vern." Parker got his attention because we had talked about what I planned to do.

"Come on Parker. None of these horses has had a rider. You're going to tell me that they're not going to buck?" Vern's skepticism didn't surprise me.

"Vern, they may buck and some probably will. I do however know which ones are more likely to buck. I'll put each man with a horse that should suit him." I looked from Vern to all the other men.

"Kylie, which one will you be riding?" Vern squawked.

"Vern!" Vernon Sr. yelled. "Shut your trap and listen." Vernon Sr., like Parker tended to be hard and quiet, but he did surprise me when he asked if he could help. Vern didn't say anything else.



“Laid out beside each horse is everything you’ll need. When I give you the horse I want you to ride, you’ll go to the saddle and do the following.” I looked at all the men because from experience, I knew the skeptics would laugh, and I looked to Pappa for support, which I never needed before. Vernon Sr. winked at me. Parker smiled and nodded. I took a deep breath.

“I want you to take one of the apples that lie on the ground near your pile and cut it into small slices and feed a piece to your horse. Keep the pieces very small and after you put the blanket on, feed it another; keep doing this until the horse is completely saddled.” I paused, “When you greet the horse I want you to hum, sing, or talk softly to it.” The men fought not to laugh. “Don’t worry if you sound like a crow, and we can all feel sorry for the horse I give to Vern.” Every man including Parker laughed.

“I love you too, Kylie,” Vern shouted.

“Vern, I would watch out, Parker’s the jealous type,” Royre retorted.

“Remember.” I raised my voice to get their attention. “Your horse doesn’t care if you sound like an opera singer or a bellowing old jack-ass; it just wants comfort.” I finished all my instructions. I started with Pappa, Cornell, and Boomer, assigning the horses. Parker, Vern and Vernon Sr. were next. After I finished assigning the horses, I walked around watching all the men, while some waited for my final instructions.

“When you go to climb on, be prepared for the horse to struggle against your weight. Make sure you have a tight grip on your reins and saddle. If it starts to run, let it. We’ll be running them for one to two hours until all of them can be handled.” All the men stared at me. “Head out west because there is more open land.” I paused. “Are there any questions?” I expected one from Vern but with looks from Parker and Vernon Sr., he didn’t say anything. “Well, gentlemen, enjoy your ride.”

Parker walked up to me. “You be careful riding, because I won’t be able to help you.” He smiled but worry showed in his eyes. “Ky, if you start hurting head back. Understand?”

“Parker, I have done this hundreds of times.”

“You haven’t been expecting a baby before. My baby. Do you understand?” he asked

“Yes.” He kissed me before he helped me on my horse. I looked at all the men waiting on me. “Let’s ride.”

Each man climbed on to his horse, some with more trouble than others. Parker left first with the others following one by one. When the last man was running, I kicked my stallion and joined them.

I slowly passed the others as the horses raced toward the sun. I watched the control each man had over his horse. Weaker riders like Luke and Cord rode the calmer horses, which meant they would have control early in the run.

I smiled at the look on Vern’s face as I crept up behind him, watching his control as I moved to ride beside him. He didn’t have control yet but he was close. Nodding at Vern, I urged my horse forward; he laughed as I passed him. The stallion dug deep ruts into the ground below us as we made our way toward Parker with the green landscape blurring beyond my sight.

I pushed my stallion even harder as my hair flew dancing in the air behind me with the ribbon gone. It felt good to ride like this again, and I thought of the last time Parker had let me ride at this pace. Smiling from the day, I danced with a tree. Parker lay low in the saddle, letting his horse run but gently pulling on the reins for control. I gained slowly on him.

He smiled when he saw me move up to his side, his control determining how long we would ride and we had already been on the run for over an hour. I usually rode a spirited horse because they took the longest, but Parker told me if I wanted to go, I had to ride my stallion.

After another half hour, I gave the signal to slow the horses into a walk. The horses had to cool down before I would allow them to rest, which meant riding for a half-hour more.

I brought us to a halt at a small pond with quiet a few trees surrounding it. I could hear the men talking and laughing about the ride while I waited on Parker to help me. I loved the riding but appreciated the chance to stretch my legs. He kissed me after I slid into his awaiting arms. The other men walked up and patted Parker on the shoulder as he stood there with his arms around me. The men gathered around the pond, continuing to discuss their amazement at the control they had over the horses.

Parker led me off to a tree away from the others where he sat down then pulled me down into his arms. “Does it always work?”

“Yes, but I was lucky this time and all the horses responded well. It took me over a year to get my chestnut in Boston to accept me as a rider.” I smiled, “He is still very argumentative but a good ride.”

“Well, Mrs. Monroe, how would you feel about us joining together and breaking all the horses? How long do you think it will take to get the others ready?” Parker tried to brush his fingers through my tangled hair. “Your ribbon came out.”

“It always does.” I smiled, “as for the horses, by next Saturday at the latest. For better results one man to one horse, it would cut the time down to three maybe four days.” I leaned against his raised knee.

“That’s less than a week.” He sounded skeptical.

“I know, but the one-on-one will make it go faster. Each man can focus on one horse, making them respond quicker to the weights.” I smiled. “If I have enough men I can watch each one more closely and weed out the more spirited horses that may take longer. Some of these

were ready to ride two days ago but we had to get that one.” I pointed at the horse Parker rode, “to behave.”

He laughed. “Well, let’s see what we can do about getting the rest ready to ride a week early.” He shifted, pulling me closer to him, drawing me in for a kiss while his hand rubbed against my belly. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel fine.” I snuggled up to him.

“Are you sure?” He tilted my head so I had to look at him.

“Yes.” I pulled away so I could face him. “It felt so good to be on a ride like this again.” I leaned back against Parker while we rested, and I closed my eyes as he rubbed his hand up and down my back, Parker stayed quiet, trying to hide his worry. After an hour, we mounted and headed back home.

I smiled when Vern rode up next to me. “Kylie, I have to admit. You were right.”

“You can expect your bed to arrive soon.” I couldn’t hide my excitement.

“What?” He looked at me.

“I had Parker send a letter to Boston to get it ordered.” I looked at Parker then back to Vern. “Next time you think I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ll hurt you.” Sighing and thinking of the other day. “Oh. Vern,” I glanced over my shoulder. “Thank you for the other day.”

“No thanks needed, Ky, Kylie. You’re family.” Vern nodded, watching me ride ahead.

After we arrived at the farm, I asked the men to gather around, Parker watched, trying to figure out what I wanted. The men stared at me as I continued, sitting on my stallion.

“Gentlemen, I see you enjoyed your ride. I have a tradition that I refuse to break.” I reached into my saddlebag and pulled out a small pouch, tossing it up and causing the money to rattle when I caught it. “I have always rewarded those who ride with me. Every man will

receive one.” I saw Parker start to object, but I held up my hand. “Every man.” I rode past each man and tossed him a bag; all the men cheered and thanked me when they caught their bag, but the cheers turned to grumbling when I tossed Boomer his, because most of them didn’t consider him as anything more than an animal. I spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Boomer, if anyone takes this from you, I’ll know it and that man will pay. Does everyone hear me?” I looked around at all the men, and Parker’s face told me that we would be discussing this later. I heard grumbling but they all heard; the cheers were back when I tossed Parker a bag.

“Kylie, you mean you pay for his services?” Royre shouted.

I smiled. “Sometimes.” The men laughed as Royre and Vern nudged Parker, but he turned back to me, glaring. One of the other men called him a kept man, while another shouted that I wouldn’t have to pay for his services. The laughter stopped as Parker moved up next to me so I could continue.

“We have thirty-two more horses to break, starting before sun up. If you’re interested; with each horse you ride you will get another pouch.” I smiled, then moved my stallion toward the barn.

The smell made me cringe but I continued inside to unsaddle my stallion. I threw my saddle over the stall door then laid my blanket over it, as Parker came in. I smiled at him, but he only nodded. My stallion munched on his feed while the brush caressed his hide and Parker tended to the horse that he rode.

“You don’t look happy,” I observed, joining him after finishing with mine; he smiled but kept wiping down his horse. I waited for him to say something but he refused.

“You’re mad at me.”

“Yes. A little,” he said, not looking at me.

“Parker, they know I am expecting your baby, and it’s not like we ever hide our feelings.”

“Ky, that’s not why I’m mad.” His eyes held so much anger as he fought to keep his temper under control. “I love that you didn’t back down to them.” He kept rubbing down the horse.

“Well, if that didn’t bother you. What? Why are you mad?” Frustrated, I raised my voice.

“You paid a slave,” he shouted. “Not to mention a hired hand that already gets paid for his work.” He set his jaw, trying again to get more control over his anger. “How much did you pay Boomer?”

“Every bag has the same amount of money?” .

Parker threw the brush across the barn, “Ky.” He hesitated, “You paid him enough to buy his freedom.”

“And why is that a bad thing?” I could feel my stance stiffen, ready for a fight if it came.

“He’s a nigger, Ky. Just a damn nigger.” Parker had never yelled at me in anger before. We never discussed my opinions on slavery, but I did know his. I glared at Parker then turned around and walked toward the door, because no one talked to me like that, and neither would he. Not wanting to be near my husband, I left him to his anger.

“Ky. I’m not finished.”

“I am.” I stared at him then pushed the door open but stopped then turned back to Parker. “I meant what I told Boomer. And, I am telling you, don’t fuck with my traditions.” I shouted. The laughter and talk around the barn stopped.

The men outside stared at me as I stormed out of the barn then past the corrals, away from every person, especially Parker. Ever since my mother sent me to Boston, most people respected what I did and no one had ever complained about me paying anyone. Now as I marched toward a small cluster of trees, my own husband stood in the barn angry with me for paying a man for his work. I let my own anger get the best of me and ran as hard and as fast as I could. My feet pounded on the hard ground, making my body ache and reminding me of my still tender back.

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“Ky!” Parker shouted as he came out of the barn. “Shit,” Parker began to look around for his wife, then at men still gathered. Vern pointed him in the direction of a cluster of trees south of the barn. Parker nodded and ran

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I had never been this angry with Parker. After sitting down in the cluster of trees with my back against the trunk of an oak, I laid a broken limb across my lap then took my knife and began to slice the bark off the branch, working my knife in both directions.

“You will cut yourself if it slips.” Parker walked closer to me.

“Go away.” I didn’t look up from the branch.

“Is that any way to talk to your husband?” He leaned against my tree.

“It is, if he’s being a snake.”

“Snake, am I?” His voice lightened. “Well, I guess we make a wild couple since my wife is being an old crone.” Kneeling beside me, “Please, give me the knife, or at least put it up.”

“I have been carving with a knife since-”

“Yes. Yes, since you were eight.”

“No. I was going to say eleven. They wouldn’t let me have a knife till then.” I still refused to look at him.

“Why?” He tried to hide his laughter, still kneeling beside me.

“You know that small scar I have on my stomach?” I stripped a long piece of bark off the branch.

“Yes.”

“I stabbed myself when I was eight. They didn’t trust me with a knife until I was eleven.” I stripped another piece away.

Parker started laughing and holding out his hand. “You’re too upset to be handling a knife right now. And-” he put his hand on top of mine. “You have enough scars. I don’t want you to get any more.” His anger gone, but I knew we would finish our previous discussion. Sitting down beside me, he turned me to face him. “Ky. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“No. You shouldn’t have.” I looked at him.

“I just don’t like you paying Boomer and Cornell.” His voice softened as he began wiping down my knife.

“You made your point very clear.” I set my jaw.

Parker slid my knife back into my boot. “Why?” He caressed my cheek. “Why do you need to pay every man that rides with you?”

Parker wanted to understand. “The man who taught me to break horses was an Indian. His daughter married the man who is still part owner in one of my farms. His daughter died in childbirth. The baby lived. She was my first and best friend in Boston. Her family took me in as one of theirs.” I took a deep breath, because I could feel the tears about to start. “Her name



was Pearl.” My eyes began to fill with water. “Pearl and I did everything together. We were still learning to ride sidesaddle, or at least Pearl was. We were out riding one day when something spooked her horse.” I took another deep breath, trying to keep my voice from trembling. “He threw her. I jumped in the horse’s way, to keep it from trampling her. It took me several minutes to get him to leave.” The tears streamed down my face as I continued. “I carried her over three hours to her home. I fell to my knees; I don’t know how many times but I didn’t drop her. I wouldn’t let myself. I don’t remember a lot after that, because they found us. They took her from me. I remember screaming and crying for her.”

Parker kissed my hand, then wiped my tears away. I took a deep breath. “The next day I remember waking up with her grandfather sitting in a chair next to me. He told me she had died.” I looked away from Parker. “He told me the only way to remember her is to teach the horse she rode how not to be scared. He spent hours teaching me how to be a better rider. It was then that I refused to wear dresses and started wearing pants.” I wiped more of my tears away. “It was also at that time he started teaching me how to break horses. They also discovered that it kept me out of trouble at school.”

“I can’t imagine you being in trouble.” Parker whispered.

I laughed, “I kept getting into fights. The teachers found out that as long as I worked with the horses, I didn’t beat up any of the other girls.” Parker kissed my forehead. “With each horse I broke, her grandfather gave me a dollar. He gave me the first dollar I ever made. I went on to break one hundred horses in six months. I took the money I made and bought my first twenty horses.”

“You were much younger than me.” Parker smiled at me.

“That got me my start. Every time someone helped me break a horse, he would ask me, “Did you pay him?” If I said no, he reminded me that they blessed me with their talent and, in turn, I need to reward them. By rewarding them, I was thanking the spirits. I must always pay for the help given to me. The more money I have the higher my rewards must be, or I could lose everything.”

Parker drew me in to his embrace, kissing me gently. He brushed his hand over my hair. He smiled. “I have one question.”

“What?” I kissed his hand.

“Where did you learn to talk like that?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I did have a lot of friends at the local boy’s school.” Parker cocked his eyebrow at me. “Parker Monroe. You know very well I didn’t do anything with any of those boys.” I pushed him away.

Parker leaned over me, kissing me, forcing me to the ground. “I know that you didn’t...” he kissed me again. “Make love to them...” he smiled as he kissed me again. “But you...” he kissed me so chastely. “Kiss too damn well...” he lightly touched my lips. “Not to have kissed them all.”

I tried to shove him off me. “Parker Monroe, you’re awful.”

His smile lit up his face as his hands found the sides of my face. “I get to reap the rewards.”

I rolled my eyes. “You reaped the rewards before they even belonged to you.”

“No. They belonged to me ever since your birthday.” I turned my head, so he couldn’t kiss me again.

“How would you have felt if I had said no to being with you?”

“I would have done more to impress you.” He caught my lips, taking his tongue deep into my mouth. “Besides, I wouldn’t let you share it with anyone else.”

I ran my hands through his hair. “You know when we reach Boston. You will have to keep your jealousy under control.”

“Why’s that?” He kissed down my neck while his hands unbuttoned my shirt.

“Because, some of my friends like to hug me,” I informed him.

“Not any more.” He pulled on my corset ribbon.

“What? Are you planning on pulling your gun on everyone of them?”

He lifted my breast out from under my camisole and took it into his mouth. “In your letter,” he said as he pulled on my nipple with his teeth, causing me to moan. “I know you told your friend you’re married?” He sucked harder, taking as much of my breast into his mouth while my body began to react.

“Yes, why?”

He pulled back, a little frustrated, “Ky, I’m trying to make love to you. I’m very sure that your friend has spread the word that you’re married.” He went back to my breast.

“But they.” He bit my breast. “Ow.”

“Hush.” He took more of my breast into his mouth, as I lay my head back and tried to relax as Parker continued playing. My body wiggled so I could reach his gun belt. I ached while my hands struggled to get his belt off and his pants undone. I played with his hard shaft, causing him to moan.

He pulled away from me; he unfastened my pants and untied my pantaloons before he pulled them down. He growled his complaint when he could only slide them over my boots but not take them all the way off. He pushed my feet up close to my ass.

He maneuvered his body over my feet before he pushed inside me. I couldn't move my legs; they were pinned under the weight of Parker's body, and he held my hands above my head with one hand while the other squeezed my exposed breast. He found a soothing rhythm, and I couldn't keep from moaning my enjoyment while wiggling one of my hands free then running my fingers in his hair, entangling it in my grasp.

My body quaked when he sped up to a faster and deeper pace, causing me to scream when my body tightened around his. I felt his pulsating throb inside me and moaned when he pushed himself in one more time.

He kissed my forehead, "You won't be hugging anyone in Boston." He slipped himself out of me, "At least not any of the men." He kissed me. "Can any of the boys in Boston shoot a gun?"

"Yes, some, but mostly dueling pistols." I lay there with him, looking at me.

We heard the dinner bell ring. Parker lifted himself off me, then tucked himself back in his trousers, but I still didn't move, exposing everything. "Ky, get up. Vern's on his way out here."

"I would but I can't move."

Parker looked down at me and laughed because my boot heels were hung on a tree root. He freed me then helped me stand, pulling my pantaloons up, and I took the ribbon, tying them in place. Parker rolled my pants back up over my boots until I could pull them the rest of the way up.

"Go over there and finish." He pointed to some bushes deeper in the cluster of trees.

"Parker!" Vern shouted. "I'm not coming any closer, so Kylie can get dressed without fear of me seeing her."

“What do you want Vern?” Parker called back as he walked to the edge of the trees.

“I am supposed to ask you if you’re going to eat with the rest of us or take it to your place.”

“We will eat with the rest of you,” Parker answered as he walked out of the trees.

“Fine,” Vern answered, turning toward the house, but he stopped and turned back. “Can I ask you something in private?”

“Depends on the topic.” Parker moved closer to his brother.

“Oh. I can’t,” Vern said as he looked past Parker to me.

“Ky. Stay there for a moment.” Parker moved so Vern couldn’t see me. “What is it?”

“How do you get her to make love to you anywhere you want?” Parker laughed at Vern’s sad face. “I bet you could take her in front of a room full of men. How?”

“Vern. I have never pushed or bullied her, and you’ve done both to Becca since the day you brought her here. If I even thought about treating Kylie that way,” Parker paused, then smiled, “She would cut me off while I slept.”

“Ugh. She’d really do that?” Vern’s face showed his fear.

“Yes,” Parker continued, “besides I get it more without, as she puts it, being ugly.”

“How can I get Becca to open up to me like that?” Vern asked.

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask Ky.”

“You think she’d tell me?” Vern glanced back in my direction.

“Probably.” Parker smiled at Vern. “Ky, you can come out now.”

I walked up to Parker, who pulled me close and kissed my forehead. “I’m getting hungry,” I stated, hoping to move us out of the sun.

“Kylie.” Vern glanced down at me as we walked toward the house. “How can I get Becca to treat me like you do Parker?”

“Ask Becca.” I looked at him to see if he believed me. “It’s up to her. I would suggest you try to romance her. Listen to her. She has lots to say but you treat her like she has the plague.” Parker squeezed my waist, trying to warn me to tread carefully. “You and Parker both have spent your lives being focused on yourselves.” Parker stopped and pulled away from me, but I turned to look at him. “Don’t give me that. If it wasn’t true then the people of Carthage wouldn’t be so scared of you.”

“She has you there, Parker,” Vern added.

“But,” I continued, “Parker treats me so lovingly, at least most of the time. He listens to me and shows me how much he cares. Do you show Becca or even tell her?” Parker moved back up to me, kissing my head. “Do you love Becca? Don’t tell me, tell her.” I leaned my head against Parker’s chest as he pulled me close. I looked back up to Vern. “Try something this week, focus all this week on romancing her. Bring her flowers, candy, and a new silk dress. You did like the one I gave her.”

“She looked beautiful in it.” Vern smiled. I couldn’t help myself, but there was a firm outline in his pants, causing me to giggle and hide myself in Parker’s chest.

“Ky? What?” Parker asked, while I continued to giggle, sliding out of his hold not wanting to look at either of them. “Ky?”

“Sorry.” Taking a deep breath so I could talk, “Vern, tomorrow evening take Becca on a picnic down by the spring, and when you’re there...” I said, stopping and moving away from Parker in order to pull Vern down so I could whisper in his ear. “Kiss her womanhood until she screams.”

“You are joking.” Vern looked at me.

“Most women are taught not to enjoy a man’s touch, so their husbands stray. Becca was taught that you only have intercourse in order to have children.” I paused. “Anything else is a sin. My personal opinion is whoever made that rule is full of shit.” Parker and Vern howled with laughter, forcing me to wait before continuing. “Vern, Becca wants to be truly loved. You’ve done the cruelty; now-” I said, lowering my voice so he would have to pay attention. “Try loving her.”

Vern smiled as the dinner bell rang again, moving us closer to the house. Becca stood on the porch, waiting to ring the bell again, as Vern stepped up the stairs in front of her. He laid his hands gently on her cheeks, drawing her in for a very tender kiss. Parker stopped and, following Vern’s thinking, he kissed me in the same manner.

“Ah. Mama, they’re standing on the porch kissing,” Cord shouted from the doorway. “Can’t they do that after dinner?”

## Chapter 15

The next morning, Parker and I walked out to find forty-eight men gathered, which meant we needed sixteen more horses. While Parker brought out the extra horses, I sat astride my stallion and gave the men my rules. “Gentlemen, so good to see you this early. I demand that you follow my instructions because I will send you home if you choose not to listen to me.” I nodded at Parker, Vern, Pappa, and Vernon Sr. brought out enough horses for everyone.

“Now, the reason most of you are here: I do not pay anyone who is not standing next to a broken horse. It can take up to a week sometimes; the breaking begins before the morning call of the roosters and ends after the cows go to sleep. The more time you spend with the horse the

more comfortable it will become. You leave during the breaking you will not be paid. Do I make myself clear?" I shouted the last.

There was a murmur from the men and I saw Parker talking with Vern. Neither of them looked happy. "Are there any questions?" I asked again when no one responded, I turned my attention to Parker, who was walking up beside me. Leaning down I whisper to him.

"You know these men; you know the horses better than I do. You need to assign each one his horse."

He laughed, giving me an insincere bow, "As Kylie Ruth commands." I knocked his hat off, causing him to laugh more before he grabbed my reins and moved me away from the corral. Parker and Vern brought out the horses and led one to each rider. They finished just before the breakfast bell rang.

"Gentleman, tie your horses to the fence and let's go eat breakfast." I rode up to the porch, making Martha frown at me; I climbed down and tied the stallion well away from the flowerbed surrounding the porch.

All the men gathered at two long tables loaded with eggs, ham, grits, biscuits, and gravy. The men smiled and laughed, because none of them knew what to expect but Pappa and Cornell. The men asked questions while I walked into the house where my bitter tea waited.

Parker came up behind me before I sat down, wrapping his arms around me. "You are cold," he whispered. "And they call me cold blooded."

I turned to look up at him, putting more weight on his arms as I leaned back to look at him. "When it comes to breaking horses, I take no prisoners." He leaned down, laughing as he kissed me.

"Ugh. Mama, they're doing it again. Make them stop!" Luke shouted.



“Yes, Mama, make them stop,” Cord echoed.

“Yes, Mama, make them stop,” Vern mimicked in a higher voice.

“Parker, Kylie, the breakfast table is not the place for such behavior as that!” Martha shouted, causing the whole room to fill with laughter.

Parker gave me another chaste kiss. “Let’s get you something to eat.” We joked and teased with the other members of the family, enjoying the same breakfast as the men. Parker stared at me when I crumbled up my fourth biscuit, then saturated it with gravy.

“Are you hungry?”

I looked up from my plate and took a sip of my tea. “What?” I asked.

“Are you hungry? That’s your fourth biscuit and gravy.” He pointed at my plate.

I looked back at my plate, my mouth watering for the taste of the biscuit covered in gravy. “I guess I am.” After I finished the fourth biscuit and gravy, I still felt famished and reached for another biscuit, but Parker slapped my hand.

“What was that for?”

“You’ve had enough. Drink your tea.” He whispered, taking my plate and his to the kitchen. Watching him, I waited for a distraction, then grabbed a couple of biscuits and stuck them into my pocket. Parker leaned over me, placing a gentle kiss on my cheek, and took them out.

“I said, you’ve had enough.”

I pouted, but he refused to give them back and went to speak with Becca, and they kept watching me. Frowning, I threw my napkin on the table because my stomach still growled with hunger. I glared him while they talked. I left to visit the outhouse before I started with the men. I also didn’t want to be around the food if I couldn’t eat it. As I stepped out the back door, I

shivered, then looked around for the reason. A shadow moved on the east side of my house but the sun blocked my view of what actually moved.

Parker met me as I came out of the outhouse, and he didn't look happy when he drew me into his arms. "How are you feeling?"

"Hungry."

"Why are you so hungry all of the sudden?"

"I don't know? I just am."

He released me but kept his arm over my shoulder so we could walk. "While I'm in town, if Becca, Vern, Pappa, or Daddy, tell you to do something, I expect you to do it." I rolled my eyes at him. "Stop. I don't want any arguments." I pulled away but he brought me back. "I don't care how many times you've done this. You weren't expecting our baby."

"Ugh, you can be such a Plug-ugly." I noted my disapproval.

"No, I'm the man who loves you, and if that makes me a Plug-ugly, so be it." He pulled me into his arms again. "It's going to take mama and me awhile in town. I don't know how long. I want you to be careful, and if you need help, get Vern." I rolled my eyes again. "Stop that."

The men were moving back toward their horses; I kissed Parker before he helped me back on my horse. "I love you."

"Kylie." Becca called from the porch. "Parker, can you give these to her?" He took the small bag, "Its biscuits with butter, and a here's a canteen filled with your tea." We kissed again before I rode back to the men.

I gave the instructions and had the men watch Pappa, Cornell, and Boomer. I separated them across the field, giving them room to lead the horses. Parker waved as he and his mother left to do their errands. I shivered at the feel of the other Monroe men, staring at me.

I kept riding around, watching the men, while Becca kept the men refreshed with cool water. The summer heat simmered across my back, forcing me to stay out of the sun as much as possible, and I insisted that all the men take breaks in the shade. I kept looking down the road, watching for Parker, trying to ignore the sweat rolling down my body. I wanted to take my shirt and corset off so I could cool off. "Pappa," I called.

He looked at me. "Kylie girl, you're all red. You need to go inside."

"I'm fine Pappa. I am going down to the spring for a little bit."

"Not alone, you're not," he informed me.

"Yes, I am, and alone," I insisted.

"Vern!" Pappa shouted.

Vern left his horse and came to join us. "Pappa."

"Kylie needs you to escort her to the spring." Pappa kept rubbing down his horse.

"Geez, Kylie." Vern looked at me, "You're all red. You're not going to the spring; you're going in the house and get out of the sun."

"Ahh!" I screamed, "What is it with all you, Monroe men? You think I'm a child to be ordered around. I have done this before." I rolled my eyes. "I get red when it's hot, and not from the sun."

"What is going on here?" Vernon Sr. walked up causing me to roll my eyes.

"Kylie girl, here, needs to go inside and she's protesting just like Parker said she would," Pappa informed him.

“All of you listen to me. I’m fine, and I’m hot. I need to go to the spring and take a quick dip so I’ll cool off and-” I paused. “So I won’t be red anymore.” All their faces showed where Parker got that look of disapproval when he glared at me.

“Ahh!”

I started to ride off but Vern grabbed my reins. “Kylie, the only place you’re going is in the house. If I have too, I’ll carry you and tie you to the bed.” Vern voice was hard but warm. “I know you can fight, but I am twice your size. If you want to fight me that’s fine, but if you want to come back out later; go inside now.” He waited until I nodded, then he walked me up to the house.

I slammed all the doors leading up to our room in the main house. I couldn’t smile when Becca brought me some cool water to wipe myself down. She touched my cheek before giving me a quick hug for comfort. “Parker gave Vern strict orders. It’s hot today and you’re getting really red. Here rest and wash yourself down.” She smiled then left.

I had to admit the water felt good against my skin, and I was surprised at how tired I felt when I lay down on the bed, wearing only my camisole and pantaloons. Keeping a cool cloth over my head, I lost myself in slumber until the lunch bell rang. After taking a few moments to dress, I walked down stairs to join the others for lunch, where Vern smiled at me, while Becca brought me a plate and some tea. I sat down and didn’t say anything.

After lunch, I waited for no one to be paying attention and then snuck out to the spring, hoping that no one saw me. The sun beat down on my head even though I borrowed the hat Martha used when she worked with her flowers. My reflection reminded me of a time when I stole Betsy’s Sunday hat that had flowers draped around the band. Giggling, I took my boots

and stockings off and walked out under the waterfall, standing in the cool water, enjoying the feel of it caressing my body through my clothes.

“You know, you’re not supposed to be out of our sight.” Vern’s voice held the anger the Monroe were known for.

“Leave me alone, Vern,” I told him.

“What are you doing, Kylie?” he asked.

“The same thing, I do every year when summer comes,” I answered.

“Kylie girl.” I cringed at Pappa’s voice. “Come out of there and get back up to the house.”

Frowning at the men, I needed to have a talk with Parker about this. “Fine.” I walked out from under the water and put my boots back on, while Vern waited to help me up on my horse.

“You coming?” I started back toward the house; feeling so much cooler.

“Kylie,” Vern said, as he and Pappa moved up next to me. “How come you’re so stubborn?”

“I guess it has to do with my raising,” I said, thinking of how many times Heidi and Betsy had said the same thing.

“No, your father won’t allow that in his house,” Vern stated.

“You forget. I wasn’t raised in Carthage. I was raised in Boston.” I stopped, turning in my saddle to look at him, fighting against the tears filling my eyes. “The Bellows are my blood family. They weren’t there to nurse me, when I was sick or hurt. They were not there to cheer for me, when I won equestrian tournaments at school.” I wanted to stop, both the crying and the

talking, but I didn't know how. "I visit them during the summer but not this year. I depended on the Barkers, my parents in Boston, and myself because I don't like feeling weak."

Vern moved up next to me, putting his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close, holding me while I cried. "It's no wonder Parker's so protective of you."

When I moved away from Vern, Pappa patted my leg. "Kylie girl. You're not weak. You're having a baby." I couldn't help but laugh. "Let's go break some horses." I realized in that moment, hidden by their tough exteriors, that all the Monroe men held the same kindness and tenderness as I found in Parker.

The afternoon moved slowly, even though Becca kept the water, tea and snacks coming. I watched her as she gave Vern a drink of water. I rolled my eyes when he walked over in my direction. "Kylie, go lie down. You're getting too hot, again." He held up his hand when I started to protest. "Just go. We have this." I didn't argue, just rode to the house and went back to my room, washed my body down again then lay across the bed.

I woke to a very familiar touch; Parker lay down on the bed beside me. "How are you feeling?" He brushed my hair back away from my face.

"I'm fine, and I was fine when Vern sent me inside." I kept my head on the pillow.

"That's not what Vern said. You really scared him and Pappa." I rolled my eyes. Parker scowled at me. "Stop doing that."

"What?" I glared at him.

"You rolled your eyes." He met my glare. "You do it all the time."

"I do not."

"Yes. Ky, you do." I rolled them, again. "You just did it." He laughed. "Are you hungry?"

“Yes.”

“Well, let’s get you dressed. It’s almost time for dinner.” He kissed me. “I missed you.” He pulled me into a deeper embrace, allowing his lips to caress mine.

I listened to the men talking about the horses, and I stayed out of their sight so they would speak freely, and none of them mentioned the money. Pappa sat with them, talking and laughing. I smiled when Parker wrapped his arms around me. “I’m glad that you listened to Vern.” He paused. “For the most part.”

“Did you bring the money?” I asked.

“Yes. Quit changing the subject.” He pulled me close. “You stayed out too long today. That’s why you slept so long.”

“If they had let me alone, I would’ve been fine,” I complained.

“How?”

“I wet myself down in the spring, I was about to go back when Vern sent me in.” I turned. “As long as I stay wet I can keep the heat off.”

“If you can’t handle the heat, you’re not going with me to Atlanta.” Parker paused. “At least not with the horses.” He laid his cheek on the top of my head. “I don’t want that.”

“Then I suggest, that you and the rest of the family trust me just a little to take care of myself.” I stiffened, trying to make my point, but Becca interrupted it when she rang the dinner bell.

Everyone sat at the tables loaded with fried chicken, mashed potatoes and assorted vegetables. Parker looked at me and at the little bit I had on my plate and shook his head. He laughed at the ritual argument between Vern and me over the liver that Becca had set beside my plate. I ate just one small plate then carried my plate to the kitchen.

After dinner, I congratulated the men on a good days work. They planned to camp out in a grove of trees with the horses close by, so they could get an early start in the morning. Pappa had all the horses ready for the weights because he had taken over when I went inside.

“Ky. Let’s go!” Parker hollered from in front of the barn where he and Vern discussed the day’s events, again.

“Parker, can I give Kylie a hug?” Royre shouted from across the yard.

“Ky, let’s go, and Royre, you can find your own redhead.” Parker moved closer to me. “Good night all.” He waved then wrapped me in his arms and led me toward our home. Parker stopped me just outside our door and he took off his kerchief.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t trust you to keep your eyes closed,” he said as he tried to put the kerchief around my eyes. “Ky. I’m just making sure you keep your eyes closed.” I kept drawing away from his attempts to cover my eyes. Then, he leaned down to give me a kiss, so he could keep me close. I still managed to avoid the kerchief, forcing him finally to grab me.

“Ky, turn around.” He spun me so I faced the door while he coved my eyes.

He pulled my hair away from my neck and I could feel his warm breath as he took my earlobe into his mouth. He wrapped his arms around, holding me in place as he sucked, causing me to fight against the chills running down my spin. He moved down the back of my neck, until I squealed.

“That’s not fair.” I tried to break free of his hold but he tightened his grip. He turned me to face him, as though he were going to kiss me again but he pulled back. “You don’t deserve what’s behind this door.”

I couldn’t see his face but his voice told me more. “Why?”



“Because, you haven’t told me how much you love me since I got back.” He teased.

“Well, I am afraid that my husband wouldn’t like me telling you that I love looking into your pale blue eyes, or how much I love kissing your full lips. But most important…” I leaned into his chest. “The way you pulsate, deep within my body.”

“Oh,” he whispered. “Do you kiss your husband with that mouth?”

“Not on the lips.” I lowered my voice. “But I like taking him into my mouth after he’s had a bath. He tastes so clean and fresh. I even lick his precious jewels.”

“I bet he would kill any man who even thought about touching your sweet juicy lips.” His tone held a bit of a warning, for any man that might be close.

“Yes. He would.” I kissed him. “So maybe, we best get inside before he spots us.”

“Sounds good to me.” He kissed me, opening the door then picking me up and carrying me into our home. He stood there, holding me with our lips still busy in a tight embrace before slowly lowering my feet to the floor.

“Stay right here.” I heard him, lighting some lamps, and bolting the door. “Close your eyes.” He stood behind me loosening the kerchief, “Are your eyes closed?”

“Yes.”

“Are you lying to me?” His voice filled with sarcasm.

“Why would I lie to you?” I smiled even though I didn’t know whether he was looking at me or not.

“If it got you what you wanted.” He drove his tongue into my mouth then pulled the kerchief from around my eyes. I wrapped my arms around his neck as our taste buds enjoyed the savory flavors brought together. He made sure he blocked my view of the room before he pulled back.

“Are you ready?” Parker smiled at me, moving out of my way. I felt faint, looking at Parker’s surprise then falling to my knees; tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn’t speak. He knelt beside me.

“You’re crying.”

I touched his cheek. “I love you.”

“I know.” We kissed softly, after Parker gently wiped away my tears. He took my hand, helping me stand then leading me to his gift. “Have a seat, little Mama.” He held my hand as I sat down in the cherrywood rocker, I had seen in town.

He sat on the floor in front of me, staring at me with a loving smile, while I fought back more tears. “I’m not a mama yet.” Parker lifted my shirt, moving my corset so he could get to my flesh. He kissed it, whispering softly to the baby sleeping inside me. I touched the cradle that he positioned next to the rocker; the red glistened against the white silk coverings, and across the room stood a baby bed with matching coverings. I stood up, leaving him on the floor, watching me as my fingers ran along the rail of the bed. Taking a deep breath, tears cascaded down me cheeks again.

Parker moved behind me, holding me; I let the tears run. “It’s beautiful.” I turned to face him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed me. “There’s more.”

“More?”

He walked us over to the table and lifted a small piece of material, revealing the guns and belt he had ordered for me. Parker picked up one of the guns, checking it to make sure it wasn’t loaded then snapped it back in place. He pulled back on the trigger causing it to click before handing it to me. “Practice shooting it.”

I wrapped my fingers around the grip, pulling back to cock it then slowly squeezing the trigger, I didn't have to struggle to reach either of them. He handed me a second one it felt different. I balanced the guns in my hands.

"This one's lighter." I held up the second gun, he gave me. "Why's that?"

"Your left wrist is weaker so I had him hollow out the handle some, so, it would be easier for you to shoot. Tomorrow, we'll go and practice."

"I can't. I have to work with the horses." I protested.

"You're not breaking any. You're adding the weights. Pappa, Boomer, and Cornell can walk them through it." He took the guns from me. "We have other things to take care of." Parker took my hand, guiding me up the stairs to our bedroom. He stopped just outside the door.

"After you, my lovely wife," Parker whispered, opening the door.

As I walked into the bedroom, the room danced with flames from candles placed all around the room. In the center of the room sat a huge bed made of cherrywood, for the second time tonight, I couldn't speak but moved to the edge of the bed where only one word crossed my lips. "How?"

"I have a few secrets." Parker smiled. "Mama lit all the candles." I touched the covers. "When?"

"Shortly before we got married." Parker smiled. "I didn't want you to spend the rest of our married life together on old worn-out beds." He stayed by the door. "I wanted you to have the most beautiful bed around."

"But the cherrywood and the silks?" I looked back at him.

“I wanted the cherrywood because the red tint matches your hair. The silks were mama’s idea and the blue, Becca’s. She said it would match your eyes.” He smiled as he held onto the doorknob.

“Parker, what am I going to do with you?” I smiled, leaning against the bed.

“I have an idea.” He held his hand out to me; I reached out for him as I crossed the room. He drew me close; our lips found each other.

“Come with me,” he whispered then led me down the hall into a smaller bedroom across from our room. He opened the door, revealing yet another surprise; a full bathroom with a porcelain tub and a chamber pot that water ran through when you pulled a cord, similar to one I had in Boston. A sink with a water pump next to it took up another wall.

“Parker, please stop, spending so much money. I don’t need all this.”

“What, you don’t like it?”

“No. I love it, but...”

“But nothing,” Parker started, pulling my shirt the rest of the way out of my pants. “Ky. I love you and I’m not going to stop spoiling you. So-” he kissed me as his hand squeezed my breast through my corset. “So get used to it.” My shirt fell to the floor, quickly followed by the rest of my clothes.

Parker helped me into the tub and I lay back, enjoying the refreshing water in the summer heat. I watched him undress and shifted my legs so he could sit down in front of me. We lay there in the cooling water with Parker’s head resting against my shoulder while I ran a rag over his chest. He shifted us until our bodies entangled under the water with our hands exploring each other until Parker’s hand slid between my legs. I moved away from it because it felt uncomfortable. “Ky. What’s wrong?”

“It hurt a little. It’s not moist.”

“Then how about we get out of here and go make it moist.” We kissed as he helped me up and out of the tub, then dried us off before we walked to our room. Parker unfolded the covers for me to lie down in the bed; my body sank into the feather mattress with my head resting on two overstuffed pillows.

He kissed me again then stretched out on the bed with his feet near my head, moving his mouth over my womanhood, teasing it. I turned on to my side, forcing him onto his back in order to straddle him. I took him into my mouth.

“Hand me a pillow,” he whispered, continuing his exploration of my womanly features. Drawing him between my lips, I handed him a pillow before pulling away to tease his jewels. Lifting them gently into my mouth, I carefully sucked and nibbled, causing him to moan at my touch.

Parker struggled to keep hold of my lips, propping himself up on the pillow so his face lay between my thighs. He pulled my lips apart, taking a hold of my tongue with his own nibbling and teasing, causing me to focus harder on his shaft. He teased me with his fingers.

I pushed back against his teasing fingers, moaning because he wouldn’t slide one of them in. I could feel him smiling as he kept up his playing, circling around my opening before he took his hand away. Another moan rumbled in my chest when he slid two fingers inside my canal while he sucked on my tongue before he bit down, causing me to scream.

Parker pushed me over on to the bed, then moved to the top of the bed, piling the pillows behind his back. He helped me sit on his lap, placing my feet above his shoulder before lowering me onto his penis, sliding me up and down. Parker shifted us, laying me on my back. He drew

my legs up and held them with his arms, then began to pull himself in and out. The pleasure caused me to moan to his rhythm until I screamed when he pulsed deep within me.

Parker smiled then helped me stand, frowning because there was no water basin in the room. He led me back to our new chamber room, where we cleaned up, then crawled back under the silk sheets, curling up in his arms, and he kissed me tenderly.

“Did you like it that way?”

“Yes, but not too often.”

“You responded so well to it.” His mouth touched me below the ear.

“Can we go to sleep?” I said, trying to fight the chills covering my body.

“Are you mad at me?” Parker leaned into kiss me.

“No.” I kissed him back.

“Then what’s wrong?” He lifted his head up, putting his weight on his elbow so he could look at me.

“I don’t deserve you. I don’t do anything like what you have done for me.” I let a tear run down my cheek. “I can’t compete with all the love you put into your gifts.”

“Kylie,” he whispered before he kissed me. “You just took my raising and breaking horses up to higher level.” He paused to kiss me again. “Besides, you’re going to hurt my feelings if you don’t let me pamper you.” Parker’s hand slid between my legs as our tongues greeted each other. “Your most precious gift to me is each time you open yourself up to me.” He lightly touched my lips then laid his palm on my stomach, “Our child is another gift you’re giving me.”

“But Parker, you are spending so much on me.” He kissed me as he drove his fingers into me again, causing me to moan. “Then I guess you need to start repaying me.” He found the same rhythm with both his fingers and tongue. “You’re still so wet.”

He climbed on top of me, inviting more pleasure as his jewels slapped against my body, making me moan again. Parker worked his arms under my shoulders, holding my neck in his hands while I rubbed my hands up and down his back as the pressure grew. My fingers searched for something to hold, moaning when it finally exploded, forcing me to dig my fingernails into Parker’s back. He grimaced and pulsed, which caused me to join him and drag my nails across his back.

“Where did that come from?” He gasped and moaned as he lifted off me. “Ahh.” He crawled to the edge of the bed.

“Parker, you’re bleeding.” I crawled off the bed and ran into the chamber room to retrieve the basin, filling it with water, forcing myself to stay focused and hurry back to my bleeding husband. After dipping a small cloth into the water, I moved to clean Parker’s back, causing him to grimace as the rag touched the scratches.

“Quit fidgeting.” It took me a while to get the wounds cleaned up and bandaged because he wouldn’t quit wiggling. I kissed his shoulder when I finished.

“Parker, I’m so sorry.”

He smiled then turned to face me. “Please, don’t be sorry for this.” He laughed but it turned into another grimace. “Vern’ll be so jealous.” He sat on the bed then drew me into a kiss. “Don’t ever be sorry for anything you do when we make love.” He kissed me again then helped me onto the bed, laying his head against my shoulder with his arm across my stomach, which had become his favorite place for it. We lay there not sleeping because Parker moaned each time

he moved and couldn't find a comfortable position in which to sleep. Exhaustion finally claimed us both.

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn't wake up until I heard the door to our bedroom open. I grabbed Parker's gun from where it hung by my head. Pointing it toward the person who stood in front of me, the covers fell into my lap, exposing my naked breasts; Martha's scream woke me fully.

"Mama, you scared me!" I shouted, putting the gun up, then grabbing the sheet to cover us up.

"I'm sorry. When you didn't come down, I got worried. Parker, are you all right?" she asked. "How did you get hurt?"

Looking down at him, blood showed on his bandages; my hand rubbed his hip with the silk sliding under my hands.

"Mama, I'm fine. We'll be down in a little bit." Parker slid his fingers into me.

"Stop it," I whispered. "Mama, please. We'll be down in a little while."

"All right." She closed the door.

I climbed out of bed, ignoring Parker's complaints, and picked out some clothes to wear while Parker continued to lie on the bed. "Are you getting up any time soon?"

"Yes, since my wife is ignoring my advances." Parker turned onto his back, then held his hands out for me to help him. He moaned, standing slowly, his face showing the tension from the pain across his back. "I love you, Ky." He didn't lean down to kiss me but lifted my hands to his lips.

"I'm sorry, I hurt you, Parker."

"Ky."



“Parker, you can’t even move.”

“I’ll loosen up soon.” He touched my cheek with his hand to reassure me.

“You need fresh bandages, and we don’t have any more.” I looked in the drawer where kept them.

“Let’s get breakfast, then you can change them.” He continued to grimace from the pain.

“I’m sure mama has some.”

I knelt to help him get dressed, picking up his longhandles and, for the first time, noticed that they were stained, dirty, and worn out with only strings holding them together in places. I went to the dresser to get another pair only to discover every pair in almost the same shape. Forced to pick the best of them, I realized something; Parker spent very little money on clothes.

“Ky,” Parker called from the bed. “What are you doing?”

“Sorry.” I shut his drawer. “I got lost in thought.”

“I noticed. What are you thinking?”

“That you need some new clothes.”

“I do not.”

“Parker.” Kneeling in front of him again, I held his longhandles while he slipped his feet in, bracing himself on the bed frame. “When was the last time you bought a new pair of these?”

“These are my Sunday pair.” He continued to protest. “I get three new pairs for Christmas. Mama gets us some each year.” He paused when my mouth opened around him before sliding his longhandles up his legs. “Ky, these are my Sunday pair.”

“I heard you.” Pulling away from him, I finished covering his organ, but not before kissing it one more time. “Just put them on.” I picked up his pants; they were so dirty I couldn’t

tell when the last time they had been washed. I went to toss them across the room but he caught my arm.

“Those are fine.” I rolled my eyes at him, causing him to laugh before helping him into them. He bent down and grabbed his boots, slipping them on without any pain.

“You did not just do that. I thought you were really hurt.” Parker just smiled. “You lying sack of-” I went to hit him but he caught me.

He threw me onto the bed, pinning my body with his. “It was nice to watch.” I struggled against him but his lips found mine. “I love you.”

“I love you too, but you are still a lying sack-” He cut me off with another kiss; eventually, he lifted off me and held out his hand. I pushed it away, still aggravated at him, but he moved in front of me, blocking my own attempt to get off the bed. He snapped his fingers, still holding out his hand; I frowned when I put my hand in his to allow him the pleasure of helping me to stand. He grabbed his shirt and guns as we walked out the door.

We stopped in our front room, where he put his gun belt on and grabbed mine, loading my guns as we walked to the main house. My guns were secured to my hips before we walked through the back door, heading in for breakfast.

## Chapter 16

All the faces turned as we entered the dining room, “Parker. You will need to put your shirt on before you sit down at my table.” Martha called.

“We needed more bandages,” he told her.

“Kylie, here’s some water. Becca, get them some bandages,” she said as she went back to putting the food on the table.

“Thanks, Mama.” I smiled, taking the water from her and sitting it on a table near where Parker sat backwards in a chair. I began to remove the bandages, revealing the deep grooves from my fingernails. Dipping the rag in the water, I gently washed them, trying not to break them open, while Parker grimaced.

His grimacing brought Vern over to look at his back. “Shit, Parker. What wild cat did that?” Parker glared over his shoulder at him.

“Move, Vern. You’re in my light,” I said, shoving him out of my way.

“Oh Parker. You gotta share.” Vern blurted. I didn’t know what happened next; I just stood there, staring down the barrel of my gun pointed at his face.

“Kylie. Parker.” Martha’s voice brought me back. “Put those guns up. You both know Vern’s all talk.”

“Shit. Parker, she’s faster than you are.” Vern’s voice showed a little nervousness.

“Kylie! Parker! Now!” Martha yelled.

Parker reached over and took my gun when I released it to him, then he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Get the bandages.”

I left the men gawking at each other. “Sorry Becca,” I whispered, then walked back to Parker, who slipped it back into my holster. I leaned down then began to doctor and bandage his back. He kissed my cheek again after putting his shirt on.

“Where’s Pappa?” Cord asked.

“He’s eating outside with the rest of the men.” Martha stated. “He’s had them working with the horses since before dawn.” She looked at me. “Kylie, slow down and eat. Pappa has the men under control,” she continued. “Drink your tea.”

“I’m not rushing to get to Pappa. I need to run an errand,” I said, biting into my buttered biscuit.

“What kind of errand?” Parker looked at me sideways.

“I need to go to town.” My bacon crunched as I bit down on it.

Parker put his fork down and turned toward me, placing his elbow on the table. “No. You need to work on your shooting,” he said, scowling at me. “We talked about it last night.”

“No. We didn’t.” I sipped some of my tea. “You told me but this morning I decided to run an errand. It should only take a couple of hours. I should be back before lunch,” I said, eating another bite of my biscuit stuffed with bacon this time. “When I get back, I promise, I will practice,” I said smiling and stuffing a fork loaded with eggs into my mouth.

“You’re not going to town,” Parker stated firmly.

“Give me one good reason why.” I stared at him.

Parker dipped his biscuit in the egg yolk in his plate. “I said so.”

“Not good enough,” I stated and kept eating. “I’ve been doing pretty much what I wanted since I was eight,” I smirked at him, “so because you said so isn’t good enough.”

“I’m leaving.” Vern got up from the table. “Coming Becca?” She didn’t say anything, but followed him out the door. I couldn’t hold back my laughter when I heard him ask her, “Who do you think will win this one?” Becca replied, “Kylie.”

Parker heard them too. He smiled, “You’re not going alone.”

“I didn’t say I’d go alone.” I kissed him, wrapping my arm around him.

He lifted his arm over my shoulder, pulling me close, returning my kiss. “What’s your errand?”

“That much, I won’t tell you.” I kissed him again. “You finish up. I’ll go saddle the horses.”

“No. I’ll do that.” Parker put his arm around my waist to keep me from leaving.

“No. You might break your scratches open,” I insisted.

“Ky.”

“Let me take care of you at least for a little while.” I stood over him with my face inches from his.

“I don’t want you lifting anything. Have one of the others saddle the horses.” Parker kissed me.

“Fine, but if I don’t like the way they do it, I’m finishing it.” We laughed then kissed again.

I left Parker still eating as I walked out onto the porch. “Boomer.”

“Yes’m.” He walked over to me.

“Will you please saddle Parker’s horse and mine?”

“Yes’m.”

“Thank you, Boomer.”

“I can’t believe he has you wearing guns now.” Becca walked up behind me.

“Parker worries.” I leaned on the rail, watching the men move back to the horses.

“I wish Vern did.”

“He’s learning.”

“No. He’s jealous.” Becca smiled. “Especially now.” She looked around, “What did he do to get you to do that?”

I smiled, looking down at the flowerbed, remembering how much I had enjoyed it. “He gave me a romantic bath, and then made love to me.” Her face showed she wanted all the details. I paused. “Tell you the rest later.”

“I thought you were getting the horses.” Parker came out of the house and stood behind me.

“Ah. Here comes Boomer with them now.” I smiled. “Becca, do you need anything from town?”

“I think.” Becca smiled.

“I know.” Laughing, I winked at her, then let Parker help me on my horse. “Be right back.” I galloped over to where Pappa worked. “Pappa.”

“Kylie girl.”

“How are they doing, Pappa?” I looked around at the others.

“They are doing fine. Several are up to fifty pounds.” Pappa smiled proudly. “I’ll have them up to a hundred by tonight.”

“Pappa, remember don’t rush them,” I scorned. “I’ll be back to check on you later.”

“You do that.” Pappa patted my thigh.

“See ya, Pappa.” I kicked my horse into a run. “Parker, see if you can keep up.”

“Shit. Ky.” He raced up behind me.

I enjoyed the feel of the stallion’s muscles caressing the inside of my thighs, because it seemed it had been ages since I had ridden with this much freedom. About a mile out of Carthage, I slowed and laughed quietly, patting the stallion’s neck.

“Good boy.”

“Kylie Ruth.” Parker trotted up next to me. “Stop running that stallion!”

“Why?”

“Because, I told you too.”

I laughed.

“Kylie. I’m serious.” Parker’s face showed the anger that went with his voice.

“Parker.”

“Don’t Parker me. No! More! Racing!” he shouted.

“Or what?”

“Or. Or. Augh.” Parker’s frustration showed on his face as he took a deep breath, knowing his yelling at me wouldn’t help his case. He took my hand in his. “Ky. Please, for me and our baby, don’t race him.” Parker scooted closer to me. “Please.”

“Since you asked, so nicely.” I smirked.

“Woman.” Parker smiled then kissed me. “Let’s get your errand done.”

I realized that it was the first time Parker and I had come to town alone. I went over my list of things I wanted to get: clothes for Parker; perfume for Becca and a silk nightdress, if I could find one; and a few supplies. I also needed to check on a delivery and send a telegram to Boston. All together, it shouldn’t take me over an hour.

The town bustled with activity, and people who usually whispered about me, smiled and waved. I pretended not to notice as we rode slowly through town.

“Kylie Ruth,” called a scolding voice. “You’re expecting a baby. You shouldn’t be riding on horse back.”

“Good morning, Grandma,” I said in a sarcastic tone.

“You may be married, but that’s no reason to be so rude.” She pointed her finger at me as Parker helped me down.

“I’m sorry.” I walked up and hugged her. “Grandma, how are you?”

She ignored me, turning her scolding to my husband, “and you Parker Monroe. I thought you knew better than to let her ride.” She continued her finger pointing.

Parker smiled. “Grandma, you tell me how to keep her off her horse, and I’ll do it.” Parker nodded at her.

“So she doesn’t listen to you either.”

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Well at least you do try.” She patted his hand. “Why are you two in town?”

“Ky had an errand to run, which probably means several.” Parker looked at me.

“Since you two don’t need me, I’m going to do my errands.” I hugged my grandmother again and gave Parker a chaste kiss, since my grandmother was upset; I didn’t want to make it worse. I headed to my first destination.

“You’re wearing guns now too.” She had been so upset about the horse she had never noticed the guns.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Talk to Parker.” I continued to walk away from them.

“She’s supposed to be a lady.” She went back to her scolding voice.

Parker offered her his arm, which she accepted, following a few steps behind me. “Supposed to be, Grandma, but I can’t be with her all the time. You don’t have to worry; she does know how to use them.”



I made my first stop, the telegraph office. “Good morning,” said the man behind the counter. “How can I help you?” He looked past me and out the door where Parker stood, talking with my grandmother.

“I need to send a telegram.” I didn’t know the man’s name, but his unfriendly attitude bothered me.

“What do you want it to say?”

“I’ll write it down.” I thanked him, when he gave me a piece of paper, pen and ink.

“To Andre´ Louderman

Clothing for Men by Auni´.

Boston, Massachusetts

Message: Coming to Boston

Need complete mans wardrobe

Size of Bengi.

Use silks lots of blue.

Kylie Bellows Monroe.”

“That’s going to cost five dollars,” the man said.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a roll of bills, handing him a five-dollar note. “Thank you.” I nodded to the man before walking past Parker and my grandmother, heading to my next stop, the town’s local dress shop, where I had yet to be greeted with a warm reception.

The dress shop stood just a few doors down from the telegraph office. When I walked inside, all the ladies gathered, stared at me. “May I help you?” asked a lady, who sounded like she belonged up north, not in Missouri.

“Yes.” I smiled. “Do you carry any silk nightdresses? The ones that show a little more, similar to the ones at Miss Bernadette’s in Boston.”

“You’ve been to Miss Bernadette’s?” the lady asked.

“Yes.” I smiled. “Do you have any?”

“This is the closest I have.” She waved her hand over a dressmaker’s dummy wearing a black silk nightdress that buttoned all the way up to the neck.

“How long would it take you to make some adjustments on it?”

“What kind of adjustments?”

“Remove the collar and the chest strip.” I pointed to the dress, then saw Parker smile, thinking the dress was for me, as he and my grandmother stood, listening. “Remove the sleeves and cut at least four inches below each arm away.” She stopped smiling her fake smile, telling me silently she didn’t want to make the adjustments. “Last, take out the seams from here down to the bottom of the dress.”

“That’s awfully showing. Are you sure you don’t want to keep it as it is?” She stared at me with eyes filled with disgust.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I wanted to keep it this way.” I looked at my grandmother and Parker; they waited to see what would happen next. “How much? How long?”

“I could have it ready by the day after tomorrow. It will cost ten for the dress and another twenty for the adjustments.” She stared at me.

“That’s three times what it’s worth. The silk cost a dollar to import; three dollars to make it; fifty cents to ship it here, and since the adjustments are mainly, ripping out and hemming. I’ll give you, fifteen. That is an extra ten for your trouble.” I stared at her.

“It’s a lot of work. I must insist on thirty.” Her price made me laugh again. I had spent too many hours with Bernie sorting out her silk and knew this lady thought I would take it as is if she raised the price so high. I studied the nightdress some more walking around it and inspecting the sewing. The lady fidgeted, while she watched me.

I turned my back on her, “Grandma. Would you be able to make the adjustments for me?” I winked at her.

“Kylie, I’d be glad to.” She smiled at me.

“Then I will take it as is, and when I get to Boston in a few weeks, I intend to tell Miss Bernadette to quit selling you any clothing and that I’ll be opening up a shop in her name, here in Carthage.” I smiled, pulling a ten-dollar bill out of my pocket.

“You? You know Miss Bernadette?” the lady asked.

A cold smile crossed my face. “It’s because of me that Miss Bernadette has a shop. I own half of it.” I let her see what I thought about the way she treated me.

“You’re Kylie Bellows?” she whispered.

“Kylie Bellows Monroe now.” Only a few outside of Boston knew about my ownership with Bernie’s shop, so it shocked me that she knew my name.

The lady’s face paled before my eyes. “I’m so sorry. I can have the dress ready and delivered to you by tomorrow afternoon. Say for seven dollars.”

“That sounds reasonable.” I handed her the money I held. Her hands shook while she got my change.

“Thank you, Mrs. Monroe.” She looked like she would cry. “Please give Miss Bernadette my best.”

“And what name shall I give her?” I smirked, as she trembled in front of me.

“I’m sorry. Elaine Danforth.” She smiled sheepishly. “Where would you like the dress delivered?”

“The Monroe farm, for Mrs. Becca Monroe.” I saw Parker frown slightly.

“Thank you,” she said.

“No. Thank you.” I walked out the door, smiling at Parker and my grandmother.

“Kylie, you have hidden many things from your family,” Grandma observed.

“You have no idea,” Parker told her. “Ky, where are you going now?”

I crossed the street to the general store, ignoring both of them, but stopped when I saw the man from the telegraph office shake hands with Asa’s father. Taking a deep breath, I hurried into the store.

“Good morning, Mrs. Monroe.” Mr. Jameson greeted with his always-friendly demeanor.

“Good morning.” I smiled, walking up to the counter.

“What can I do for you today?” he asked.

“I came to check on my order and I need of a few other supplies.” I began to wander between the merchandise.

“I’ll check on your packages,” Mr. Jameson strolled to the back of the store.

I gathered up more writing tablets, ink, and pens and put them on the counter, then found the perfumes and began smelling them. Several bottles stunk, but two smelled nice; Parker wrapped his arms around me and I held them up for him to smell them one at a time.

“Which one do you like? I want one for Becca.”

“I like this one,” he pointed to the one that smelled like lavender. “If you get it, keep it for yourself. You can give Becca the one that smells like gardenias. It smells nice enough.” He

turned me, forcing me to look in his eyes. “If Vern wants her to smell good, he can buy the next one. I want you to stop buying her things that Vern is supposed to buy.”

“Parker. I’m just trying to make her life easier.” With all my money, I found it hard not to use it to help someone else, but I didn’t know how to explain it to him. Frustrated, I changed the subject.

“Where is Grandma?”

“She’s over there.” Parker pointed at my grandmother rummaging through some material.

“Mrs. Monroe,” Mr. Jameson called.

I walked up to the counter putting both bottles of perfume with the tablets. “Yes.”

“The packages are here. Do you want to take them with you?”

“No. We only have the horses. Can you have them delivered?”

“Be glad to.” Mr. Jameson started to add up the items.

“When it’s delivered, tell them, the big package is for Becca.”

“Sure thing.”

“I need some more things.” I walked to where he kept the men’s clothing. I picked out several shirts, pants, longhandles and anything else Parker might need, while he stood next to me, complaining, but I got them anyway.

It took Mr. Jameson several minutes to add it all up. “With all this and your delivery it will be an even seventy-five dollars.”

“Kylie Ruth. What did you get?” Grandma’s voice sounded shocked at the cost.

I just smiled knowing that most of the charges incurred were from the large delivery I ordered from several shops in Boston. “Anything I wanted.” I reached into my boot, pulling out another wad of rolled bills; my grandmother watched me count out seventy dollars. “Parker.” He kept at least ten with him at all times, he nodded and threw the last five on the counter.

“Thank you very much,” Mr. Jameson said.

“Mr. Jameson, would it be too much trouble for you to have it all delivered tonight?” I asked.

“It would be my pleasure.” Mr. Jameson gave me a gracious smile.

“Thank you. Have a nice day.” I walked up to where Parker and Grandma stood. “Grandma, Parker’s going to buy me a piece of pie, would you like to join us?”

“No. You get your pie. I have to go meet your grandpa and father at the livery.” I hugged her. “Give my love to grandpa.” Parker took my hand and walked me to the diner.

He didn’t say anything but his face made me suspicious of what was on his mind. “What are you thinking?”

“I was wondering why you didn’t buy yourself a night dress like Becca’s.”

“Would you like it if I did?”

“Yes.” His face lit up and his eyes twinkled, telling me he wasn’t thinking polite thoughts.

“I didn’t think you would even consider it; you never leave my clothes on,” I teased.

He kissed my hand, leaning down to whisper in my ear. “But it would be nice, taking it off.” Placing a chaste kiss on my neck, he led me to a seat outside at the diner.

Miss Pearl delivered a piece of apple pie with sugar and cinnamon sprinkled on the crust for me.

My mouth watered just smelling it, but my taste buds drooled when the soft apples slid across

them. Parker laughed while taking a bite of his cherry pie, the bright red juices drizzling from his fork as he held it to his lips. We each ate a couple of bites before Parker took a bite from mine, forcing me to steal one of his. A couple of older women made comments on how we disgusted them by the way we acted, but I laughed when Parker's eyes danced with a mischievous gleam because he planned to make it worse.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked when we finished our pies.

“Yes,” I answered, taking his outstretched hand. Winking at me, he leaned down and kissed me, allowing his hand slid down across my breast then down to my hips. We heard the women begin to complain louder this time.

He pulled away, taking my hand in his. He tipped his hat at the women, “Ladies.” We couldn't stop laughing as we rode out of town and back home.

## Chapter 17

Mr. Jameson delivered my packages while we were eating supper. Parker wrapped his arms around me as Vern stared at the four huge crates all addressed to Becca and I couldn't help but laugh as they continued to unload more crates. “Kylie, here is everything else that you purchased.” Mr. Jameson placed another large crate at my feet.

I knelt down and began to sift through it. I found the sheets and bed cover I ordered. “Becca,” I called, “Parker.” Both of them ignored me.

“What do you need, Kylie girl?” Pappa walked up behind me.

“I need this taken over to my house then up the stairs.”

“Here, let me.”

“No, Pappa.” I winked and raised my voice. “I can carry this box to my house.” I moved down a couple of stairs. “I just need to get a hold of it just right.” I jerked the box, causing it to scrape across the porch, drawing Parker’s attention as he helped with one of the bigger crates.

“Kylie. Don’t pick that up,” Parker said, walking toward me. “Where do you want me to put it?” he asked, picking it up off the step.

“Just put it in the bedroom.” I smiled sweetly; he looked at me and laughed. He left, carrying it around to our house, then returned a few minutes later to watch Vern sort out the other ones.

I sat on the top step, then leaned into him when he wrapped his arms around me. “You did that on purpose,” he whispered.

“Well, you ignored me.” Our attention drawn away from Vern’s confusion as our lips met. “Why don’t you go help Vern set up his bed while Becca and I go for a walk if the rest of you don’t mind?”

“No, we don’t. Cord and Luke can help me clear the table,” Martha stated.

“Come, Becca, let’s go for a walk.” I stood, still holding the sheets and the blankets.

“Not yet you don’t.” Parker stepped in my way.

“Why not?”

Parker leaned down and kissed me with Becca standing beside me. I heard Vernon Sr. hit Vern, telling him to go kiss his wife, making me fight the urge to laugh, but Parker held my cheeks between his hands, keeping me from pulling away. He only pulled back when Vern and Becca started kissing.



“Don’t go far and stay near the houses.” I moaned my complaint, handing him the sheets and blankets I held. “Ky.” He kissed me again, then went to help Vern.

We walked on the garden path that Martha had been working on since I joined the family. I sat down on the bench at the end of the path. “Kylie, I hope you don’t mind, but you and Parker seem so close and he is so protective of you. Why’s that?” Becca asked, sitting down next to me.

A smile crossed my face. “You know Parker was the first man who got close to me, without complaining about me not wearing dresses.” I looked up at Becca’s door but could only see a dim light. “I wanted to be with Parker practically from the first time I saw him. I know it wasn’t like that for you and Vern. You’re father practically sold you like one of the slave were bought and paid for. Parker and I chose each other.” Becca had finally started to open up to me, as our friendship started blooming.

“I don’t believe I would have chosen Vern,” Becca said softly. “But I am with him.”

“It seems to be getting better between the two of you,” I added, looking at her in the dim light of sunset.

“Yes, but he is going nagging me to find out how Parker got all those scratches.” We started laughing. “Come on Kylie. Tell me, or Vern will drive me crazy.”

“Tell Vern, he needs to take a bath with you in a room filled with candles.” The lower parts of my body throbbed, thinking of last night.

“I wish we could. Parker’s so much smarter than Vern. He has taken this farm so far, since he took it over.” She paused. “Vern spends all his money the day he gets it. If Mama hadn’t stepped in on several occasions, Vern would be dead by now.”

“I’m sorry, but let’s make some adjustments.” I thought for a minute. “You know the spring with the small waterfall?”

“Yes.” Her face showed her confusion.

“Have Vern take you to it tomorrow for a picnic. After you eat, invite him in under the waterfall for a shower.”

“With or without our clothes?”

“It would get his attention more without.” I could see her face go red even in the dim light. “Now while you’re under the waterfall, take Vern’s part into your mouth. At some point, make your lower body available to him.” I paused, trying not to laugh, “Don’t fight the pressure as it builds. Parker likes to build it and then build it up in a different way.”

“I don’t know.” Becca looked down at her feet. “My mother always said that I wasn’t supposed to enjoy it. If I did I wasn’t a lady.”

“Becca. You’re going to be married to Vern for a long time. Would you rather enjoy his touches or have it the way it used to be?” I cocked my eyebrow at her. “Parker keeps doing things that are different. Some of them I like and some I don’t, but I do try to enjoy them for Parker.” I looked back at the house as my body craved Parker’s touch. “Last night after the bath, we lay on the bed kissing each other’s parts.”

“I can barely touch it,” Becca said.

I laughed aloud. “You are beginning to like what it feels like, and Vern will love it in your mouth.” I smiled. “But whatever you do, don’t tell Parker I suggested it.” We both laughed. “At one point he had my legs so high; it did feel good in that position.”

“And that is when you scratched him.”

“No. That came later.” I paused. I turned when I heard a horse behind us because the corrals were on the other side of the farm. “Sorry, I thought I heard a horse in the trees.” I continued to look around but didn’t see or hear anything. “After we cleaned ourselves up we lay in the bed naked.” I laughed when Becca turned red and covered her mouth giggling. “Parker began kissing me again as his fingers slid inside me. I was still ready and very sensitive. He went in the normal way this time, but his hold was different. He braced my head and neck in his hands. As the pressure built, I wanted something to hold. I was shaking. I dug my fingernails into his back, which caused him to pulsate and made the shaking worse, so I dragged my nails across his back.” I took a deep breath, shaking my head.

“Kylie, are you all right?” she asked, but I just nodded. “Parker didn’t get mad?”

“No, but he would be if he knew I told you what happened.” I looked around again, while rubbing the hairs on the back of my neck, then trembled.

“I don’t know if I could do all those things you do?” She went back to staring at her feet.

“Hasn’t Vern’s been easier to deal with lately?”

“Yes.”

“Just try them to enjoy them and don’t fight against yourself.” I pulled the perfume out of my pocket and placed it in her hand. “Parker said, after today, Vern has to start paying for this stuff.”

“Parker’s getting upset about you helping me?”

“No. He is getting upset because Vern isn’t as jealous as he used to be.” I laughed. “We best get back before Parker does get mad.”

“He’s been getting mad a lot more lately.” Becca wrapped her arm in mine as we walked back toward the house.

“He’s just worried.” I stopped and turned to Becca. “Just enjoy yourself with Vern.”

“All right,” she said.

“Hey Parker, here they come.” Vern shouted, walking toward us. “Kylie, Parker is hotter than a rattlesnake.”

Parker walked up with a half of smile. “I told you not to go far and to stay near the houses.”

I rolled my eyes as I wrapped my arms around Parker’s waist. “We were just at the end of the path.” I smiled. “Are you finished?”

“Yes.” Parker embraced me.

“Good, because I want to go check on Pappa and I’m kind of tired. I’d like to go to bed soon.” I tightened my hold on Parker.

Parker tilted my head so he could look into my face. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine. I just want to go to bed early.” I leaned into his chest.

He kissed my forehead. “Let’s go. See you in the morning,” Parker said to Vern. We checked in on Pappa, and I reminded him not to rush the weights. We said goodnight to everyone else, then we walked home.

I made a visit to the chamber room to wash the sticky sweat off my body, wanting to feel cooler and have a little more energy. Entering the bedroom, Parker knelt by the crate going through his new clothes.

“Ky. I don’t need all these clothes,” he said, holding up the five pairs of longhandles.

“Maybe not for around here, but we’re going to Boston. What would people think of me, if I let my husband walk around in dirty clothes, with in his underclothes, when I own a men’s clothing shop?” I leaned against the doorframe.

“They would say he works hard for his money.” Parker moved to sit on the bed.

“No, they wouldn’t.” I looked down at the floor. “Most of the boys I know come from old money. That’s why I took so many chances with mine, buying into one business or another. I made my money; bought my land; built my house so I could belong to their society.”

“Ky, what’s wrong?”

“I have to take steps to protect my investments in Boston.” I looked away then back at Parker, while he walked up to me as the tears ran down my face. I held up my hand. “I’m afraid you’re not going to like Boston, the people, my friends, and me.”

“Ky. I’ll always like and love you.” He pulled me into his embrace.

“Parker, you’ll not be able to wear you guns out in the open.” I moved out of his arms and raised the lid to the trunk that sat by the door. Most of my secrets from Boston lay inside all my trunks, I unlatched six hidden wires, then lifted out the inside walls and bottom of the trunk.

Parker moved up next to me to see what I revealed. Five thin gold bars lined the inside of the trunk, which could hold up to eight. A large bundle of cash lay bound next to two leather pouches. “Ky, when were you going to tell me about this?”

“I don’t know. I’m so used to hiding my life from everyone. It’s a different world for me. Here take this,” I handed him one of the leather pouches. He opened it and emptied the contents into his hand; a small revolver in a holster fell out. “I was supposed to learn how to use it, but I never did.”

Parker examined the gun, flipping it open then closed it. “Who wanted you to learn?”

“One of my suitors’ fathers said, with all I owned, I needed to protect myself. That’s part of the reason for the knife in my boot.”

Parker squatted down next to me, placing the gun back in the trunk. “When were you going to tell me about the money and the gold?”

“When I finished building a place to stash them.”

“Have you got something started?”

“Nope. That’s why I threw such a fit to keep them in the house.” I sighed. “Each trunk has at least three gold bars and a couple hundred dollars in it. I don’t like not having any money.” Laying my head against his shoulder, he wrapped his arm around me.

Parker smiled. “You know, I should be mad at you.”

“I know, but before you get truly mad at me. I have one more thing to show you.” I kissed him. “Can you put this away and I’ll be right back.” I picked up a package off the floor and walked out.

I went into the bedroom across the hall from ours to slip out of my clothes. I laid them across the bed and began to unwrap the package. I looked at my naked body in the freestanding mirror in the corner, frowning because I’d be over two months pregnant when we reached Boston and over three months when we returned. My body would never look the same again. I fought hard not to cry at the mirror’s unforgiving reflection of the pink scars, running across my back.

“Ky, you all right in there?” Parker’s voice brought me back as I took the royal blue silk nightdress out of the package, slipping it over my head, then tied the ribbon that held the bodice together. I glanced in the mirror one more time.

I walked back and stood in our doorway, watching Parker close the trunk. His face lit up when he saw me.

“Ky.” He moved toward me, “You’re beautiful.” He held his hand out to me then escorted me over to the bed. His eyes kept looking up and down, undressing me as they went, but his hands stayed at his side.

“Parker?”

He pulled me into him, kissing me as his hand found the slit by my leg while his other hand held my neck, keeping tight in his kiss. He pulled away “Do you feel all right? You said you were tired.”

“Yes. I am tired, but I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to keep pleasing you. So I’m fine.”

Parker took my breast and the silk into his mouth. His hand folded in the silk as he maneuvered my legs apart, sliding his fingers and the silk inside me. I moaned to the touch. He held me tight as he worked his talents until I moaned with my orgasm. Standing there, I was unable to move, with only his arm around my waist keeping me from falling.

He laid me on the bed, then took his clothes off before lowering himself back onto me, pulling my legs out of the slits. He left the dress laying over me, rubbing the silk against our bodies. I grimaced as he pushed himself inside, encasing his shaft in the silk. I gripped his hands tight as he teased my insides. My body shook, out of my control, each time Parker went deep. I screamed as he pulsated. Parker lay there for several minutes before he lifted himself off me. The nightdress showed all his moisture as he pulled it out of me. He wiped it down before I stood up and slipped it off, then we crawled back into bed, naked.

## Chapter 18

The next few days passed quietly; we didn't see much of Vern and Becca after Becca received her nightdress. Parker stayed close to me because I felt unusually tired. He made sure I rested every few hours and allowed me to ride out to the spring so I could keep myself cool. I kept two canteens of water, one of my tea, and a wet cloth around my neck to keep my face from getting hot.

Parker and I agreed that if a horse didn't respond to my breaking style then he'd do it his way, but all the horses did fine. I stood beside Parker as he gave the instructions about the run, when all the horses were ready to be ridden. We gave Vern a high-spirited colt. He and Parker had switched off during the week, so Vern could spend time with Becca. I held the reins of my stallion, as Parker continued telling everyone what to expect.

I wanted to feel the air blowing through my hair, with the power of my stallion massaging my inner thighs as he raced over the land. It always made me happy to be racing fast, ignoring the world around me. I caressed the shoulder of my stallion.

"Ky. Quit moping. He's the fastest horse on the farm." Parker rubbed his hand up and down my back.

"I know, but-" I tried to pout more.

Parker's arms wrapped around me, I glanced over at Vern. He didn't have to be told to kiss his wife, and Becca looked happier than I had ever seen her.

"Ky. I'm standing right here." Parker drew my attention back to him. "I want you to get some rest." I rolled my eyes. "Stop that." He kissed me, holding me tight for a few moments, until pulling away, and climbing on my stallion. "Gentlemen. Let's ride." He held my hand as



we watched all the men mount their horses, some more gracefully than others. Parker leaned down, kissing me one more time. “I love you,” he said, before racing after the others.

I joined Becca, where she stood waving at the men. Becca wrapped her arms around me in a hug. “You want to be with them.”

“How could you tell?”

“You’ve hardly spoken all morning.” We strolled up to the house arm in arm. “Kylie, I want to thank you for what you’ve done for me. I never thought I could be so happy with Vern.” We both turned back down the drive hoping to see our husbands one more time. I heard the clomping of hooves coming from town but couldn’t see anything. “Kylie, I’ve work to do, but I wish there was some way I could repay you.”

“Seeing you smile is enough payment for me; I just hated you being so unhappy.” I hugged her, then she ran off to the house. I walked around outside for a little bit and then sat on the swing under a huge oak tree in the middle of the front yard, trying to think of anything I wanted to do. I tried to read one of my books, but after reading the same paragraph four times, I put it away, and attempts at writing had the same disastrous outcome. I returned to the main house, taking a seat in the loveseat in the main room, hoping that my boredom would go away. With unsuccessful deterrents, I decided to join Martha on the front porch, where she sat snapping beans.

She smiled at me as I leaned up against the porch railing. Her hands never stopped snapping. “Kylie.”

“Yes,” I whispered, turning to look out on the empty farm with only the distance songs of the slaves coming from the field and the kitchen while they stayed in cadence with Martha.

“You look lost.” She kept snapping.

“I feel lost.” I had only been away from Parker a few times, but it had never felt like this.

“You and Parker are good for each other. You’ve also been good for this family, especially Becca.” She smiled at me, never breaking her rhythm. “I’ve never seen her so happy.”

“I didn’t do anything really.” I turned to hide my embarrassment.

“Kylie, don’t be so modest, with everything you have been through, you still think of others first. Treasure that gift, we all do, especially Pappa.” She laughed.

“Pappa?”

“Yes. Parker’s grandmother was your grandmother’s best friend. She, like you, thought of everyone else. It was deep in the winter, they were coming home when their carriage turned over and Pappa was knocked unconscious. Both her legs were broke, but she crawled up and laid on Pappa to keep him warm. She stayed there until Parker found them. He was only ten, and he wrapped her in his coat; she was almost frozen. He carried her home on his horse, while Vernon Sr. brought Pappa. Parker stayed by her the whole time; he never cried when she died. That was when he closed himself off to everyone until you.”

I watched her as she continued. “That Sunday, as we sat in church, Parker couldn’t keep his eyes off you, but neither could Pappa, and when you and Parker raced out of the church, Pappa looked at me after we saw you ride off at full speed, Parker smiling as he caught up with you. He told me, ‘he loves her.’” Her snapping stopped as she dumped the tips into a bucket, then pick up another load of unsnapped beans from a basket at her side. “Then after you left us to go to back to your parents’ home, Pappa looked at us and said, ‘I think we will be adding to our family very shortly.’” She stopped. “That night when he brought you back, bloody and hurt, Pappa, Vern, and Vernon Sr., wanted to go kill your father. Parker woke up to them arguing. He

told them that he could have killed him earlier that day, but he didn't because he would lose you if he did. He ordered them not to go near him." She began snapping the beans again. "He said that you would handle it in your own way."

Her face glowed with pride. "We all know you have lots of secrets. We also know you have money, probably more than any of us could imagine, but we have watched you over the past few weeks. Pappa sees in you what made him fell in love with Nana. Parker is a lot like him."

"I'm just me." I turned back to the empty farm. "Thanks, Mama."

"Are you still lost?"

"Yes, unfortunately."

"There will be times when you and Parker can't be together. Those times will bring you closer." Her snapping rhythm echoed over the porch again. "Has he noticed that you're loosening your pants and corset?"

"He hasn't said anything, but he's done everything he can to keep me away from the breaking."

"I have an idea," she said, as she gathered her apron up into a ball, so she wouldn't drop any of the beans or tips onto the porch. She walked to the end of the porch.

"Arthur." An older black man moved up to the house.

"Yes'm."

"Go saddle Master Parker's horse, then escort Mistress Kylie across the way to Miss Leigh Anne's. You'll wait there for her."

"Yes'm."

"Parker's not going to like it."

“Parker wouldn’t like you sitting around here moping, either.” She smiled. “Besides, if you’re happy, so is he.”

“Thanks, Mama.” I hugged her.

“Thank you, Kylie.”

“What have I done?” I looked up at her and noticed she had the same color eyes as Parker.

“You’ve been calling me, Mama,” she said as tears came to her eyes. “I didn’t think you’d ever be able to do that.” Arthur walked out with Parker’s horse. “Go have fun.” I started to step down off the porch, “Kylie. Be careful, and if there is any sign of trouble, get back here.”

“Yes Mama,” I nodded, then went and mounted Parker’s horse with Arthur’s help. I rode slowly so he didn’t have to run.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leigh Anne’s house had two main floors, but Leigh Anne’s room took up the whole attic. They had made it into a bedroom to keep her from sneaking out on one of our grand summer adventures. I laughed as I stared at the porch, circling the whole house, remembering the hours we spent chasing each other around it.

“Kylie,” Leigh Anne sang as she ran out of the house.

I slid off Parker’s horse and into Leigh Anne’s awaiting arms. It felt nice to be around a friend. “Leigh Anne, it is so good to see you.”

“What do I owe this pleasure?” She smiled, not complaining.

“Martha was tired of me moping around.” I laughed. “Parker has the horses out on a run, which will keep him away for a few hours.”

“And he wouldn’t let you go.” She laughed, putting her arm around me.

“No.” I felt lost again.

She pulled me close as we walked to the back of her house and down a long path that led up to a small muddy pond, on the west side of her mother’s flower path. “Do you remember when we ran through here covered in mud?” Leigh Anne sat under her favorite tree. Its short branches kept the sun streaming down on her.

I took my favorite spot in the full shade across from her. “That was just last year.” I laughed. “Who would’ve thought a year later, I’d be married and expecting a baby?”

“Not me. Well, at least not married to Parker Monroe, of all the boys who have wanted you.” She looked at me, her eyes were sad. “What is he like? I know he can be charming, but he does have a reputation.”

“He is actually very kind and gentle and he worries, a lot, because of everything that has happened to me and he is very-” I paused, “-very protective. He doesn’t trust anyone to care for me.” I looked at Leigh Anne; she began squirming, the way she did when she had a secret that she wasn’t sure about telling.

“He can be so warm and charming.” Her squirming turned to fidgeting, telling me something was wrong. “Leigh, what’s bothering you?”

She looked away from me. “Part of the reason my father sent me to London was Parker.”

“What?” I stared at her. “Why?”

“My father and I were coming back from town. Our wagon broke down. Parker came along and helped us.” She paused to look at me. “Parker showed me a little attention. That upset my father, and he started making plans for me to go to see his sister in London.”

“Did you kiss him?”

“Kylie, you’re not going to be mad at me?”

“No. I know Parker’s been with other girls. Just tell me.”

“We met secretly. You were already back in Boston. It was the day before I left in the late afternoon.” She stopped. “Do you really want me to go on?”

“Go on.” I threw a rock into the pond, stirring a rivulet of mud.

“He was so charming. We sat under a tree near the circle of pines out of sight of the house.” She laughed. “I don’t even remember what we talked about. I remember his kisses were very inviting as he lowered us down on a blanket. Kylie?” I smiled, motioning for her to continue. She took a deep breath. “After several minutes his hand started moving my skirt up. He touched my knee, when my father called for me.” She laughed.

“You’re father would have killed both of you,” I laughed.

“I know. I’m glad nothing happened because you’re so happy.” She smiled.

“Did he do that to you?” She looked at me. “Did he explore your body?”

“Not as fast as the Frenchman or the musician.”

“Kylie, what did they do?” She wanted to know everything.

“The Frenchman pinned me up against a wall; he wanted more than to hold my hand. He had pushed my breasts out of my corset before I could give him a nice scar.” I hadn’t thought about that in a while, and I began to feel as though I couldn’t breathe.

“Kylie.” Leigh moved up beside me. “What’s wrong?”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing. “I’m fine, just had the worst thought cross my mind.”

“What?”

“Parker will meet the Frenchman. You must never tell him.” She nodded her understanding. “I doubt he’ll meet the musician; he lives somewhere in the south.”

“What was his name?”

“Nate. Well, Nathaniel.” I smiled. “He and a couple of his buddies tied my hands behind my back. They were arguing on who’d get me first, which gave me a chance to get my knife. I cut the ropes, then made sure they never touched me again.”

“Who were the other two?”

“Tucker and Bishop,” I said. “They underestimated me. They each have a scare to remind them that when I say no, I mean no.”

Leigh’s face went pale. “I wish I was as brave as you.”

“I’m not brave,” I laughed and we began reliving our past adventures. We spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in the shade of the trees, talking of our hidden lives away from Carthage. We told each other everything, which kept us laughing so much my stomach muscles hurt.

I closed my eyes, trying to regain control, when I heard a horse galloping close. “Oh no. What time is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Shit.” I climbed up on a low branch, looking toward the front of the house to see who was in the drive, but her family’s corn crop blocked my view. I jumped down and ran up the path and around the side of the house. “Shit.”

“Kylie, what’s wrong?” she asked coming up behind me, I pointed to where Parker sat on my stallion. He climbed down as Leigh Anne and I walked toward him. “Are you going to be in trouble?”

“No. He’s smiling.”

“Leigh Anne.” Parker tipped his hat. “Ky. You’re late. You have a lot of anxious men waiting to be paid.”

“Parker, I’m sorry.” I looked at Leigh Anne, and we started laughing again. “We got carried away.”

“Arthur, take my horse home.” Parker ordered. Arthur nodded then he headed to the house.

I hugged Leigh Anne. “It was a great afternoon. We’ll do this again.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Ky.” Parker helped me up on my horse then climbed up behind me. “Leigh Anne.” He kicked my stallion into a run, holding me tight, racing up the drive, Martha yelled at him to slow down when we passed her. He nodded but didn’t stop until we were at our house.

“Stay here.” He ran inside and back out before I could think about getting down. He handed me the saddlebags filled with the men’s pay and then he climbed back up behind me again. “I’m dying to kiss you.”

“Why don’t you?” I turned in the saddle enough to face him, and he accepted my tongue; it brushed against his as we both melted into the kiss.

“Let’s go pay the men.” He nuzzled my neck. “I love you.” We glided back at a slower pace to pay the men.

“You’ve been quiet since we left Leigh Anne’s. What’s bothering you?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“I know you’re lying.”

“Just pay the men.”



I thanked the men and paid them. The men left in high spirits, with no more horses to break. Parker guided us up to Vernon Sr. and Pappa. "I'd like to leave in two days. Will everything be ready to go at that time?"

"We have almost everything ready now." Vernon Sr. smiled up at us.

Parker touched my belly. "Finish getting what we need."

"Where you going?" Pappa asked.

"I'm going to take Ky for a ride." Parker urged my stallion to walk at a slow pace. He took us behind the houses to a small cluster of trees that overlooked the farm. Parker climbed down, then helped me; we sat in the shade against a large tree with me cuddled in his arms. I draped my legs over one of his before he gently moved my hair out of my face.

"We need to get you a hat. I don't want you wearing your hair down while we ride."

"I'll be wearing it back in a braid, but I don't need a hat."

"You do need a hat, and we need to get you into clothes that don't show that you're a woman."

"Parker, that's kind of hard to hide."

He shook his head. "You're gaining a belly, and you've loosened your corset and pants." He placed his hand on my stomach.

"You've been talking to your mother." I couldn't help but frown.

"No. I've seen it. When we ride, you're to stay close to me." He caressed my cheek so softly, reminding me of silk touching it. "I've hired several men from out of the area. They're good horsemen but a little wild. I want you to stay near me."

"Is that what's bothering you?"

“Some. We’ll be leaving the day after tomorrow. Are you going to be able to spend twelve to eighteen hours on a horse?” His eyes showed his fear. “If you get tired I’ll put you in the wagon.”

“Is this your way of telling me not to argue with you, to keep my mouth shut, to stay at your back and-” I paused, fighting the urge not to laugh. “And never to be without my guns?”

His smile turned to a frown. “Yes.”

“Now that you’ve made your point, what’s truly bothering you?” He laughed. “Let me try that one too.” I smiled. “You’re worried about what Leigh Anne told me.”

He lost his smile. “She told you.”

“Well, she told me that you came to her father’s rescue. She got your attention and you gave some back.”

“What else?”

“That you allowed your hands to roam.”

Parker got a smirk on his face. “She was willing.”

“Parker.” I stared at him. “She’s my best friend.”

“You know I’ve been with girls from the area.”

“What am I, just another local conquest?” I tried to move away.

He pulled me into a tight embrace. “Ky. You were never a conquest. Leigh Anne, definitely a conquest.”

“Parker.” I tried to move away again.

He pulled me back into his embrace. “I didn’t even know you were a Bellows. You were never in town, and you didn’t even know who I was.” Parker brushed my hair back. “Your

family kept you so hidden, I didn't know you existed." He touched my cheek again, then moved his hand around to the back of my neck and gently squeezed. "My heart belongs only to you."

"I love hearing you say that." I brought him down to my lips. We began to kiss deeply and enthusiastically, but the dinner bell echoed below us.

"When did you eat last?"

"Before you left."

"Hop up. You need to eat." Parker pushed me to my feet before walking to the stallion. He embraced me, forcing me to look at him. "Have I told you how much you make me want you?"

"Not lately."

"You." Parker took my hand and rubbed it against the front of his pants. "It's going to be very hard-" He gasped when I squeezed, "to keep my distance from you on the ride." I squeezed tighter. He smiled and moved my hand. "Mrs. Monroe, may I call on you tonight?"

"I don't know, Mr. Monroe. It seems you are rejecting my personal touch." I grabbed a tighter grip, squeezing as I drew closer.

"Ky." He grabbed me behind my neck with one hand, then with his other grabbed the hand that held him. He drew me closer, eating at my mouth; he wanted me, and his body tensed at my touch. He pulled back. "Ky." He shouted, forcing my hand to release him. "Damn woman." He leaned against my stallion, gasping for air.

"Parker?"

He lifted his hand before he walked away, leaning down, bracing his hands on his knees while gasping and trying to take deep breaths.

"What's wrong?"

He looked at me, pain evident on his face, and took a few deeper breaths, before he stood back up. He grimaced and took a deep breath with his eyes closed. I went to him to offer a little comfort, but he wrapped his arms around me when the dinner bell rang again. “Ky.” He held my hands in his behind my back.

“Quit saying Ky and tell me what’s wrong.”

He laughed. “Please, whatever you do, be careful how tight or how hard you hold me there.”

“Why? I thought you liked it?”

“I do, but it can hurt and hurt bad.” Parker smiled. “Shit Ky, don’t you know this.”

“Know what?”

“I can’t believe this,” he laughed. “If you wanted to get away from a man who held you, what would you do?”

“You know what I’d do.” I shifted my weight, waiting for him to continue.

“What would Becca do?” he asked.

“I don’t know?”

“Why did you kick Asa here?” he continued with his questions.

“I had the best shot. He’d have blocked any where else.”

Parker rubbed my arms. “It’s the most sensitive part of a man’s body.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I kissed him. “Honey, are you all right?”

“Honey? That’s a first.” Parker kissed me. “Let’s go get you something to eat.” He helped me onto the stallion, but he grimaced as he climbed up behind me.

After dinner, Parker and I walked into our home. He hadn’t said much. “What’s bothering you now?” I asked, watching him roam through the house. “Parker?”

“Let’s go to bed,” he said taking my hand.

“Are you still hurting?”

“No.”

He draped his arm across my shoulder. “Mama’s mad that I am taking you with me.”

“Parker, I am stronger than anyone thinks, and I know horses, probably, better than most men.”

“Ky. It’s not your knowledge. It’s the physical strain.” Parker began to undress, not even looking at me. “When was the last time you moved any horses?”

“April twenty-third through May twenty-first. I along with fifteen men took three hundred horses from Boston to Philadelphia by train, where they were sold them. Then we helped take one-hundred and fifteen from Philadelphia to Montreal, Canada by train. Then we drove them thirty miles north of Quebec City making that over one-hundred, eighty miles. That was my sixteenth drive.” Parker stared at me, as I bounced remembering my excitement from that trip. “On the way back we went through western New York to the grandest sight I have ever seen. We saw a huge waterfall called Niagara Falls and I wore my clothes. I didn’t hide my womanly features and the men found out early to stay away from me.” Parker continued to stare. “And I had only my wits and knives.”

“What did you do with the money?”

I smiled. “I kept it. I deposited eight thousand dollars in the bank in Boston on May twenty-second.”

“You’re lying to me.” Parker stared with his mouth open. “There ain’t no way, you carried that much money that far.”

“Where will you carry your money, Parker?”

“I have...” He walked toward his dresser drawer, producing a waistband money pouch.

“That’s typical.”

“What?”

“Follow me.” I walked out of the bedroom with Parker following me. Time had come to reveal another of my secrets. We lit a few lamps in the front room before I leaned against my large trunk with the curved lid. I thought back to when Parker and Vern were complaining about carrying it in.

“You know that I’m about to reveal some more of my secrets.”

“I suspected that.”

I clicked the latch but turned and sat down on the trunk again. “On pain of death, you must swear not to reveal the secrets held within this trunk.”

“Just open it.”

“You’re no fun.” I turned and lifted the lid.

“Shit Ky.” Parker’s mouth gapped open.

I lifted my fancy trail saddle out of the trunk then tossed a set of matching saddlebags next to the saddle. I pulled out my leather chaps with a matching jacket, then picked up a box that sat in the bottom before releasing the wire catches, hiding the secret compartment. I went to lift it out, but it was too heavy.

“Honey, lift this out for me please.”

“Honey? Please? You have my attention.” He moved me out of his way, then lifted the false bottom out of the trunk and set it on the floor. “Kylie.” Gripping the edge of the trunk, he stared at the four gold bars, lining the outside of the trunk, two large bundles of cash and eight

small, easy-to-hide money pouches. “We need to move these.” He pointed to the gold. “We’ll keep the cash in here though.”

“Do you love me because you know I have money or because I am so good in the bedroom?” I joked.

Parker turned to me, his face showing that he did not like my joke. “I’m taking these upstairs.” He grabbed the bars and stormed up to the bedroom, where he slammed the door. I could hear him, slamming things around in the room.

I tried to pick up the bottom but still couldn’t lift it, so I moved my saddle against the wall then tossed my saddlebags next to it. Putting my chaps and jacket on the table, I left the moneybags where they lay before going out onto the porch and sitting in the corner hidden behind the chairs that ran along the wall. I let the tears roll down my cheeks because I had hurt Parker and didn’t know how to make it up to him. I curled up in a ball and cried until I fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Waking to the caress of the silk sheets, Parker’s hand slid across my hip while he lay behind me. I didn’t know when or how he had brought me inside, but he had left a small lamp by the bed with a low flame, and a red rosebud lay beside it. I began to cry again; I had hurt him, but he had given me a rose. I had ruined our evening of discovery, and now I only wanted to tell him how sorry I felt and make love to him. I wondered how he could forgive me. Ashamed of what I had done, I cried.

Parker scooted close to me and rubbed his hand over my belly as he leaned in and kissed my head. “Please don’t cry. I hate it when you cry.” He whispered then kissed my head again.

I turned into his arms still sobbing. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I curled up into his embrace.

“I know you didn’t.” He kissed my forehead.

“Parker, I love you so much. I went nuts after you left, that’s why Mama sent me to Leigh Anne’s.”

“Ky, I would’ve loved you even if you didn’t have any money. I don’t need your money, and I do enjoy making love to you, but that is not why I wanted to be with you.” He turned my face so he could look into my eyes. “I need you. You make me whole.” I reached up and kissed him before moving my hand to his penis, but he stopped me. He brought my hand up and kissed it. “I just want to hold you. I may not get to do this for a while.”

“How did you know I was awake?”

“You got quiet.”

“Have you been asleep at all?” His eyes looked so tired in the lamp light.

“Yes, but anytime you get too quiet, I wake.” He rolled me onto my back. “I love you.” He kissed me again, then pulled me into the comfort of his embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vern’s voice interrupted my peaceful sleep, because he and Parker were having a loud conversation before I heard footsteps coming upstairs. Parker came into the room, opened the trunk, and took out a bundle of cash. “Are you hungry?” He leaned down and kissed me.

“Yes.”

“I’ll bring you up something. I want you to rest today.” He smiled. “Doc. Reynolds will be here in a little while. Do you need anything for the ride?”



“The bitter tea, just make sure we have lots of it.” I jumped up and ran out the door of our bedroom and into the chamber room. I threw up, Parker holding me in his usual way, until I passed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

My head throbbed to the sound of Parker and Vern arguing again, this time in the hallway outside my bedroom. “Parker, she’s no shape to go.” Vern bellowed. “Have her take the stage and meet us there.”

“No, she’s going with us.”

“We leave tomorrow, and she’s still getting sick.”

“Vern, I want you to go help your father and Pappa,” Martha ordered. Vern stormed down the stairs and slammed the door behind him. “Parker, what does Kylie know about moving horses?”

“A lot more than I do.”

“Will she be able to ride tomorrow?” Martha’s voice filled with worry.

“Yes, if everyone will quit yelling,” I complained.

“Kylie, sit up.” Martha moved up beside the bed. I felt a silk camisole on my chest. Parker smiled when I sat up.

“Kylie, here is some toast and your tea,” Martha continued as I took them and began to eat.

Parker came to me. “I want you to rest today. I need to get a few things ready for tomorrow.”

“Leave all my things in the house. I have to get them ready. I am taking the big trunk downstairs. When I get it packed. I’ll come find you.”

“Take it easy, though.”

“I will.” He kissed me until someone knocked on the door.

“Sorry, Parker, but Dr. Reynolds is here, and the men you hired.” Cord stood in the doorway.

“Tell the men I’ll be down in a minute.” Parker instructed as Dr. Reynolds came in.

“Good morning, Doc.” Parker shook his hand.

“Parker, Kylie, Martha,” he greeted us. I just nodded.

“Well Parker, I do think it was wise of you to have me examine Kylie before you leave.” He told him. “I also, want to suggest that you have her looked at while your in Atlanta and again in Boston.”

“I plan to,” Parker stated. I just rolled my eyes, taking another sip of my tea, then got up to take my clothes off. I lay across the bed. Doc Reynolds’s hands were warm but still very uncomfortable. Parker leaned against the dresser, watching but not saying anything. His hand never went for his gun. After several minutes of mashing and prodding, Doc Reynolds walked to the chamber room to wash his hands while I got dressed.

“Kylie, if for any reason, you get tired or you start hurting, move to the wagon. The baby is growing, and I dare say you maybe really showing by the time you get back.” He looked at Parker. “I don’t have to tell you to watch out for her and not to let her do anything where she might get hurt.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“She’s healthy, and there is no reason she should have any trouble.”

“Thanks Doc.” Parker said. “I’ll walk you out.”

After finishing my breakfast, I started gathering my things for the drive. I packed clothes in the trunk, then I tied my hair into a long braid down my back. I crossed the yard, buckling my gun belt in place. Parker and the other men had gathered when I strolled into the barn, then back out with Boomer and Cornell, causing the men to stare. Some of the men ignored Parker when I returned, followed by Boomer and Cornell, who carried the trunk and set it next to the wagon.

“Boomer, will you saddle my horse for me?” I asked. He nodded and ran into the barn. Parker watched the men’s reaction to me, but I needed to lay down my own ground rules, besides the ones Parker had told them. Thanking Boomer, I smiled at Parker because he had never seen what I was about to do. I ran alongside my stallion, holding on to the edge of my saddle. I planted my feet and jumped, swinging my legs high over his back before bringing my feet slowly down until firmly seated then kicked the stallion’s haunches, causing him to rear.

The men, including Vern, whooped and hollered while Parker’s jaw locked and his eyes narrowed, which told me I had better not do that again. Riding over to the corral with all eyes still watching me, I took out my knife, then an apple from my saddlebag before I hopped down. Draping my saddlebag over my shoulder, I began to sing. The horses gathered close to the gate, tossing Boomer and Cornell the saddlebag so they could get an apple once they joined me. They each took out their knives and we began feeding the horses; I stepped into the corral, followed by the men, as the horses gathered around and began following us.

“Ky. Get out of there!” Parker shouted.

I finished feeding all the horses with Boomer and Cornell. “Give them some grain,” I instructed them before climbing back up on my stallion and riding up to Parker; he glared at me when I blew him a kiss.

“Gentlemen.” Parker moved up next to me. “I’d like to introduce you to my wife, Kylie.” The men mumbled their greetings before Parker continued, “She’ll be accompanying us,” that brought on louder grumblings. “If you’re worried about her knowledge of horses or moving them, don’t. I’m confident that she’ll be able to hold her own.” I smiled at them. “I’ll see you here before dawn; there’s a cluster of trees over there where you can camp. Are there any questions?”

“Yes. Can she cook as good as she looks?” one man asked.

Parker stiffened but relaxed when a gunshot rang out. “Put it up, Ky.” He patted my leg then looked at the ground near the man’s foot, shaking his head. “Did you miss on purpose?” Parker moved to stand face to face with the man. “To answer your question, no, she doesn’t cook, but she does hit where she aims.” Parker backed away. “Gentlemen, we will see you in the morning.” Parker grabbed my reins and swung up behind me. “I think you proved your point.” We rode away from the others before Parker said anything, “You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I am,” I said, leaning back into his arms. “That’s why you’re riding with me.” He took us back up on the hill, overlooking the farm. We sat back down under the tree as we had done the day before. “We can’t stay here too long.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I have things to show you at the house.”

“What kind of things?”

“A few hidden places on my saddle and in my chaps.” I kissed him trying to make him stop laughing.

“Will I ever find out all of your secrets?”

“Probably not,” I whispered, making him laugh more as we kept kissing. We sat up on the hill, enjoying each other’s company until we saw Pappa and Vernon Sr. coming back from town with supplies.

\* \* \* \* \*

My mother and grandmother waited for me when I walked into the main house and I could tell they wanted to voice their opinions about my going with Parker. “Mother. Grandma. Mama.”

“Kylie,” they said.

“Before either of you say anything, I’m going. Doc Reynolds says I’m healthy.”

“We know. We have been talking with Martha, and we didn’t plan on trying to talk you out of going. We brought these.” I stared at three pairs of new pants. “We think these will help you, and they have been adjusted so that they’ll give you more room. Martha said you were loosening the ones you’re currently wearing.”

Martha smiled up at me. “Thank you.” I hugged all the women. “I really appreciate it.”

My mother had tears in her eyes. “We want you to be careful, and we know Parker will look after you.” She paused. “We need to get going because your father will be worried. We wouldn’t let Karrie Ann come.”

“Give her a hug for me.” I walked them out to the wagon. “Tell her I’ll bring her back something from Boston.” We hugged again, then they left me standing by the drive, wondering whether I would ever get past the nine years of hurt and anger still buried within me.

\*\*\*\*\*

Parker helped load the supplies, which took most of the afternoon, while I sat on the porch watching. Becca brought me some tea and sat down to join me. “I wish Vern would let me go.”

“Why?”

“He tends to explore other women when he’s out of town.” Tears came to Becca’s eyes.

“Becca. I’m sorry.”

“I’m fine,” she stated. “I hope that this time will be different.”

“Just make sure you give him all you can tonight. Make him want to come home.” I didn’t look at her; my thoughts wondered to what I wanted to do with Parker later this evening.

“Vern’s been very gentle of late. He’s frustrated that I’m bleeding.” Becca’s voice sounded sad.

“Parker and I have yet to deal with that. I haven’t had one since we have been together.”

“How’s Parker going to do in Boston?”

“Not well, I’m afraid. I did have quite a few suitors back there, and most of them won’t like Parker.” I frowned.

“How are you going to deal with it?”

“I have warned him already,” I paused. “Becca, while I am in Boston, I’ll be getting everything in order, so if something were to happen to me, my family would be taken care of.”

“What do you think will happen?”

“Nothing, but with all that is happening in this country, who knows?” My eyes filled with tears. “If something did happen, I want my child raised at my home in Boston.”

“Does Parker know?” she paused. “More important, would he let it happen?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t want to do it against his will.” I turned to Becca. “You have to promise me. If anything happens to Parker or myself, you must make sure my wishes are honored. Promise me, Becca.”

“Kylie. I-”

“Becca. You must.”

She stared at me. “Fine. I promise.”

“Well, what’s this serious chattering?” Parker asked Vern.

“I think they’re plotting something.” Vern laughed.

I stood and walked up to Parker as he leaned against the porch rail, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Always.” Then I kissed him.

Martha came up behind us and rang the bell for dinner, which consisted of roast, new potatoes drenched in gravy, corn, and spinach. Parker stayed quiet through dinner, but he kept looking at me sipping my tea.

“Ky, are you finished?”

“Yes.”

“Mama, it was delicious. I’m taking Ky home to get some rest before we leave. See you all in the morning.” He held his hand out to me.

“Kylie, don’t forget your pants,” Martha said.

“Thanks. Goodnight all.” I waved and let Parker lead me home.

He held my hand as we walked between the houses, and I hoped he wanted the same thing I did. Parker held the door to open for me but didn’t have it all the way shut before he pinned me to the door. His hands ripped at my clothes, with his mouth locked on mine.

I kicked my saddle. “Shit.” I thought. “Parker.” I pushed against him. “Parker.”

“What?” He growled at me for interrupting him.

“I need to show you a few things before we get carried away.” He kept kissing down my neck. “Parker.” He put his fingers into my mouth while his other hand slid down the front of my pants. “Parker.”

“Shhh.” He pulled me into a kiss. “You can show me in a little while.” I gave in to him, sucking on his fingers when they returned to my mouth, while the fingertips on his other hand found their way inside my moist canal. My knees began to weaken while my hand gripped the door handle, helping me to stay on my feet. He moved his fingers from my mouth to my pants and began to push them down before kneeling in front of my exposed curls, and he groaned his frustration that my legs were confined by my clothes.

He grabbed me, then laid me down on the braided rug in front of the door and pulled off my boots off, followed by my clothes, and tossed them across the room. Parker lifted my legs then drove his himself deep into me, causing me to moan as he found a fast rhythm. My body quaked as the pressure grew. I moaned when he pulsated within my body.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all day.” He kissed me. “I love you.” We continued kissing for several more minutes. “What did you want to show me?”

“I’ll show you when I can move.” He laughed, then lifted himself off me, causing me to moan, then helped me sit up. “Where are my clothes?”

“You don’t need them.”

“That’s fine for you to say, you have all yours on.”

“I can remedy that.” Parker smiled then stood and stripped off all his clothes. “There.” He smiled, flipping his organ at me.



I began to laugh. “While you’re dancing around, grab my saddle and my chaps.” Parker wiggled his ass around, picking up the items, and then laid the saddle next to me. Still dancing, he wrapped my chaps around his waist, flicking himself at me again; I had never seen this side of him. “Will you sit down, please?”

“Ky, you’re no fun tonight,” Parker complained.

“Parker, let me get this done, then I’ll let you do anything you want, anywhere you want, and for however long you want.” I licked my lips.

“Really?” His eyes got a twinkle that matched the unusual tone of innocence in his voice.

“Yes, really.” I fought to keep Parker totally focused while showing him the secret compartments in my saddle and chaps. I also showed him the money already hidden in them. He smiled when I had nothing more to show him.

“I get to do anything?” I nodded at Parker. He got a twinkle in his eyes with his mind, racing with all kinds of thoughts. He stood then offered his hands out to me. “Go wash up. I’ll be up in a minute.” He kissed me softly.

I could hear Parker rummaging around downstairs while I washed myself in the chamber room, wishing for a bath; it would have been nice to sit in it with him holding me in the cool water.

“I like watching you do that.” Parker stood in the door as I brushed the rag over my breast then moved on to more private parts of my body. After I finished, he held out his hand.

“Come with me.”

“You need to wash up?”

“I did downstairs.” With my hand in his, he led me into our bedroom. Parker had lit the lamp by on the nightstand and the blankets and sheets were pulled back. He sat down on the bed. “Ky,” he pulled me close then brushed my hair away from my face. “Do you know what I think about when we’re apart or when I can’t hold you?”

“No.”

“I think of your birthday. You had no reason to give yourself to me and you opened up to me. You trusted me. I could never understand how you could believe I wouldn’t go away, the way I had done with so many others.” Parker smiled; he rubbed his hands up and down my hips then kissed my stomach.

He wrapped his arms around me, then lowered me onto the bed before he maneuvered his body over my leg, forcing it behind his back. He pushed my other leg farther apart with his foot. He played with my lower lips, teasing me until I squirmed against him.

I reached for him but he took my free hand in his while rubbing my other hand across the flesh of his back. “Ky,” he whispered. “Don’t claw me.” He slid his finger inside me, flicking it causing me to shiver more. “You’re awfully wiggly tonight.” He kissed my lips lightly but increased the teasing between my legs. I moaned. He slid his tongue in my mouth as he brought me screaming. “Ky. That is wonderful. I love it when you scream.”

He shifted then let his shaft slip deep inside me on the wetness he created, slowly sliding in and out while rotating his hips ever so slightly. Taking his time and holding me close, he maintained a slow sensual rhythm as the pressure increased.

“Give me your hands.” He intertwined our fingers as my body exploded around his. My body continued to quake as he kept his rhythm while tightening our grip. I wrapped my legs over his.

“Ugh.”

“Ky?” He stopped. “That sounded painful.” He kissed my forehead. “Did it hurt?”

“Just when you went so deep. Please keep going.” I kissed his neck and began to suck on it, not ready for him to finish, drawing more of his skin into my mouth. I nibbled and sucked until he began to move inside me again. As he quickened his rhythm, I tried not to moan, afraid he would think I was hurting. In moments, the pressure grew with the quaking of my body, then we exploded together.

Parker crawled off me then helped me up. “Let’s get you cleaned up. I want you to get a lot of rest.” We walked naked into the chamber room where he pumped fresh water into the basin. He washed me gently, then I washed him before he looked in the mirror at his neck. “Kylie Ruth.” He sounded upset.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” I stared at him.

“What is it with you leaving marks on me?”

“What are you talking about?”

Parker turned toward to me as I stared at a large black and red spot on his neck. “Honey.” I went to get a closer look. “I’m so sorry.”

Parker smiled. “I love when you call me that. Don’t be sorry for putting your marks on me.”

We walked back into the bedroom, where Parker sat on the bed as I went to the dresser, and took out a small box. “I have something for you. I wanted to keep it till your birthday but I want you to have it sooner.” I handed Parker the box.

“What is this?”

“Open it and find out.” Parker lifted the lid to the box; inside sat a plain gold wedding band. He sat there looking at it. I took the ring then lifted his left hand. “Parker Ambrose Monroe, I give you this ring to remind you always of my love and devotion to you. I swear by the continuous circle of this ring to honor, love and obey. Well, obey to the best of my ability.” Parker laughed. “Till death do we part. Parker will you accept this ring?”

“Yes.” He whispered allowing me to slip the ring on his finger.

“Honey, I love you so much.” Placing my hands on the side of his face, I drew him in for a kiss.

“Ky. Come to bed.” We both lay in our bed intertwined in each other’s naked, loving embrace.

## Chapter 19

The next morning Parker left with only a short kiss, along with orders for me to hurry up. I put on a dusty brown pair of pants that my mother gave me, along with a white silk shirt. My knee-high black leather boots slipped over my silk stockings, which kept the legs of my pants tucked tightly inside. Looking at the clean reflection in the mirror, I knew wouldn’t look this clean for a while, but my hair was a tangled mass; rolling my eyes, I brushed it thoroughly and then twisted a long strip of leather from the top of the braid down to the tip to hold it tight. I surveyed the room: my guns lay on a table next to the bed; the empty knife sheaths held brand-new blades with bone handles. Draping my gun belt across my shoulder, I walked downstairs to find my saddle and saddlebags gone, along with three rifles that Parker kept in a gun cabinet. My chaps lay on the dining room table next to the big box that had been stored in the trunk. I began to read the inscription written on the lid

“Kylie,

You have been like a granddaughter to me ever since you were little. Here is a token of my affection; each feather has a special meaning for you. The peacock feather with its eye because nothing sneaks up on you. The hawk feather represents your fierceness and determination. Last, the eagle feather, a proud strong bird, symbolizing the way you carry yourself.

Wear them and think of Pearl.

Love,

Graywolf.”

I wiped the tears from my eyes because Graywolf died three days before I arrived back in Boston after my last horse sale. The guilt-ridden pain ached still at not telling him goodbye, and I wondered what he would think of me now. Lost in my thoughts, I jumped when Cord and Luke burst through the door but stopped and stared at the gun in my hand.

“Kylie, Parker says to hurry up.” Cord finally said as I put my gun away.

“Kylie, why are you crying?” Luke's soft voice sounded worried.

“No reason. I'm always a little on edge before a drive,” I said, lifting the lid slowly off the box.

“What is in there?” The boys moved up to look because of my refusal to answer, afraid the tears would come back; I lifted the black wide brimmed hat up. The peacock feather lay just off the brim. The hawk feather stood at an angle just above it, guarded by the feather from the eagle. Not able to stop, the tears poured from my eyes while tracing the multicolored beads along the band as it caressed my fingertips just as it had once caressed Graywolf's neck.

“Kylie?” Luke whispered.

“Oh, sorry. Let's go. I need to eat.” Slipping the hat over my tight braid, I put my chaps and coat on and slung my guns back over my shoulder before heading out the door to the sound of the breakfast bell.

Parker and Vern sat in their usual places at the table, waiting for everyone to come join them for our last meal together for several weeks. I entered through the kitchen just as Vern looked in my direction.

“Shit.” His face showed his surprise at my outfit. “How many secrets does she have?”

“A lot.” Parker smiled as he got up from the table to take my guns and hat. “You did have a hat.”

“I told you I've done this before.” I took my place next to Parker.

“Parker, Kylie was crying?” Luke told him.

“Traitor,” I whispered.

“Ky?”

“It was nothing. The hatbox had a note on it from a friend of mine who died before I got back to Boston after my last drive. I was just being sentimental.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.” I kissed him, hoping he would accept my answer. His hand massaged my back while we waited on everyone to join us at the table. Parker kissed my hand after Pappa said the blessing. With all our plates full, we ate to the sound of laughter, enjoying the last few moments with our family.

After finishing several cups of my tea, I departed to the outhouse, my last dignified trip for a while. When I returned, Martha handed me a bag of food, a canteen filled with tea, and

another with water. I adjusted my chaps to fit securely but not too tightly and then put on my gun belt. A smile crossed my face at the disapproving frown on Martha's sagging cheeks. A slight chill filled the air touched by the smell of rain, mixed with a hint of roses greeted me.

By the corral, the men waited, listening to the final orders from Parker, who never looked my way as I joined them. I nuzzled my stallion's nose, and he snorted his enjoyment before I checked his saddle while singing softly to calm both of us.

“Mount up.” Parker's words echoed, followed by the sound of the men's joyous tones as we prepared to depart. I watched my husband stroll toward me with instructions for me. “Ky, I want you to stay with the wagon.”

“Parker, don't do this to me.” I showed my disapproval. “Don't put me with the wagon.”

“I want you with the wagon so I can focus and not worry about you today.”

“I'm not worried about these guys,” I said.

“I'm not either, but if you are doing to them what you are doing to me, we will not get anywhere.” He kissed me tenderly before a suspicious smile crossed his face. “Besides, if you're with the wagon I don't have to worry about you. Mike won't let anyone come near you.” He stopped with another kiss then helped me on my stallion. “Head out, Mike.” The wheels of the wagon ground along the hard dirt road as I dutifully followed behind. With the final wave goodbye, I kicked my horse, causing him to rear and race up the drive.

“Kylie!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The trail started slow while I followed the wagon for most of the day before doing some scouting, looking for a place to make camp. I wandered through the trees to avoid Mike seeing

me get ill from not drinking enough tea and racing my stallion to fight off the boredom. I allowed myself to roam, surveying the landscape. My body ached from the hours of sitting astride my mighty steed, so I rejoiced when it came time to make camp.

Mike laughed, causing his round belly to jiggle, when I told him I couldn't help him cook. He laughed even harder while watching me attempt to make my tea. "Kylie, get away from there and let me do it. You're going to burn yourself."

"I can help. Please let me help." I winked, then couldn't stop laughing at Mike's expression.

"No Kylie. You go gather up firewood- it will be safer for both of us."

"Ah, Mike. I'm not that bad." I wandered off to gather up lots of firewood. Hidden within a grove of trees, my stomach released what few contents it held, followed by the dry heaves. The dizzy feeling swarmed over me, forcing me to sit against a tree and watch a tick crawl across my arm until I could stand again. I looked toward the sunset and thought I saw the figure of a man on a horse but he disappeared when Mike shouted.

"Kylie." Mike's voice sounded worried.

"Coming." I carried the bundle of twigs back to Mike for the fire. "I'm going to go scout the area."

"Fine, just stay close. I don't want to have to explain to Parker how you got away from me."

Nodding at Mike, I rode off to explore around the camp and followed our path back down to where I could see Parker and the horses coming. It would take them at least another hour for them to reach the camp.



Vern laughed when I rode up next to him, with Parker scowling at me on his other side. “You’re supposed to be resting in camp, that-”

“That’s why you sent me with the wagon.” Vern howled loudly when I finished Parker’s sentence, but the laughter stopped at the sound of a cracking of a whip. “You had better not be letting him hit the horses with that.”

“He’s not,” Parker stated. The whipped popped again, forcing me to spin my stallion to find the man responsible for the noise. “Shit, Vern.”

“Coming.”

They raced after me as I caught the whip and gave it a jerk. The leather handle flew out of the man’s hand, making him turn to look at me. “Who the hell do you think you are?” He glared angrily at me. It had only been a day's ride, but he looked like he had a months worth of dirt on his body. His crusty beard could have hidden a rat.

“I’m the one who will be paying you to leave if I catch you using a whip again.” The heat of my own anger turned my face completely red. “If I find one mark on these horses I will deduct it from your pay.”

His disbelief showed on his face. “You have no say over the pay.”

“Try me.”

“Ky.” Parker moved up behind me.

“Parker.” The man turned his attention to my husband.

“Ky, give him back his whip.” Parker urged his horse closer to me.

I turned, glaring at Parker, wanting to scream, but his face grew stern. Urging my stallion up next to the man, I slammed his whip into his chest. “I don’t know who taught you about running horses, but if I hear it pop again you’ll be out of a job.” Fighting the urge to kill the

man, I turned my stallion into the herd, looking for any sign of an injury from it. As second-in-command and the only other Monroe male, Vern followed me and stayed at my heels the rest of the ride into camp and on into the first watch.

After hours of successfully weaving my way through the horses, I found no injuries. I didn't hire men who used whips. I wouldn't risk any harm coming to the horses. I wondered what Parker would tell him, but the man would know I meant what I said and could back it up. Vern and I circled the herd on our watch, while the others ate their dinner. Anger still fueled my need to keep moving, not wanting to be anywhere near that beast.

"Kylie, let's go," Vern called, riding up behind me. "Parker told him not to use the whip and not to go against you. Parker's worried about you. That's why you're out here. I can't go eat until you go with me; neither of us wants to make you any angrier, so please let's go."

I took a deep breath to release the tension in my back. "I am getting a little hungry."

"Parker wanted you away from all the men so he could let them all know that you do have the authority to do whatever you say you will do." I nodded and headed for camp to the awaiting stares of the men as we rode up.

Parker's worried smile greeted me as he helped me off my horse. "Mike said you disappeared a few times today."

I looked past Parker at Mike who just shrugged. "You don't need to have me followed."

"I got this, you go eat." Parker patted my back, shoving me toward the chuck wagon. "Ky, we're not done with this discussion."

I waved as I walked toward the food, "Thanks, Mike." Frowning, I took the plate from him.

"Sorry, Kylie, he's the boss."

“He keeps telling himself that.” I glared over my shoulder at Parker, rubbing down my stallion, then went and sat down next to his saddle. No one spoke as I ate and drank my tea. Leaving my plate half-full and my cup next to me, I leaned down on Parker's saddle to rest for a moment.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ky, wake up.” Parker patted me on the thigh. “Wake up.” He kissed my cheek. “You don’t get up now, you’re in the wagon.”

I grabbed his shirt. “Don’t even think about it.” He laughed then kissed me. “What time is it?”

“You have an hour to get a move on.” Parker sat down beside me. “Here, eat.”

“What happened?”

His smile didn’t light up his face as he spoke. “You ate, then were asleep before I even got a kiss.”

“I’ve never done that before. Usually, I can’t sit still.” I nibbled on a piece of bread.

“You have never been on a ride while expecting a baby. We have to decide something.” He ate some of his breakfast.

“What?”

“Are you going to be able to make it on the rest of the ride?”

A frown crossed my face. “It’s only a week to Memphis.”

“Ky, you slept from the time you got in till this morning.” Parker ate another bite while I sipped on some tea then scooped some of the eggs off his plate. “You are riding behind me. Any sign of you getting sick or tired, you’re in the wagon for the rest of the trip.”

“What about yesterday?”

“It’s been taken care of.” Parker set his jaw, which told me he didn’t want to discuss the matter any more.

When I finished my breakfast, my stallion stood saddled and waiting on me. My body ached as I lifted myself up then made my way down to the shallow creek beside the camp where the water rippled and danced around the moss-covered rocks. Dismounting and removing my guns, I waded into the cool water, allowing it to caress my sore legs before lying down in the middle of it, allowing the pressure to massage my back.

“Well, what have we here?” A man’s voice came from the shadows on the bank. “The boss lady, all alone.”

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be getting the herd ready to move.” Lifting my head slightly out of the water, I turned to face the man with the whip as he slapped it against his leg.

“Reckless of your man to leave you alone, especially since you’re not wearing your guns.” His broken smile and dirty face couldn’t hide his intentions. Carefully rising out of the water, I wrung out my hair but never took my eyes off him. He drew his arm back, the leather whip darted toward me, and a gunshot rang. The man fell to his knees staring at the whip, which formed a bracelet around my wrist, then down at the knife sticking out of his shoulder while blood ran from his chest. “How?” He whispered then fell forward.

“I hate stupid men.” I loosened the whip from my wrist, then led my horse out of the water.

“Ky.” Parker and the rest of the men stood around the body.

“Bury him.” My knife dripped with blood when I pulled it from his body, then wiped it on the dead man’s pants before returning it to its sheath in my boot. Several of the men moved

in and started digging a grave for the man as Parker helped me up on my stallion and I rode away.

Parker kept me close, with Vern mingling with the men; I did take a couple of breaks to relieve myself while Parker stood guard. Our party moved across the landscape as the sun beat down on our heads while I kept a wet bandana wrapped around my neck. It felt good working the herd, even though I wasn't riding as I usually did, but at least I wasn't assigned to watch the rear of the herd.

The camp stared when Vern and I rode in after taking the first watch and Parker, as on the night before, met us and sent me to eat. A plate of beans and biscuits was waiting, but the heat from the day's ride, which was still heavy on my shoulders took away my desire to eat them. Knowing I would get sick if I didn't, I took the spoon and forced myself to eat, but after only a few bites of beans and both the biscuits, I sat my plate down. Leaning against Parker's saddle, I fell asleep.

I woke to a quiet argument, "Parker, she's not eating." Vern's voice sounded worried.

"She is eating. Mike keeps her loaded with biscuits and jerky. Her saddlebag's filled with them. When I checked last night, there was only one biscuit left and half the jerky." Parker patted my hip. "Ky, wake up."

"I am awake. You two arguing woke me again."

"I'm sorry. Here, eat." Parker kissed my cheek. "I love you."

"Do you two ever stop?"

"Good morning, Vern." I picked up the plate and began to eat. The biscuits were still warm, and my tea felt cool going down my throat. With no creek close by, Parker and Vern enjoyed pouring water over me. Once I was thoroughly soaked, we mounted and left for another

day of riding while the sun simmered through the few clouds gathered high above us, slowly moving on their quest over the horizon. Nothing exciting happened, just the repetition of herding the horses forward toward the train in Memphis. The next couple of days repeated themselves with only the landscape changing.

The trip moved faster once we made Memphis, where we loaded the horses onto trains. I insisted on sitting on the steps separating the cars. Parker blamed my sickness on my expecting a baby but I knew different. I smiled at being back on a horse, but dreaded the train ride from Atlanta to Boston. We guided the horses across the land for another four days.

\* \* \* \* \*

I let my mind wonder, thinking of crawling into my extremely large cotton and feather bed, wrapping my nude body in the silk sheets after a long soak in a cool bath. The soft mattress molded itself around my curves until I fell asleep.

“Kylie,” Parker startled me awake. “Move your foot.” He slipped his foot into my stirrup then climbed up behind me. He guided us into camp; Mike scurried around trying to get the food ready for tonight’s meal.

“I was wondering when you’d bring her in.” Mike never looked up from the boiling kettle. “There is a bed in the wagon so she can cool off.”

“Thanks Mike.” Parker helped me down; his hand wrapped around my arm and guided me to the front of the wagon. Inside the wagon, quilts lay across the hard boards, creating a small but cool bed. The wagon stood in a cluster of trees where a cool breeze moved through the wagon. “Get undressed.”

“Parker, I’m fine.”

“That’s why you fell asleep on your horse. Now, get undressed.” My husband climbed into the wagon, carrying a canteen and a rag. “I can’t stay, but you’re staying here for the rest of the day. If you need anything, Mike will get it for you.” He began to wash the wet rag over my face, arms, and chest; the coolness became a welcome friend. “I want you to rest. Keep your guns close, but get some sleep.” He kissed me. “I’ll be back later.” I lay under the cool breeze blowing through the wagon.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mike.”

“Parker, she’s still asleep in the wagon. She must be exhausted.” Mike held up a plate of food for me. “She’ll need a long rest when we get to Atlanta. Why didn’t you make her ride in the train on to Atlanta? She’d have been tired, but not like this.”

“It would’ve been worse for both you and me.” I laughed, taking the plate. “She’d have been sick the whole way, and neither of us would be at peace with her complaining.”

“What?”

“Kylie gets ill every time she rides in a wagon, coach, or train.” Parker laughed, scooping up some juice on his biscuit.

“What are you going to do about the trip to Boston?”

“I don’t know,” taking a bite of the beans.

“Here,” Mike moved to the back of the wagon and lifted a small bottle out of the drawer. “Slip a couple of drops in her tea. She’ll never know and she might sleep most of the way.”

“You keep it for now.” Smiling, I handed Mike my plate then climbed up in the wagon. With a cool wet cloth, I gently rubbed her cheek and waking her from a deep sleep. “Ky, are you awake.”

“Yes.”

“Then why are your eyes still closed?”

“Because I want you to keep doing that.”

I laughed, and pressed my lips to hers. I missed the tender touch. “Get dressed. You need to eat. I have to go take your watch.”

“I can do it.”

“No. You eat and rest.” I kissed her again, then climbed out of the wagon.

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The men sat around talking, laughing, and eating as I climbed out of the wagon. They grew quiet and stared at me when Mike handed me a plate and then took a seat next to my saddle. I wanted the camaraderie of the group, but they had all witnessed the man’s death, so by experience they would not see me as one of them, especially now that Parker pulled me away from the herd. I ate my dinner quietly, hating the loneliness with both the Monroe men taking the first watch. My spoon soon scraped across my empty plate, so leaving the men to themselves, I went to see Mike.

“Can ya help me clean up? Only if ya don’t clean like ya cook.” Mike laughed.

“Funny.” I began to wash the empty plates. “Mike, how come the men are keeping their distance?”

“Kylie, we all saw what happened the other morning, you and that knife of yours. I didn’t see ya move, then Parker killed him.”

“Great.” I took my time on cleaning up, because it kept me busy. After finishing, I took out my journal and began to write. After only a few paragraphs, I put it down, laying my head across my saddle, and fell asleep again.



## Chapter 20

“Wake up, Ky.” Parker patted my leg. “You need to eat. Vern’s taking the herd while you and I go see a man about some horses.”

“Do you think its wise leaving him alone with the other men?”

“Four of the men are fellows we grew up with, and Mike is here. They’ll look out for him.” He took a bite of his biscuit so he wouldn’t have to look me straight in the face.

“What’s the real reason we’re going on ahead, and don’t lie to me?” I let him feed me a piece of his biscuits.

“I want to get you to a doctor and resting.”

“I don’t have a choice in this?”

“Nope.” I growled at him, while he laughed and fed me another piece of biscuit. We finished our breakfast and then went to get ready to leave; Parker saddled the horses as I gathered up the food, tea, clothes and as on every other morning, a fountain of water poured down on me. We mounted, leaving Vern and Mike to bring in the herd.

As the heat of the sun beat down on us, I handed Parker my wet kerchief to wipe his face, but he couldn’t get past the growth. He would be shaving when we got to Atlanta, even if I had to do it myself. He stayed close as we rode through the unfamiliar area, keeping our talk light, if we talked at all. We ate a small lunch under some trees by a small creek. As we went to mount, a dark shadow distracted me.

“Ky, let’s go.” He stood next to my stallion. “Kylie!”

“What?” He didn’t answer but held his hand out for me to step in. “Oh, sorry.” He helped me up, but I kept staring into the sun as it headed toward early afternoon.

“Ky, what are you looking at?” Parker asked.

“I don’t know, probably just a shadow.”

He looked in the same direction, “There’s nothing there. Let’s go.” He turned, leading toward our destination, and moved us on without having time to enjoy the scenery. The sun cooked our bodies as we rode up to a small farm.

An old farmer was pulling weed from his garden, when Parker interrupted him to ask for directions to the Avery plantation. The old man gave us instructions while my body ached for a respite from the saddle.

“Avery?” I thought. “No. Couldn’t be?” We rode for another hour when we came up on a huge mansion; there were slaves throughout the large cotton field. I had never seen so many in one place.

“Ky. Stay close and behind me.” I nodded my agreement, because a man with a rifle, whip, and a double holster secured to his hips greeted us.

“That’s far enough.” The man pulled the rifle in front of his chest. “What do you want?”

I kept Parker between the man and me because of the way he stared at me. Parker’s voice echoed my sentiments. “I’m looking for Mr. Jacob Avery.” I shivered at the name Avery.

“And you are?”

“Parker Monroe, I have some horses coming for Mr. Avery.”

“No. Please no.” I cringed at my thoughts. “There had to be other Avery’s in the south.”

“The horseman from Missouri.” The man looked behind us. “Where are the horses?”

“They’ll be here, tomorrow.” Parker reached back and gripped the reins on my horse to keep me close.

“Come with me.” We followed the man up to the house that reminded me of the Roman buildings I had seen in my schoolbooks. I smiled while Parker stared at the columns that stood the height of the house. “Wait here.”

I drank the last of my warm tea, watching Parker dismount then wet his kerchief down and hand it up to me. The cool cloth felt good on my face but I had to remove my hat to rub it over the top of my head, knowing my face sizzled with as much redness as my hair.

“Ky?”

“I’m fine, just a little hot.” I slipped my hat back on to keep the sun off my face.

Parker wanted to say more but Mr. Avery walked up. “Ah. Mr. Monroe. You’re early; we didn’t expect you until some time next week.”

“We were able to leave earlier than we thought.” Parker shook hands with Mr. Avery. “The horses should be here sometime tomorrow.”

“Oh, my lord.”

“No!” My thoughts screamed at the familiar voice.

“I’d know that red-faced redhead anywhere.” A young man stepped out onto the porch, and I gasped the sight of him.

“Nathanial, what are you talking about?” Mr. Avery turned to look at his son.

“Papa, you remember me telling you of the pretty little girl that shot down every suitor that crossed her threshold.” Nathanial moved up closer to me, like a cat that just caught a rat.

“Yes.” Mr. Avery looked a little aggravated at his son.

“Ask the fellow on the horse here to take his hat off again.” Nathaniel’s smile grew wider, showing all of his teeth as his father looked up at me. I lifted my hat off again, the hair that had fallen out of my braid hung down around my face.

“Oh my. That’s not a young man.” Mr. Avery stared up at me.

“No, she’s not. Mr. Avery, this is my wife, Kylie.” Parker met Nathaniel’s eyes with a look that warned him to stay away.

“No shit,” he exclaimed. “Kylie Bellows married. Oh, hearts will break in Boston.”

“Nathaniel, hold your tongue. There’s a lady present.” His father scolded.

“Shit, she ain’t no lady. I’ve heard her say worse,” he argued.

I shook my head, because he visited my home frequently, “Nate, one more word, and you’ll go back to Boston with a scar larger than the last one I gave you.”

“Ky.” Parker looked at me as I put my hat back on.

“Mr. Monroe, why don’t you and your wife come inside?” Mr. Avery asked.

“No. I need to get Kylie in to see a doctor then to a hotel.” Parker patted my thigh. “I just wanted to let you know that we would have the horses here early.”

I leaned down to grip his shoulder. “Parker.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“She came on the trail with you?” a man asked.

“Yes,” Parker answered softly.

“She seems fine, exhausted and just a little too much sun,” the man continued. “I noticed the scars on her back. Do they give her any trouble? How did she get them?”

“Her father beat her with a riding crop, and she hasn’t said anything about them since they healed.” Parker’s anger still festered just below the surface.

“Oh, this poor child.” The woman sitting next to me wiped my face with a cool cloth.

“How far along is she?” the man asked.

“Just a couple of months.”

“Oh. I can’t wait to tell the other fellows in Boston. The queen is married and going to be a mama,” Nate stated.

“Nathanial Sylvester Avery, you keep your voice down,” the woman scolded.

“Yes, Mama.”

“Ky, how are you feeling?” Parker patted my foot.

“Better, now that Sylvester has to be quiet, since that is an amazing accomplishment for him.” I didn’t open my eyes but I knew Nate had an unhappy scowl.

“Kylie, that’s not a polite thing to say.” Nate squirmed at the door.

“I know, but it’s true.” I smiled because Nate and others fought to court me in Boston. They spent hours at my home under close watch of my family, but I knew I couldn’t care for them more than friends.

“Mrs. Monroe. I’m Doctor Edwards. Have you had any other problems on the trail?”

“No, but I did run out of my tea.” I laughed when Parker rolled his eyes.

“Tea? We have tea,” the woman cried joyfully.

“It’s a bitter tea that helps me keep from getting sick,” I told her.

“I have some,” Parker stated.

“Mr. Monroe, why don’t you and Nathanial go get it and put your horses in the barn, because your wife’s not going to be able to ride any more today.” She turned to me. “I am Virginia Avery. Nathanial’s mother.”

“Hello. Call me Kylie.”

“Kylie, do you need anything?” She wiped my face again.

Parker stopped at the door and smiled. “I need to go to the outhouse.”

“We have a room just down the hall,” Virginia stated.

Parker held his hand out to me as I sat up, wearing only my camisole and pantaloons. Mrs. Avery shoed Nate away as Parker walked me down the hall and into the chamber room. A circular stained glass window looked out over the plantation and shed colored light on the sink, pot, and the large brass tub. I frowned when I looked at myself in the mirror.

“I need a bath.”

“You need to get some rest.”

I placed my hands on Parker’s cheeks, pulling him down into a kiss. “I don’t believe I’ve told you how much I love you lately.”

“No, you haven’t.” We kissed in the privacy of the chamber room.

“I love you,” I whispered before sitting down while Parker stared at himself in the mirror; he needed a bath as much as I did. He walked me back into the room, where I lay back down.

“Kylie, Mama wanted me to tell you she will have a bath drawn up for you,” Nate said peaking in the door.

“Thank her for me because that sounds wonderful.”

“Mr. Monroe, if you’d like to come with me, I can show you where to put the horses.” Nate watched Parker, when he leaned down and kissed me. “They’ll never believe this.”

“Be back in a little while. You get some sleep.” He kissed me, again. “I love you.” Parker followed Nate out to care for the horses and bring in my tea. I lay on the bed as a breeze, blew through from a nearby window, and I closed my eyes enjoying the softness of the bed.

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“He’s not left her side.” The voice of a young woman came from the door.

“He’s handsome,” another said.

“You best remember he’s married and she’s gonna have a baby.”

“But she’s not much older than I am.”

“And she hears everything, you are saying.” I turned and looked at the girls, standing in the doorway. One looked like Nate but with long brown hair, the other just a little older with her blonde hair put up in a loose bun. Pushing the covers off, “Parker, please come help me.”

He offered me his hand, nodding at the girls as we walked past them. “Ladies.”

“Let me eat, then we can go get the horses.” I finished my business and began to wash my hands and face. “I thought she was going to make me a bath.”

“She wanted to but I told her to wait and let you sleep.” Parker had a strange smile on his face.

“What’s that look for?”

“You’re jealous.” He leaned down and kissed me.

“I’m not jealous, just letting them know that you dear, husband, are not available.” I kissed Parker; he allowed my tongue to tease his.

“No. You’re just jealous.” He returned my kiss.

“Ugh.” I stuck my tongue out at him. He laughed as we wrapped ourselves in each other’s embrace while our lips met.

“I need to go get ready.” The girls had gone when we walked back into the room. Parker closed the door behind him. I looked around for my clothes when he tossed me my corset. As I was slipping it on, my husband sauntered over to me.

“Pretty soon, you won’t be able to wear this.” He smiled as he tugged on the ribbon that held it.

“Where are my guns and saddle?”

He pointed to the all my things piled in the corner and leaned against the door waiting on me to finish dressing, “Ky, you’re not going. You passed out yesterday. You can stay here, till I get back with the horses.” He picked up my saddle and headed for the door.

“What are you doing?” I picked up my guns to follow him out.

“Riding your horse and using your saddle.” He waited while I slid my boots on my feet. “Let’s go get you some tea and food.”

The smell of fresh cooked bacon sent me scurrying back to the chamber room, Parker a step behind me, where I emptied what little was in my stomach.

We walked out to find Virginia Avery all smiles. “I remember those days. The smell or thought sent me scurrying. Here is some of your tea.”

“Thank you.” I welcomed the wet liquid on my parched throat.

“You have a good man, not many men would watch over their wives the way he does. You are very lucky.” She leaned against the railing.

“I know, but his catering can be a little annoying.” Parker chuckled a little when my arms wrapped around him.

“Mr. Monroe, don’t believe a word she says. She’s glad you’re there.”

“Parker, please, ma’am.”

“Parker. Now what can I get for you and Mrs. Monroe?”

“Kylie.”

“Kylie, what can you eat?” she asked, reminding me of my mother before eight children.



“Biscuit or toast with butter,” Parker stated.

“You’re a very lucky woman.” Mrs. Avery guided us down the downstairs. “You go out to the porch, and I’ll bring it out to you.” She left us with her skirt billowing behind her as if she were dancing.

I cringed as the sun hit my face, stepping out on the long Roman porch. “Mr. Avery.”

“Mrs. Monroe, how are you feeling this morning?” He must have been up for awhile, because an empty plate sat in front of him and a half drunk cup of coffee. “Mr. Monroe.”

“Mr. Avery,” Parker greeted.

“I’m much better,” I added.

“Mr. Monroe, I gathered some of my men to ride with you and had your horses brought up. We saddled the bay but couldn’t seem to find the other saddle.” Mr. Avery looked down at the saddle in Parker’s hand.

“Ky likes her things close by.” Parker moved to saddle my stallion. He tossed me my chaps before handing me my guns. “Yes.” My excitement made Parker frown. “I’m fine.”

Mr. Avery examined my horse while Parker saddled him. “He’s magnificent.” The stallion stood in a majestic stance while Mr. Avery walked around him, examining every inch of him. “I do hope that all the horses have this quality.”

“If Kylie had anything to do with them, they will be.” Nate came up from the side of the house to join us. “Kylie’s horses are some of the best I’ve ever seen.”

“Really?” Mr. Avery turned to face me. “Is he one of yours?”

I moved up beside him to greet my stallion with a kiss on the nose. “Sadly no. I do plan to make him a part of it soon. Credit for him goes to Parker.”

“I look forward to your delivery, Mr. Monroe. You said that you brought sixteen extra.”

Mr. Avery couldn't contain his excitement.

“Yes sir.” Parker held his hand out to me.

“Are you sure, you're well enough to ride?” Mrs. Avery handed me up a bundle of food.

“Yes, I'm sure.” I smiled at her, while wondering whether I would be a good mother.

“We should be back before sunset,” Parker informed Mr. Avery.

“Kylie, does he dance?” Nate called from his perch on his horse.

Smiling, I spun my stallion before kicking his flanks, causing him to rear and to take multiple steps in different directions to look as if he were dancing. “Kylie! No!” Parker shouted, as we continued our little dance until I patted his neck and he lowered us to the ground in a run.

“Nathaniel, you shouldn't encourage her,” Mr. Avery scolded his son before turning back to Parker. “It seems your wife has as much spirit as her stallion.”

“Yes, she does.” Parker mounted while his horse ran after me. “Ky.”

Pulling up on the reins, I turned to meet the angry face of my husband. “I know. I know. I just wanted to get you alone for a moment.” I could see the men riding with us mounting and about to head our way.

“What then?”

“I've know Nate for several years. He attends the boys' school, next to mine.” I fought not to laugh at Parker's raised eyebrow.

“He was a suitor?”

“No but he wanted to be,” I said, frowning at Parker. “Nate tends to believe and repeat all he hears, especially the stories about me. There were a lot of rumors about me in Boston, but I swear to you, he has never crossed my door in that way.”

“Why should I think otherwise? You forget, I broke you open.” His lips found mine, gently caressing them.

We turned to wait on the approaching riders; Nate’s grin told me what he thought. “It seems you’ve not changed, Nate?”

“You have.” He grinned, suspiciously at me while we moved forward. “I can’t wait to tell Bishop, Spears, and Hayden.”

“What will you tell them?” Parker blocked his view of me.

“Oh.” Nate paused, meeting my husband’s protective gaze. “Well, Kylie has a habit of teasing the fellows up north with her attributes.”

Parker laughed. “Are you saying that my wife uses her womanly charms to taunt the men of Boston to get what she wants?”

“No. No. You misunderstand.” Nate took a breath before he continued. “She taunted us with the amazing horseflesh, but none of us could get a kiss from her. She even blacked a few eyes.”

“That I could see.” Parker kept their conversation light while we rode up to meet the herd. It took us until just after midday to reach them. Parker led Nate around while I strolled up next to Vern.

“Who’s the guy with Parker?”

“Trouble.”

“What kind?” Vern’s smile grew. “What secrets does he hold for our dear Kylie?”

“None, as long as Parker doesn’t believe him.”

“Kylie?” Vern’s concern made me look at him. “What’s got you so worried?”

I fought back the tears but didn’t know why I wanted to cry. Tugging on the reins, my stallion turned and moved us away from the herd. “Stay away, Vern.”

Vern looked behind us. “Parker’s on his way; you’d best pull yourself together.”

Sliding off my stallion, I leaned against a tree with one arm and held my stomach with the other. Of all the times I had thrown up, now that I wanted to, I couldn’t. I leaned my head against my arm, not wanting to see Parker’s face.

“Ky?” His hands slipped around me in their usual way, laying their comforting touch on my stomach.

I intertwined my fingers with his. “I felt ill, but it’s gone now.”

“Come.” He led me back to the others. “Mr. Avery, what do you think of the horses?”

“Nate. Please. I’m impressed.” Nate paused. “Very impressed, and I think we better head back, otherwise my mother’ll have fits.” He looked at me. “Kylie, I was wondering?”

“Wondering what?”

“How much have you told your husband about your life in Boston?” Nate asked.

Parker tightened his grip on my waist. “Nate, are you referring to the time that you, Tucker and Bishop hogtied me in the school barn? What do you think your father would say, if he knew about your escapades in Boston?” Parker stiffened more.

“Kylie, that was a foolish joke. We were so young and stupid.” Nate’s voice filled with his own fears. “We were only fooling around.”

“Call it what you will, but if I ever hear of any reference to anything that went on in Boston, I promise to make you unable to call yourself a man.” Parker released me, taking my hand.

“Kylie, I’m sorry for being a fool. I won’t bring it up again.” Nate nodded at me.

“Let’s get these horses to your father,” Parker said as helped me onto my stallion. I urged my stallion forward, hollering commands at the herd, pushing them into a quicker pace with my husband right behind me.

“She’s still the toughest girl I’ve ever met.” Nate turned toward Vern.

“Believe it or not, she has a soft side,” Vern told him, then followed Parker and me.

The dust from the herd blew all over me causing me to sneeze because of the faster pace. Mr. Avery expected his delivery today, and every time Nate got close, I found an excuse to move to the opposite side of the herd. My stallion and I raced faster than we had from the start of the ride and Parker gave up chasing me after my third trip around the herd.

“Kylie,” Nate called as I rode near him heading into my fourth trip.

“What have you heard from Boston?” I asked.

“Nothing. I’ll be going back early though.”

“Parker and I are heading up there in two days; we’re taking the train from Atlanta.” I looked over at the horses.

“How much does he know about Boston?” Nate asked.

“Not much. He likes to discover my secrets one at a time.” I wiped my face with a wet kerchief. “He does know I have money and a home.”

“But he doesn’t know how much?” Nate laughed. “Does any one know you are coming?”

“Heidi and Andrew, of course; Matty and I sent a telegram to Andre’.”

Nate laughed more. “Then almost everyone will know.” He patted his thigh still laughing. “What did you see in him? You have to tell me how he won you over.”

My mind raced to the reason why I fell in love with Parker. “Honestly, I don’t know, but I saw him the day I arrived home. He literally knocked me off my horse the next day.”

“Kylie fell off a horse?” Nate began to howl.

“She had help.” Parker said as he rode up behind me. “You’re slipping, Ky.”

“I was taking it easy.”

“Doesn’t matter. You know to keep your eyes open.” Parker seemed aggravated.

“Or maybe he’s jealous?” the thought crossed my mind.

“Excuse me, Nate. I’m failing in my work.” I rode off without another word or even a glance at my husband.

“Shit, Ky.” Parker’s voice showed he didn’t want me mad at him.

“Well. I see she still likes being in charge.” I slowed so I could hear what else Nate wanted to say.

“That she does,” Parker stated.

“How did you win her heart? I know, over half the school I go to tried, but only a few even got close.” Nate stared at Parker.

“I was just myself,” Parker answered, then rode up next to me.

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Mr. Avery’s eyes danced with excitement when he examined the horses. After wandering through the herd for several minutes, he and Parker walked into the house to complete the sale. I hoped that Parker listened to what I told him about the horses.

“Mrs. Monroe, I’m not wanting to sound like a mother, but you’ve been on a horse for too long for a woman who is expecting a baby.” Mrs. Avery scowled, but I just smiled and went on with my work of showing Nate some of the best ways to calm many of the horses.

After about an hour, Parker came out smiling. “Kylie. Come on,” he called. I sat under a tree with Mrs. Avery on a bench. “We need to get you to town.” Parker waited for me by my stallion.

“Mrs. Avery, it was nice chatting with you,” I nodded.

“I have enjoyed it.” She walked me up to her husband.

“Parker, I will give you a two hundred, fifty for the black,” Mr. Avery called from the porch.

“I told you Mr. Avery, he’s not for sale.”

“Five hundred.”

Parker shook his head causing his hair to fall slightly in his eyes, then helped me up. He climbed up on his horse, “Mr. Avery, Nathaniel, Mrs. Avery, it’s been a pleasure. Gentlemen, lets head out.” We headed out past the plantation, then rode past three more before Parker brought us to a halt. He paid all the men the money he promised and split what he would have paid the man he killed between them and added a little extra. Once paid the men rode on into Atlanta while Parker, Vern and I stayed with Mike.

Atlanta bustled with life as we made our way into the early evening streets and Parker headed toward the industrial side of the city. “No. I don’t believe I’ll stay in that area.” I popped my reins and headed toward the closet livery.

“What can I do for ya?” The man covered in black soot, sweat, and blood looked up at me.

“How much to put up seven horses and a chuck wagon?”

“This here one of ’em.”

“Yes, why?”

“Because he’ll need a stall and a good rub down and that’ll cost more.” The man circled my stallion examining his hooves, and legs. “He’s a mighty fine animal.”

“I’ll make you a deal. Here’s a hundred for the next three days, pamper him, the bay and the gray and I’ll add another hundred.”

“That’s a lot of money.” The man stared at the wad of bills in my hand.

“Do we have a deal?” I smiled because he wanted the money.

“Yes ‘m.”

“Here you go then. Now can you tell me where there’s a really nice hotel?”

“Thank ya, miss. Just go down till you reach the cross streets then turn right. You can see ’em from there.” The man’s tired smile acknowledged my trust in him.

“What’s your name?”

“They call me, Corny.”

“Corny, nice to meet you. Mike, are you joining us for dinner?”

“No Miss Kylie, I’m staying with the wagon.”

“I’ll send you some food down. Mike, this is Corny. He’ll stay and help you care for the animals, and the deal has been made so there will be no changing it. Another hundred when we get ready to leave.”

“Thank you Miss, I really appreciate it.” Corny’s eyes showed a cheerful smile.

Leaving Corny and Mike to tend to all the horses from the wagon, I led Parker and Vern to a nice hotel and a bath. The people stared at us as we rode down the street. We were dirty,



tired, and they could smell us from across the road. A beautiful banner dangled from a bar over an elegant hotel, with a footman standing in front. I stopped and handed Parker the reins then headed for the door.

“I’m sorry Miss; we don’t serve your kind here,” the footman stated.

“Really.” I walked past him into the lobby and up to the counter.

“Miss,” he continued.

“I need of two rooms for two days, five dinners, and two baths.” Looking at the man behind the counter, I knew from experience that he didn’t believe I could pay. “How much will that be?”

“That would be one hundred dollars up front,” the clerk stated without looking at me.

Pulling out a roll of bills, I laid a one-hundred dollar note on the counter. “And here is another twenty because I want you to deliver two meals, to the livery for Mike and Corny.” The man stared at me, “If you prefer I can give you the same amount in tens, twenties, or even fives, but it’s too cumbersome to carry it in ones.” I paused, noticing my hand; dirt covered it, “I would like one of the baths drawn as soon as possible.”

“Yes, ma’am. Will there be anything else?” The man behind the counter continued to stare for a few moments longer then turned to the footman and nodded. The footman moved out of Parker and Vern’s way as they stood, holding our saddlebags and my saddle.

“Have the other three dinners sent up to my room.” I laid another twenty on the counter.

The man handed me a pen and the register book, after signing I took the keys, motioning for Parker and Vern to follow. A young boy appeared to guide us up a fancy stairwell and down a carpeted hallway on the second floor. The rooms stood next door to each other, and the boy

pointed to a new chamber room across the hall. Parker and I took the first room and we gave Vern the second, then I handed the boy a dollar before he left.

“Parker, are you going to let her spend all your money?” Vern put his arm on Parker’s shoulder.

“That’s her money.” Parker chuckled, then patted Vern’s shoulder. “Go take the horses to the livery, then when you get back the food will hopefully be here.”

“Be back in a little while.” Vern left while we waited on the food.

I began to strip off my guns and pull my clothing out of my saddlebag. Parker stopped my progress when he wrapped his arms around me and began to kiss me. “I’ve missed holding you,” he whispered between kisses but growled because someone knocked on the door. Two men stood in the hall with a large brass tub.

“We’ll have the hot water and your dinner here shortly,” one of the men told us as they left.

Sitting on the bed and pulling my boots off, I had forgotten how bad my feet smelled after a ride, and I made a face when the horrid aroma hit my stomach and sent me scurrying to the chamber room across the hall. While I emptied my stomach contents, Parker took his usual place behind me until the dry heaves ended and we went back to our room to wait on our dinner. I leaned against the headboard with a kerchief over my face and rested while Parker paced around the room.

A heavy hand pounded on our door, startling me, causing me to look for my guns. “Easy, Ky.” Parker laughed and went to the door. Vern stood just outside the door as three men walked down the hall, carrying two buckets each. They poured the water in the tub then promised they

would return with more shortly. One of the men held the door open for two women bringing in trays with our food.

Parker brought me a plate then sat on the bed next to me with Vern sitting in the only chair in the room. We focused on our food, not saying a word to each other until, setting my half-eaten plate on the bed, I leaned my head against Parker's shoulder as he and Vern finished their food and the rest of mine. Vern left to go to his room, only to let the men back in with the hot water; they took our plates as they left.

Parker touched the water in the tub, smiling at the warmth. "It's not big enough for both of us." He held his hand out to me to help me off the bed, leaning down, kissing me gently, then tugged on my shirt before pulling it over my head. I impersonated him, pulling on his shirt to expose his chest before he removed my chaps, pants and gently removed my underclothes, leaving me totally dirty and naked in front of him. He lifted my hand to his lips softly kissing it. "You first."

He took the water pitcher, scooping out a little water to shave as I stepped into the tub. The warm water caressed my exhausted body, revealing my pale skin below all the dust and grime. I rubbed the lye soap across my arms, legs, and chest, leaving my hair for last before lowering my long curls into the water, allowing them to swim in the water any way they wanted.

Parker smiled with his face covered in lather as he scrapped the razor over his cheek. I lay back, watching him, and laughing when he nicked himself. Lifting my hand out to him, he took it and helped me stand. He started to wrap his arms around me, as I stood in front of him, naked with water droplets streaming down my legs.

"You're not putting your dirty body next to me."

"But Ky, I just shaved" he complained.

“Bath first.” Our lips gently embraced, forcing me to fight the warmth and tenderness of the touch. “Bath.” I pulled away from my soon to be lover and sat on the bed to watch him bathe. He frowned, crawling into the tub with every muscle in his legs flexing, inviting me to run my hands across the creases created by the power in each leg. He sat down in the almost-cold water, dunking his head and enjoying the coolness. The rag caressed his upper arm as it flexed sending droplets careening with a melodic melody into the tub, causing the muscles between my thighs to heat.

I licked my lips, wanting to feel Parker’s body close and tight against mine. Trembling, my fingers found their way to my wet folds, bending my knees, touching the moist tongue hidden within. I found the heat growing even from the first touch, causing me to gasp and losing myself in the feeling. I closed my eyes as the tips of my fingers teased the soft flesh, encasing my mind as I tried to remember everything Parker did when he touched me.

I repeated some of the movements, dropping my head back as I felt the sensations increasing. Putting my fingers from my other hand into my mouth, I sucked gently until I heard the water move, making me open my eyes. Parker sat on the end of the bed, water glistening from his body.

“Ky, don’t stop.” He whispered, rubbing his hand up and down his shaft before he picked up my foot and widened the opening. “Go on.” His tongue licked the inside of my foot, then nibbled on my toes, but his eyes never stopped staring at me.

I moved my fingers back and forth over my lower tongue. “Slide your fingers inside,” Parker whispered, watching me hold them at the edge of the opening, then he dropped my foot, scooted closer, and helped me slide farther down into the bed. We welcomed each other’s touch with our lips, inviting more passion. I went to move my hand out of my canal.

“No.” Parker placed his hand over mine, working our fingers, guiding them in and out.

“You are so wet.”

“I want you in me.”

“Not yet. You’re not ready.”

I moaned as Parker slid our fingers even deeper inside of me before moving to tease my breast. Licking my nipple, he pulled it into his mouth then circled his tongue around it.

“Keep your fingers going.” He moved my other leg, forcing me onto my side, while sucking on my nipple and sliding his fingers back inside me.

“I love you.” His thumb rubbed against my clit, causing me to moan.

He quickened the rhythm of his fingers, sliding his free hand up my body and to my mouth. Sucking on his fingers, I moaned, wanting more, as the sensation filled every muscle, tightening, flexing, quaking, and frustrating my desire to feel the muscles from Parker’s body overwhelming my control. His tongue and lips found mine as I screamed into his mouth.

“Don’t move.” He draped my leg over his as he slid deep inside me with his hand, squeezing my breast while holding my hands above my head, he worked his shaft in and out, slowly increasing his pace as the pressure grew. The bars of the brass bed frame felt cold to my fingers as they wrapped tightly around them.

“Don’t scream.” He whispered while I fought against the moans, gasping for air as he held me in place with my body, tightening to his touch. I screamed into the pillow under my head, while Parker moaned and pulsed within me.

He pulled me tight, and then we lay there with him still deep inside me and I whispered softly, “I love you.”

His lips found my shoulder. “I love you, too.”

## Chapter 21

I growled at the sounds of the city, forgetting how much I hated it, jumping up when I heard the train whistle in the distance. Parker just laughed from where he leaned against the windowsill, watching the city below.

“We don’t leave until early in the morning.” He was dressed in the clean clothes we brought. “How can you sleep with all this ruckus?”

“You get used to it. When did you wake?”

“Vern and I have been up since most of the noise started.”

I rolled my eyes, then lay back down. “Where is he?”

“He said to give you his love and will see you when we get back.” Parker looked at me. “I think this is the first time Vern hasn’t slept with another woman since he’s been with Becca. You really made a difference in him.”

“It wasn’t me.” A soft smile crossed my face. “I give the credit to Becca. She wants to be in love, and she wasn’t given a choice of who she could be with.”

Parker moved over to the bed. “Here, eat. I had them make a fresh canteen of tea.”

“How much is left?”

“Quite a lot actually. Your mother sent a large bag full.” He kissed me as I nibbled on a biscuit then pulled away chewing. “What are your plans for today?”

“Don’t have any?”

Parker winked at me. “Good.” The look on his face said he had made plans as he lay across the end of the bed watching me eat. He didn’t say a word but his eyes glistened in the sun as the rays came through the window.

I looked around; noticing most of my things were gone. “Where’s my saddle?”

“I packed it in the wagon with Mike.” I glared at him. “Don’t worry, Vern sat outside the door while I packed them and the money away. I also put some of what you were carrying away.” His face turned scornful. “What were you doing carrying that much money?”

“I always carry that much.” I smiled. “How many bundles did you leave me?”

He continued to frown. “Two.”

“How many did you find?”

“I left what you had in your pocket and right boot. I took what was in the left, your coat, vest, and hat. Your coat and vest are also packed. Oh, and I almost forgot, the eight bundles in your chaps and saddle have been packed as well.” Shaking his head, his anger on the verge of exploding, he ran his hands through his hair and took a deep breathe. “They took the tub, so we have all day for you to lie here and rest.”

I rolled my eyes and set my tea and half my biscuit on the small table next to the bed before crawling across the mattress. “You don’t think that I will lie in this bed and sleep all day.” I held my face just out of reach of his.

“I certainly hoped I could persuade you to stay naked with me in bed all day.”

“Shit.” I grabbed my shirt then darted across the hall as he continued to lie there and watch me. When I came out, he just laughed as I leaned over him. “You didn’t follow me.”

“Were you sick?”

“No.” I wondered how he always knew what was happening with me before I did.

“Then there was no need to follow.” He got a twinkle in his eyes. “Lock the door.” He lifted his hand up to me.

“What do you have in mind?” I locked the door then leaned down to him lightly kissing his lips.

“Take your shirt off.” He sat up and moved to watch me undress.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Do you trust me?” His eyes told me that his mind was racing. “Come around here.” I walked around the bed but could not keep the smile off my face when Parker held up a silk scarf. He drew me in for a kiss, teasing my tongue while his hands reached above my head then lowered the scarf over my eyes. He kissed down my neck on his way to my breast where he squeezed them. He bit my nipple, causing me to do more than moan.

“If you’re going to scream, I’ll have to gag you.” He went back to biting my breast, forcing me to bite my lip to keep silent.

With no urgency, Parker sucked on my nipple, pulling most of it deep into his mouth. I held his shoulders to keep my balance because my body craved more of his touch, shifting my stance and separating my legs to invite him to move forward.

“Not yet,” he whispered. “I’m in no hurry.” He began to circle my breasts slowly, moving all around them, causing my legs to quiver until he stood and left me fighting my desire to lift the scarf enough to see what caused him to rattle the bed. His hand tenderly caressed my cheek, drawing me into a soft kiss before he returned to eat at my chest. He continued until my legs quivered again.

“I like that.” He moved out of my way, guiding me to the edge of the bed. “Crawl to the top of the bed, straddle the pile of pillows and blankets.” I felt the pile then laid on top of them.



“Sit back.” Parker laid his hand on my hip, then I could feel him moving the pillows and blankets around. “Lie back down.” The pile supported my stomach. “Better.”

A gentle caress moved down my arm until he took my hand, lifting it to his lip and placing a very loving kiss on it. He tied another silk ribbon around my wrist then kissed all the way from my wrist to my shoulder, moving along my side where he bit me. I wiggled and squealed, causing him to laugh. Leaning down over me, his lips brushed my cheek.

“Ky, do you trust me?”

“Not if you keep biting me.”

He lifted my head so he could kiss me. “I intend to do more than bite you because we don’t have long before we won’t be able to do anything.” He kissed me again. “Open your mouth.” He filled my mouth with more silk before moving to the other side of the bed and tying my other hand. He kissed up my arm and bit my side as I squealed into the silk.

He moved off the bed and I heard his clothes drop to the floor before he secured the door with the chair before crawling back up behind me. I could feel his shaft pressing against me as he knelt behind me and kissed across my back while forcing my legs farther apart, exposing my opening to him. He bit softly across the flesh between my shoulders and caused me to wiggle when his teeth clamped down on my side again. His hands massaged my arms and breasts, continuing his teasing while his tongue raced all over my back, then suddenly a cool sticky substance dribbled over my flesh. His hands slipped through the sticky substance, moving it over my back and shoulder followed by Parker’s moist tongue and lips.

His finger slid into me, teasing my canal as more of the substance dribbled down my ass. He played in the liquid then began to lick it off my body, sucking, and removing the liquid clear down to my lower lips. I screamed when my body quaked while he ate around my tongue. He

refused to stop until he caused me to scream one more time. A gentle kiss touched my hip as he slipped off the bed.

I heard him washing his hands in the basin, then a cool cloth softly washed the rest of the sticky substance off my body. He climbed up behind me, kissing my sensitive lips one more time while his strong, calloused hands held my hips as he slid deep inside. Parker found a quick rhythm, causing me to moan in time with the pounding of our flesh. I gripped the sheets when he pulsed deep inside until he fell away and lay on the bed beside me.

I waited while he untied one of my hands. I took the gag out of my mouth and lifted the scarf covering my eyes. “Ow.”

“What’s wrong?”

“The silk is tangled in my hair. I could use some help.”

Parker crawled to where he could untie my right hand then helped me move so I could sit between his legs giving him the room to untangle the silk from my hair. Once freed of my restraints, he wrapped me in his loving embrace.

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I sat by the window, watching the street below, while Parker slept after our morning of making love. People were rushing around on the street: a mother dealing with a crying baby made me cringe; a young couple in love strolled by with a scowling woman, whacked the young man with her parasol, each time he tried to hold the girl’s hand.

“No!” I gasped.

“Ky, what is it?” Parker asked from the bed, waiting for me to answer. I continued to stare out the window. “Ky?” I took a deep breath and jumped when Parker placed his hand on my shoulder. He knelt in front of me. “What’s wrong?”

“Asa’s here in Atlanta.”

Parker turned toward the window and scanned the street. “Where?”

“He stood under the canopy, across the street.”

“I don’t see him. Are you sure it was him?” At that moment a man walked out of the store across from the hotel. His height, build and weight resembled Asa’s. “Is that the guy you saw?” I looked out the window and stared. “Are you sure it was Asa?”

“I thought I did. Maybe it was that man.” I wrapped my arms around Parker’s neck.

“Why would Asa be here in Atlanta? He has no reason to be here.” He kissed my forehead. “Come lie down. We have a long trip tomorrow.”

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We spent the rest of the afternoon, comforted by the closeness. We went downstairs to the dining room for an early supper. Parker paid for breakfast and food to take with us on the train. That evening Parker felt I needed my rest, but I couldn’t help tossing and turning, while he pretended to sleep.

He woke me the next morning, after had all our things packed. It didn’t take me long to dress, then we went downstairs and ate a small breakfast before Mike took us to the train station with our horses tied to the wagon. The station bustled with people and supplies heading up north. Parker left Mike and me, to pay for passage for the horses and us.

“Ky, you get the horses and I will get the trunks,” he said, after joining us.

Another man walked up to help him as Mike and I loaded the horses. “Mike, you have to careful going back home. I wish Vern had stayed and you were both going back together.” I smiled as we moved the horses into a stall. “Did you pay Corny his extra hundred?” I asked.

“Yes, Parker instructed me to pay him another fifty as well.” Mike smiled. “He was very grateful.” He wrapped his arm around me. “Kylie. I’ll be alright.” His eyes showed that he wasn’t worried when the latch of the stall clicked shut. He held his arm out for me to take a hold of as we walked out of the car, only to watch Parker instruct the men who were loading our trunk. “You look tired.”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. Partly because this will be the first time I have been on a train with someone else, and I really hate riding on trains.” I frowned, kicking my boot across the ground. “Unfortunately, it’s the fastest way to Boston.”

“Parker told me you get sick. How bad?”

I took a large swig of my tea. “I usually end up sitting on the steps because I can’t keep from getting sick. I’m lucky if the train gets out of the station before I start throwing up.” I nibbled on a biscuit we had packed.

“Ky. Are you ready?” Parker wrapped his arms around me. Mike and I just laughed. “What?”

“All aboard,” the conductor called.

I hugged Mike. “We’ll see you in a few weeks.”

“Parker, take care of her, and you two have fun.” Mike laughed as they shook hands.

“Let’s go.” Parker took my hand. “What was Mike talking about?”

I let him lead me onto the train. “I did tell you, I really hate trains.” I looked around the car at all the passengers beginning to board as he guided me to a seat near the back of the car. I started preparing myself for the long ride by pulling my shirt out of my pants, which I had worn looser than normal.

“You know how sick I was last week on the train?” He nodded. “This’ll be worse.”

Parker laughed, turning to me. “How much worse?”

“I tend to throw up after the train starts moving and don’t stop until I arrive at my destination.” I tried to frown at Parker when he laughed even louder.

“Drink some more tea. Maybe it’ll help.” He kissed my forehead. “Before the train starts, try to relax and lean on me.” I drank a couple more sips then leaned against his arm. I closed my eyes to relax for the ride, glad that on this trip I wouldn’t be alone.

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I woke to Parker shifting his weight and saw an elderly couple sitting in front of us smiling. Parker wrapped his arm over my shoulder, pulling me into a more comfortable position and encouraging me to go back to sleep.

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I moaned from the cramping in my muscles. “Ky?” Parker rubbed his hand up and down my back then helped me sit up. “Drink.” He handed me my tea.

I took a sip. “How long have I been asleep?”

“All day.” He tried to hide his worry with his smile. “We should be stopping soon. You can walk around some.”

“Good.” I rubbed my hand over my stomach, glancing up at my husband.

He looked at me so tenderly. “I undid your pants to make you more comfortable. You rested more.”

“Ladies and gentlemen. We’ll be stopping Knoxville soon. You’ll have one hour to walk around and get something to eat.” The conductor announced.

Covering my mouth, I climbed over Parker and ran out the car door to lean over the side while I threw up. He wrapped his arm around me, holding me until I finished. We remained on

the steps until the train pulled into the station. Parker left me on a bench while he got our things off the train before he escorted me to the outhouse where I relieved myself then waited on him.

We strolled around the station, and ate sandwiches and jerky. Parker filled his canteen with water while I drank my still full canteen of tea.

“Parker, weren’t we supposed to change trains?” I asked.

“We did.” I looked at him a little puzzled. “I only had a small basket and you to carry, but other people helped me.” I yawned, causing him to laugh. “Drink some more tea. It seems to be helping.” He kissed me. “Let’s go get our seats.” Parker wrapped me in his arms and I lost myself to sleep again.

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“Ky, wake up.” Parker whispered as I moaned my complaint. “Ky. Honey. We’re here. We’re in Boston.”

“We’re here?” I sat up, half awake but smiling when I saw the familiar station. “Why did I sleep so much?”

“We’ll figure it out later. Let’s get our things.” I stepped off the train and realized we needed a wagon and I had one at my home on the other side of town.

“Kylie.” I heard a familiar voice. “Kylie.”

I turned to face the man who had raised me. “Andrew.” I wrapped my arms around him. “What are you doing here?”

“Between your telegrams and letters, Matilda figured you would be coming some time this week. I’ve been coming out here every morning.” He hugged me.

“I’m so glad you did.” Hugging him again before I turned to look at Parker as he cleared his throat. “Sorry, Parker. Andrew may I introduce you to my husband Parker Monroe. Parker this is my father, Andrew.”

“Mr. Monroe.” Andrew held his hand out to him.

“Andrew.” Parker clasped his hand. “Ky, our luggage.”

“Parker, you and Andrew get the luggage, and I’ll get the horses.”

“Ky. Be careful.” Parker kissed my forehead.

An anxious feeling came over me as I headed to the car; the horses were skittish but I began to sing to them before guiding them off the train one at a time.

“That’s some incredible horse flesh you have there.” A man observed as he moved out of the shadows.

“Tucker Spears, I should’ve known, you’d be scurrying around in the dark.”

“You’re back early. School doesn’t start for another month.”

“I’m not back for school, and I won’t be coming back.” Tucker had tried to court me several times but I could never trust him. “Excuse me, Tucker. My husband is waiting on me.”

“Husband?” Tucker laughed.

“Yes.” I heard a gun cock. “Ky. Bring the horses.”

“Tucker, this is my husband Parker.” I glanced at Tucker when he turned to face Parker, who still held the gun pointed at him. “Let’s go, Parker. Tucker’s not worth the trouble.”

“Kylie, it’s been interesting to see you again.” Tucker tilted his head toward me.

“Parker, come on.” I walked away from them as Parker lowered his gun, but he didn’t put it away until I had our horses tied to the wagon. Wrapping my arms around Andrew again, I

saw two horses saddled, waiting for us. “Oh. Andrew, I love you.” In the nine years with him, he always let me ride a horse.

“You said you wouldn’t be coming alone.” Andrew smiled. “And I know how you hate carriages.”

“Thanks.” Kissing his cheek before turning to Parker, I said, “I get the chestnut.” I lost all control over my laughing as Parker put his gun up and helped me onto my Chestnut.

Parker looked at the Chestnut, then moved to the Blue Roan. “These are some of yours?”

“Yes.”

“They’re impressive.” Parker smiled when we rode away from the train station, and it felt good to be on a horse again. Sunrise was still a half-hour away when I realized that I was hungry. “Andrew. Will you be all right getting back to the house?”

“Yes, Kylie.” He laughed, shaking his head at me.

“Parker, let’s go.” We urged the horses into a gallop, riding through the streets of Boston. His face showed his amazement of the city where I grew up. I turned toward the street that led up to my house, hoping that my husband wouldn’t feel out of place in my world. By noon, most of my friends would know of Parker’s encounter with Tucker.

Parker stopped moving, shifting in his saddle, staring at the homes surrounding us. “Is your house anywhere near the size of these?” I only smiled at him. “Larger?”

“You’ll find out.” I kept on riding with Parker following me only to lead him around another corner to houses larger than the ones we just passed. He didn’t say anything but continued to look around, when we stopped in front of some cast iron gates, with an intertwined double B. I could barely contain my excitement or enjoyment at watching the sun rising over my home, while Parker stared at the heavy gates towering over us.



“Ky.”

“Just watch.” The sun crept over the horizon behind us, casting our shadows over the grounds of my home. The sunlight glided across finely cut green grass, the tree-lined drive until it reflected off the huge bay window, sending rainbows, dancing in all directions. I still couldn’t help but be amazed at the beauty.

“Ky?” I laughed at Parker staring at the home in front of him with his mouth wide open. “This is your place?”

“Yes. I designed it.” I reached over and kissed him. “You want to see it?”

“Yes.” He kissed me before I climbed down to open the gate. “This is only a piece of who I am when I’m in Boston.” I pushed the gate open while Parker climbed down to join me, leading the horses. Once the gates closed, I led him up the drive, pointing out Andrew’s cottage, guarding the entrance. We tied the horses to the hitching post near the barn then strolled toward the front door.

We stopped at the large cherrywood carved door, with the same double B, that gleamed a deep red in the sun. “I’d carry you across my threshold, but I don’t think I could lift you.”

Parker laughed but let me open the door before picking me up and carrying me across the threshold, not stopping the kiss until my feet touched the floor. “Kylie!” A woman’s voice screamed, interrupting my husband’s romantic jester. “Betsy, she’s here!”

“Heidi.” I left Parker’s arms only to wrap my own around her neck.

“I’m so glad you’re home. I’ve missed you so.” Heidi had tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Parker, this is Heidi, Andrew’s wife and my mother.” I hugged her again. “Heidi this is my husband, Parker.”

“Parker.” Heidi smiled then moved up to hug him. “It’s good to meet the man who has filled my baby with so much happiness.”

“It’s been my greatest pleasure.” Parker hugged her back.

“Have you two eaten anything?” Heidi wiped her tears away.

“No, and I’m starving.” I laughed.

“Betsy will be pleased, because she’s in the kitchen cooking up enough for an army.” Heidi turned to me, hugging me again. “I’m glad you’re here. I best go help, Betsy or she’ll be upset with both of us.” We both laughed because it was nothing for Betsy to threaten to tan our hides, even though she never did.

I took Parker’s hand, guiding him into a small alcove beside the front door. “Come sit.” A mural of a meadow reflected in the mirror behind a small sofa where I seated myself and began to remove my boots and stockings. “Take your boots off. No shoes are allowed to cross my floors.”

“Why?”

“I paid too much money for my home, so to keep it looking new, shoes off.”

He shook his head, smiling as he sat down to remove his boots. I went to the water basin that sat on a small table next to the sofa. “We keep this basin filled with water and the towels are in here.” I opened the door just above the table to a small cabinet and picked up two small towels, throwing one over my shoulder and dipping the other in the basin. After wringing it out, I knelt in front of Parker, washing away the sweaty smell from his feet, then dried them with the towel over my shoulder.

He helped me stand, taking the rag from me and began to wash my feet. “You’re very picky about this place.”

“When you see it, you should understand.” I wrapped my fingers around his outstretched hand after he finished and led him further into my home. “It took me over a year to build it and another to furnish it.” The coolness of the polished stone under my feet felt wonderful, easing the nervous feelings spinning through me as I opened the carved double-doors leading into the parlor. Parker stepped inside the doorway, staring at the sunken sitting area surrounded by a marble walkway that kept the stone hearth from crawling out into the room. A huge bay window with its sitting perch overlooked the whole room and allowing in the sun’s light.

Wrapping my hand around his arm, I led my husband down the hall, opening the doors to the formal dining room with the custom-made cherrywood table and matching china hutch filled with hand-painted rose china trimmed in gold. He pulled me close, embracing me tenderly.

“Ky. This isn’t who you truly are. Why?”

“I was teased about being the poor girl from Missouri, so when opportunities opened up for me to make money, I took it.” I rubbed my hands up and down his upper arms. “I created my life here. It took a lot, but my empire of businesses thrive through the help of very trusted advisors.”

My stomach growled, causing both of us to laugh. “Let’s go get you something to eat.” Parker kept his arm around my back as we walked into the kitchen.

“Miss Kylie!” The large colored woman pulled me away from Parker’s grasp, lifting me into her embrace while dancing with me in her arms. “Our little Kylie is married.” We hugged each other again.

“And hungry.” I added still held with my feet dangling off the ground. “Betsy, this is my husband, Parker.”

“Hello, Mr. Parker.” Betsy said as she lowered me to the floor. He nodded his greeting. “Miss Kylie, there is some bacon and eggs on the terrace. I’ll have you some biscuits there shortly.”

“I can’t wait.” I hugged her one more time before leading my husband out onto the terrace and to my favorite breakfast spot. A small cast iron table sat near the wall that surrounded the raised porch, shadowed by the house and trees that lined the path to the orchard in my back yard. Parker stopped as he stared at the beauty in my world.

“What’s running through your head?” I coaxed him further onto the terrace.

“I was wondering if all your secrets about Boston are this big.” He pulled a chair out, then helped me sit down.

I giggled. “Yes.”

“It’s no wonder all those fellows wanted you.” He filled his plate with eggs.

“Parker Monroe. You mean to tell me that if you’d known about all this, you would have tried to win me even harder.”

He laughed. “I might have left you to Asa.”

I wanted to scream. “You mean you wouldn’t have pursued me?”

“No. I definitely would’ve pursued you.” Parker paused to take a bite of his eggs. “But you’d never have known, whether it was the money or you I was after.” He smiled and took another bite. “So, I am glad I knew nothing of it. That way you know I truly love you.”

I smiled. “Yes, you do, but I have known that for a while.”

“I also know by all this, you truly love me, because you didn’t need my money.” He smiled as he took another bite of food. “Now tell me, how were you planning to get away from Asa, if things hadn’t gone as they did?”

He fed me a bite of his eggs. “I was going to come see you and ask you to come back here with me. No one in my family knows about it.”

“Why?” He scraped more eggs into his plate.

“Excuse me; here are some fresh biscuits for you.” Betsy laid a platter full of biscuits on the table. “Oh, I forgot the butter. Mr. Parker, would you like some preserves?”

“Yes. That’d be nice,” Parker answered. “And some coffee.” Betsy nodded. “Have our trunks arrived?”

“Yes. They’re being unloaded as we speak.” Betsy smiled.

“Which way?”

“Through that gate and around the house, next to the barn.” Betsy pointed at a small gate by the edge of the terrace.

“Be right back.” Parker kissed my forehead then ran out the gate.

“You look happy.” She smiled at me.

“I am.”

“Well, I am going to get the butter, preserves, and Mr. Parker’s coffee.” She kissed my head. “It’s good to have you home.”

I was nibbling on a piece of biscuit when he came back through the gate, smiling, then headed into the kitchen. After finishing off the eggs on my plate, I stole a bite off Parker’s only to hear him, laughing as he came back out, carrying a tray filled with the preserves, butter, and coffee. He sat the tray on a cart and handed me the butter, then picked up his coffee.

“What was that all about?”

“You need your tea. I went to get the bag your mother gave us.” Parker knelt in front of me, brushing a piece of my hair out of my face. “How are you feeling?”

“Still hungry.”

He kissed me. “Then finish eating.” He kissed me again. “I love you, and I’m glad I didn’t know about all this.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face when I heard the sound of two crying women in the kitchen. “Me too. You do know that none of this is really me?”

“Yes, because you fought to stay in the little cabin.” He kissed me this time with his tongue massaging mine.

“I love you, Parker.” I kissed him again, but the taste of his coffee forced me to pull back. “I hate coffee.” It almost made me nauseous; I welcomed the taste of my tea and the comfort it gave me while enjoying our first breakfast together in Boston. After we ate, I lead Parker on a tour of the rest of the house, except for my bedroom. I had asked Heidi to prepare a bath for me and informed her not to make it too hot, which made her very suspicious.

“Kylie, what’s wrong?” Heidi gave me her “I know you’re not telling me something” look.

“Go get Andrew and Betsy, then meet us in the parlor.” I frowned up at Parker as Heidi left, calling for the others. “We have to tell them.”

“I know.” He kissed my forehead then led me up into the bay window where we sat and waited for my family.

We watched them walk in and stand at the steps of the bay window. “Kylie. I want the truth. What are you not telling us, and remember I’ll know if you’re lying.” Heidi stood in front of me with her hands on her hips. Parker stood and took my hand as we stepped in front of my family. I looked at my feet, trying to avoid looking at them.

“Kylie, we’re waiting.”

“I,” stammering to prolong their torture, “I’m expecting a baby.” I finally smiled, staring at them. “You’re going to be grandparents.”

“Ahhhh,” came the simultaneous screams from Heidi and Betsy.

“My baby girl’s having a baby.” Andrew let tears come to his eyes as he wrapped his arms around me, kissing the top of my head.

Betsy grabbed Parker and danced around, holding him tight as she laughed while tears streamed down her cheeks, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his face. Heidi moved me away from Andrew before she kissed my cheek. “I’m so happy for you.”

Andrew wrapped his arms around Parker. “Welcome to the family son.”

“Thank you.” Parker hugged him back.

Heidi moved from me to Parker. “I want to thank you for making my baby so happy.” Heidi hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“She’s made me quite happy as well. Thank you for taking such good care of her.” Parker lifted my hand up to his lips. “If you all will excuse us, Ky is looking tired, and I want her to get some rest before she shows me any more of Boston.” Hugs were exchanged again, then Parker allowed me to lead him up to my bedroom.

I stared at Parker as we stood in front of the carved double-doors, with a large K in the center, leading to my bedroom. A bath waited in the adjoining chamber, and all I had to do was open the doors but for some reason I was nervous.

“What do you think?” I asked, leaning on the doors and looking up at Parker.

“I think Pappa’s house suits you better. You smile more whereas here you’re still hiding the truth.” He pulled me into his arms. “This place is a mask, you wore to be a part of the life you had to live.”

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Ky. Why would I be mad?” He kissed me. “If anything, I’m relieved to know that you and our child would be well provided for if something were to happen to me.”

“Do you trust me?”

“In all things.” He kissed me again.

I pushed the doors to my bedroom open, revealing a huge cherrywood bed taking up most of the far wall. The four-poster bed shimmered deep red with a light blue silk covering, shining from the sun that flowed through the stained glass windows of the two sets of French doors that led out to a balcony. I opened both sets of doors, allowing a cool breeze to blow into the room.

“Parker, shut the doors.” I lifted my shirt over my head, letting it fall to the floor while he stared at me standing in the world I created.

I pulled the ribbon out of my corset, dropping it next to my shirt as Parker watched me. I lifted my camisole over my head, exposing my breasts to him, before removing my pants and pantaloons.

“Honey, are you going to stand there or join me?” I walked into the chamber room.

The custom-made porcelain tub took up most of the room. A chamber pot sat at the end of the tub with a basin and a long counter running along the inside wall. The outside wall had eight-frosted glass windows stacked on top of each other four deep, with only a sheer curtain. I lowered myself into the warm water, closing my eyes as the scent from the lavender petals floating in the water filled my senses.

“You are beautiful.” Parker stood by door without any clothes on. I raised my hand to him; he leaned down and kissed it before joining me. We lay there just holding each other after we had washed the sweat from the train off us.



“You’re getting all wrinkled.” I shivered when he kissed my neck. “Up. You don’t need to be getting chilled.”

“Just a little longer?” I kissed his neck.

“Out.” Parker helped me out of the tub, but stared at me when I handed him a thick silk robe. “You have two robes. May I ask who the second one was for?”

“It was made for you.” I smiled.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” I rolled my eyes at him. “Come with me,” walking back into the bedroom, I went to the second of two more sets of French doors opposite the balcony doors. “I knew that one day I would get married, even though I didn’t want to. So, I had two closets built, and this one is mine.” I opened the doors leading into my closet; a row of colorful dresses lined one wall, with all my pants, shirts, vests and jackets hanging across from them. The wall facing the doors held my dresser with all my boots lined up on top. Closing my doors, I moved to the next set of doors. “These are yours.”

“Mine?” Parker stared at the closet full of clothes. One wall held all the silk suits with linen and cotton work clothes hanging on the opposite wall. An identical dresser to mine filled the far wall with a line of matching boots. “Ky, I don’t need all these clothes.”

“You say that, now.”

“How?”

“You remember the telegram I sent to Boston while you and Grandma chatted behind me?”

“Yes.”

“That telegram was to the owner of one of my shops. His assistant is your size, and if anything doesn’t fit, we can have it altered.” He walked in, inspecting the clothing much of it in silk. I wrapped my arms around his waist while he pulled open several drawers, laughing when he found the largest drawer filled with longhandles. “Are you angry?”

“No, but I still say, I don’t need all these clothes.” He wrapped me in his embrace. “You need to rest.” I wanted to roll my eyes. “Don’t,” he said and before I had the chance to protest then he escorted me to the large bed where our naked bodies sank into the feather mattress.

## Chapter 22

I smiled at Parker as he lay sleeping, moving off the edge of the bed, trying not to disturb him before slipping into my closet. Picking out my favorite pair of black pants, silk shirt with matching pantaloons, camisole, and corset, and dressing quickly, I went to secure my pants but the material refused to budge. I continued to tug and pull, but the fabric still wouldn’t come together. I groaned my disapproval only to hear Parker laughing behind me, which forced me to turn to face him.

“Looks like I’m not the one who needs alterations,” he teased.

“I want my clothes.” The frown on my face made him laugh even more.

“Ky. You’re expecting a baby. You know your clothes will stop fitting all together.” He turned and walked up to the trunks we brought. He pulled out the black pair of pants my mother gave me, returning to help me out of my favorite pants and into the new pair, which we knew would fit. Parker walked into his closet and closed the door as I grabbed some stockings and pair of shiny boots then strolled out onto the balcony while waiting on my husband. He stepped

out to join me, causing me to smile at the tight-fitting black pants, white silk shirt, and black vest.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

“Lunch, then take the horses out to one of my farms. I want to breed them with all the ready mares.” I stared at him. “Do you mind?”

“No. I want to see your horses and see whether there are any I want to join with mine.”

“It’s no wonder we get along so well.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and drew him down into a kiss. We stood there in each other’s embrace, with our lips finding the love that brought us together.

We walked down stairs to the terrace to find a large table loaded with my favorite items: fried chicken, mashed potatoes, biscuits, gravy, and a plate of chicken livers. We sat down with my family and enjoyed the meal, with a pitcher of my tea sitting next to me. Each time I emptied my glass, Parker filled it back up. I frowned when Heidi started telling a few stories of my childhood.

“Are you finished?” Parker asked.

“Yes, since it gets you away from these old gossiping biddies.” I laughed.

“Kylie Ruth, you best be nice or I will bend you over my knee and bust your behind,” Betsy scolded me.

“Betsy, would it do any good if you did?” Parker asked, causing the women to laugh.

“Parker, are you coming?” I stormed away from them.

“That child will never learn.” Betsy laughed.

“Kylie, you be careful,” Heidi called. “Parker, please keep an eye on her. She’s in one of her moods.”

“Tell me about it.” He laughed and put his hat on, following me to the barn after slipping our boots on. We found Chestnut and the Blue Roan waiting next to the barn, with my stallion and Parker’s bay already secured to the saddles.

Andrew smiled, coming out of the barn. “I knew you would want them ready to go.”

“You could always read my mind.”

“Are you going to both farms or just one?” He laughed. “And how mad are you at your mother and Betsy?”

“She called them old gossiping biddies.” Parker joined Andrew’s laughing.

“Not sure. It depends on what he wants to do.” I frowned at both of them.

“Well, I dare say that your husband will be pleased, but I would go to Schmidt’s first, they have more mares coming into season. And as for your mother and Betsy, they are a couple of gossiping biddies.” Andrew winked at me, causing Parker to laugh more as he helped me up on my Chestnut.

“Thanks, Andrew.” I gave him a kiss on his cheek. “Schmidts will give Parker more of a chance to see the city and countryside.”

“Should we expect you for dinner?” Andrew smiled.

“Yes, and I’m sure that Matty will make an appearance shortly.”

“I have no doubt about that,” Andrew added.

We rode north through the streets of Boston leading toward the countryside. I pointed out many areas, including the school. “Kylie. Kylie.” Several of the older girls shouted and ran out to greet me. They were local girls who helped at the school during the summer. “Helen. Mary. Sybil.” I winked at my husband.

“Who is this handsome gentleman?” Mary played with her straight blonde hair while leaning forward, exposing the tops of her breasts to him.

“Girls, this is Parker Monroe, he’s here to look at some of my horses.” I smiled, watching him trying to hide his laughter.

“Well, Parker.” Sybil walked up to him, running her hand along his leg from his knee up to the top of his thigh. “Why would you want to see Kylie’s awful horses, when we would love to show you around Boston?”

Parker cocked his eye at me, waiting on me to say something before he spoke. When I only laughed, he lifted Sybil’s hand off his leg. “Why would I prefer to see her horses? Because I’m married to her, besides I wouldn’t be caught dead with a gaggle of strutting hens.” He turned to me then drew me in for a kiss. “Ky, lets get moving. Ladies.” The girls screamed as we rode off, while they shouted for me to come back and tell them everything.

We continued on our way out of the city, then on out to the farm, until I brought us to a stop on a small hill overlooking the Schmidt farm. Parker climbed down, staring at the horses running in small clusters, spreading over the huge area. He looked at me.

“How much of this is yours?”

I refused to meet his eyes, but I smiled. “I own four out of every five horses. Henry owns the farm and house. He gets fifty-five percent of the profits, I get the rest. When I bought into it, it wasn’t a fourth this size. Fifteen percent of what I get goes back into the place; the rest goes into the bank. All my businesses are basically ran the same way.”

“How do you manage all your businesses?”

“I’m the financial backing. I always get a say and a percentage in how the business is run.” I looked at him. “Are you ready to go see the horses?”

“Yes.” He climbed back up then leaned into kiss me.

I touched his cheek. “I love you.” We kissed again before heading down the hill toward the farm. Several of the workers waved at me, but kept on working.

“My lovely rose, I thought you weren’t coming back until the fall?” a man with a heavy French accent said. I stared at the man with his shirt open and the hair curling on his chest, with a hint of scar crossing over his left breast.

“Hello Antwone.” I laughed when my husband shifted in his saddle.

“The sun in your hair is like a fresh budding rose.” Antwone bowed in front of me.

I giggled, looking at Parker. “Antwone Bibineaux, I’d like to introduce you to my newest partner and my husband, Parker.” I reached out to take Parker’s hand.

Antwone moved in front of him. “I bow to the man who has truly won the heart of our dear rose.”

“Meet us up at the house.” I smiled.

“I will be there shortly.” He bowed out of Parker’s way as we urged our horses forward. We tied the horses to the fence then walked up to the front door of the house.

“Kylie’s here. Kylie’s here.” A little blonde girl ran into the house screaming.

“Is she always like that?” Parker asked as he pulled me into his arms.

“Yes.” I kissed him until we heard the sounds of little girls giggling. We smiled at each other. “Parker, this is Cassandra and Laurie Schmidt.” He released me. “Candy, Laurie this is my husband Parker.”

“Please to meet you.” They said in unison as they curtsied to him.

“Husband? Then it’s my honor to introduce myself. I’m Heinrich Schmidt, Henry, in English.” Henry held his hand out to Parker, who took his hand. “It’s my greatest pleasure to meet the man who tamed this fiery heart.”

“Parker Monroe. It is nice to meet you, Henry.” The two men moved to the horses.

“By the looks of these magnificent horses, I know why Kylie’s back early.” Henry examined my stallion. “Kylie, what do you have in mind?”

“I want at least six mares to take back with us, and I’d like to breed these two with as many mares as possible.” I moved up next to Parker.

“Kylie, you’re not going to make this an easy venture. What are you not telling me?” Henry frowned at me, placing his hand on his hip while pointing index finger of his free hand toward me.

I smiled, walking up to my stallion and kissed his nose. “You only have two weeks before I take them to Carver.” Moving back next to Parker, I slipped my hand into his. “These are from his herd, so he chooses which mares he wants to take back with us.”

“Mr. Monroe, do you know what kind of tiger you’ve taken to your bed?” Henry teased.

“I am beginning to wonder.” Parker squeezed my hand.

“Henry,” called a woman. “Leave Kylie alone. She has always done well by us.” The woman dressed in a pale yellow dress walked up to me. “Kylie.” She held her arms out to me.

I hugged her. “Katie. You’re looking well.”

“Mr. Monroe,” Henry began.

“Parker.”

“Parker, this is my wife Katie.”

“Katie,” Parker nodded.

“Kylie, you looked flushed. Come inside.” Katie wrapped her arm around me.

“I should’ve known Kylie would find herself a horseman,” Henry stated. “Well, while the ladies go inside, let’s you and I go look at some mares.”

“Ky.” I turned to look at Parker, who handed me a canteen of my bitter tea. “Drink it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Go play with the horses.” Parker smiled, then kissed me before following Henry to the barn.

“He’s good for you.” Katie wrapped her arm around me again as we walked into the house. “Better than all those spoiled boys from the school.”

“Yes, he is.” I glanced over my shoulder to see him one more time.

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“Now.” Katie closed us up in the sitting room. “You must tell me everything.”

I sat in my favorite chair as I told Katie everything, from the day I arrived home in Carthage to our arrival back in Boston. I expected her to scold me for giving in to Parker, but she didn’t.

“Katie, do you think me horrible?” I frowned up at her.

“Kylie, the bond that brought the two of you together will keep you together. I don’t know him, but his eyes shine when he looks upon you.” Katie’s eyes grew soft. “You love him, too.”

“I do.” I looked at her. “I never thought I’d ever feel the way I do about anyone.”

“That’s as it should be? I do wonder how many of your suitors he has met.”

“Three, so far.”

“How did he handle it?” Katie giggled.

“Well, he only drew a gun on one of them.” I laughed.



“Does he treat you well?”

“Yes.”

“No. I know he has proven he knows how, but how does he treat you?”

I smiled, thinking of each time Parker tried something new. “Katie, he is kind, gentle, and if it’s something we haven’t done before, he always asks me if I trust him. I have yet to tell him no.”

“So he touches your heart when he touches your body.”

“Yes.” I’d never thought of it that way. “Yes, he does.”

“Then we should celebrate. I’ll plan a big banquet.”

“Katie, you don’t have to do that.” I looked at the door when I heard the front door open.

“Yes, I do,” Katie insisted.

“Yes, you do what my dear?” Henry asked.

“I’m going to give a party in Kylie and Parker’s honor.” Katie’s eyes danced as the preparations, ran through her mind.

“That sounds like a grand idea.” Henry sat on the arm of Katie’s chair.

“No. Henry, Katie that’s not necessary.” I always found it hard to argue with them.

“Maybe not, but Katie and I owe you so much. It’s the least we could do.” Henry went on.

I rolled my eyes then looked at Parker, who was smiling at me. “Thank you, Henry. Ky, did you tell Katie?” I shook my head.

“Tell me what?” Katie stared at me.

Parker’s face lit up with his smile. “Kylie’s expecting a baby?”

“Kylie Ruth Bellows.” Katie shouted, standing to her feet and pointing her angry finger at me. “You should have told me.”

“I hate to cut Kylie’s scolding and this visit short, but she is supposed to have company later and she needs to get some rest before they arrive. So we need to be getting back.” Parker held his hand out to me.

“Parker, thank you for taking care of our Kylie, even though I am very upset with her right now.” Katie hugged me.

“It has been my greatest joy to do so.” He tipped his head at her.

“Oh, before I forget.” I took a piece of paper out of my vest pocket. “I need you to add this to my contract.”

“Kylie, what is it?” Henry asked.

“It’s a list of beneficiaries for my part in the farm, if anything happens to me.” I looked at Parker. “We all know that there are a lot of rumors about the future, but I must make sure that my family is provided for. This letter lays it all out.”

“Ky.” Parker offered me his arm, allowing me to wrap my hand around his tight muscle.

“Kylie, I do believe this young man, truly loves you.” Henry stated.

“Yes, he does.” I smiled.

“Parker, I will see you in a couple of days.” Henry shook Parker’s hand. “Kylie, you ride carefully.”

“Always do,” I answered.

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We took our time riding back to home. “Ky. Your horses are beautiful. I am going to have trouble deciding which ones to take with us.” He began to laugh. “I had a few words with

Antwone and he had a very nice scar to show me and told me about a promise he made you.” Parker started, laughing again because of my horror-stricken face. “I thought he was going to faint dead-away, when I told him and Henry about the baby.”

“Antwone is good man and great with the horses.” I smiled.

“I have met two men with scars, and I have a few of my own. How many of your suitors have scars?” Parker turned in his saddle to look at me as we sat outside the gate.

“Only the ones who went beyond my barriers.” I laughed, staring down the drive.

“Your company’s here.” Parker frowned as we made our way up the drive, holding my arm, when he saw Matty running out to meet us. “Ky. I want you to take it easy. You’re looking tired.”

“Kylie Ruth. You get down here and give me a hug,” Matty demanded in her authoritative voice.

I started to climb down. “Ky.” I rolled my eyes while he climbed down, putting himself between Matty and myself. “Excuse me.” He looked down at her before lifting his arms up to help me down. He kissed me, letting Matty know he had a say in what I do. “I meant what I said.” I kissed him back as he released me.

“Matilda Ann.” We hugged each other, even though it had only been two months since we saw each other last. “Matty, I’d like to introduce you to my husband, Parker.”

“Parker.” Matty responded to his nod.

“Betsy’s preparing supper.” She smiled, wrapping her hands around my arm, guiding me away from Parker. “Kylie, I must complain about you being home all day and not coming to see me. I had to hear it from, of all people, Tucker Spears. He’s so heartbroken to meet your fellow.”

“Ky.”

I glanced back at Parker. “I’m going.”

Matty pulled me closer. “Shall we go hide?”

“We shall,” I whispered, quickening our pace; we scurried upstairs to the study, where I pulled on a secret lever, exposing the entrance to another room filled with pillows and a small table. She sat giggling, excited by the anticipation of all she wanted to know; she reminded me of myself just a few months earlier, before Parker rode into my life. I sat by a small window that overlooked the barn, where he rubbed down our horses.

“Kylie.” Matty refused to keep her voice down. “He’s a little wild.” She moved up beside me, so she could see him. “You’ve changed. Married life seems to agree with you.”

“Parker’s not wild. He has been a gentleman from the start.”

“A gentleman? A gentleman wouldn’t have bed you after only three days.” She frowned at me. I hated that I had told her everything in my letter, which made me wonder whom she had told.

I frowned at her; she had been my friend for a long time, but I didn’t like what she was saying about my husband. “Matty, I wouldn’t trade anything I’ve done over the past three months, except the beating I got from my father.”

“Forgive me, Kylie, but he seems very controlling.” Anger evident in her voice.

“Ky.” I barely heard him calling. “Kylie,” the distance muffled the sound of his voice.

“I need to go.” I said, getting up from the pillows.

“Kylie, he controls every move you make.” Matty grabbed my arm, forcing me to look at her.

“No, Matty, he doesn’t.”

“Kylie.” Parker’s voice got louder.

“Then why are you going to him?” Matty tightened her grip.

“When you get married, I hope you will understand then-” I jerked my arm out of her grasp.

“Kylie Ruth!” Parker shouted. “Damnit, Kylie. Where are you?”

I came out from behind the curtain. “Resting, as you wanted me to do.” He crossed the room, drawing me into a tight embrace, and then kissed me passionately as Matty came out from behind the curtain.

“Oh my!” Matty exclaimed as she watched us kiss.

“Dinner’s ready.” Parker pulled back. “You need to eat.” He wrapped his arm over my shoulder, guiding me to the stairs.

“Parker, is it?” Matty’s face showed her dislike for him. “Do you always tell Kylie what to do or, do you see her as just a slave?”

Parker wrapped his arms around me, holding my arms against my body as I struggle to get at Matty.

“Matilda!” I screamed, struggling against his grip. “How dare you?” My voice echoed through the house. “You have no right, saying that. Parker, let me go.”

“No.” He was trying to hold onto his anger and me.

“Let go of me. I’m going to beat the tar out of her.”

“No. You’re not.”

“Parker.”

“Kylie.” He struggled, pulling me toward our room.

“Matty, get the hell out of my house!” I screamed.

“Matilda Ann, get down here,” Heidi ordered. “I don’t know what you said, but you get yourself home.”

“Parker.” I fought to free myself from his arms.

“Ky. Calm down.” Parker held firm even when I threw my head back. “Ugh.” Parker wrestled me to the floor as I continued to fight. He managed to get me on my back, pinning me to the floor with him on top of me, keeping his weight off my stomach. I raised my arms but he slammed them back to the floor then he hooked his knees over my legs.

“Ky!” Parker shouted with blood dripping from his nose and mouth. “Please.” He breathed deeply. “Heidi is Matty gone?” He wiped his face on my shirt.

“Yes,” she called as she guarded the front door.

“Ky.”

“What?” I glared at him.

“Can I let you up?” He wiped his face again. “Honey.” He whispered while still holding me tight, waiting on me to quit struggling.

“Get off of me.”

“Not until I’m sure you’re not going after her.”

“You’re bleeding.”

“Yes, I know.” He wiped more blood on me. “Now, can I let you up so we can go get cleaned up and you can eat?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m fine.”

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m sorry.” I looked at his blood-covered face as more drops fell on me. “Please, let me up.”

He released my arms before he stood and helped me off the floor. Wrapping his arm around my back, he guided me into our chamber room, where he pumped water into the basin and began to wash his face. He didn't say anything, but his eyes showed his fear while he watched me clean myself up.

Once we finished, Parker took my hand and led me downstairs to the formal dining room. My friends filled seven of the twelve chairs. "Kylie." Several of my friends greeted with warm, friendly smiles on their faces.

"Shit," I whispered. "Hello, everyone." I felt Parker slip his fingers down the waistband of my pants. "I'd like to introduce all of you to my husband, Parker. Parker, these are my closest friends."

"What happened to you?" Wayne looked up at Parker.

"Nothing more than has happened to you in the past." I glanced over my shoulder. Parker's lip was swollen, but his nose looked fine. "Parker, this is Wayne, Jacob, Cammy, Lilly, Johnny, Caleb, and Patricia." Parker just nodded.

"What did Matty say to make you so mad this time?" Wayne, the usual spokesman for the group, asked.

"I give you a week, and you two will be best friends again," Cammy stated.

"Kylie, you're not saying much," Caleb added.

"To be honest, you're all here because of Matty. I spent most of the last three weeks on a train and driving horses from Carthage to Atlanta. We arrived an hour before sunrise." I paused to get a deep breath, feeling the tiredness in my body as Parker's hand slid up my back. "We had a few hours rest today; before we rode out to the Schmidts, then I came home to my best friend, who had the nerve to ask my husband and the father my child, whether he sees me as a slave?"

Parker's hand slid back down into my waistband. "So, if you want to talk, then talk, but don't any of you, think about crossing me right now."

"Ky." Parker wrapped his arms around me. "Sit down and eat. I'll be right back." He kissed my forehead, then helped me to an empty chair. I took a roll, held it in my hand, staring at it, not knowing what to do. I couldn't figure out why I was so mad, tightening my grip around the roll, squeezing it until the bread crumbled in my fingers. I couldn't hold back the tears and threw the roll across the room.

My friends moved around me, calling my name as the tears and sobbing drowned out all their voices. Strong calloused hands touched my face, when I heard the soothing whispers. "Ky. Honey." I opened my eyes to see Parker with tears welling up in his own eyes, and my arms wrapped around him as I cried. Parker picked me up and carried me away from the others and up to our room. He laid me on the bed and comforted me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke to a dark room, wearing all my clothes, with only a small lamp surrounding us in an orange glow. Parker's arm lay across my waist with his hand resting on my belly. My stomach growled, reminding me that I hadn't eaten since dinner, so I quietly crept out the door making my way to the kitchen. I passed Caleb, Jacob and Johnny, sleeping in the study, as my feet touched the soft wood of my staircase.

Standing in the doorway, I stared at my ultimate nightmare, the only room in my house I detested, the kitchen. I lit the lamp sitting on the counter before lighting two more around the room. "Do you need some help?" I turned to see Parker standing where I had been.

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to wake you." I wrapped my arms around him.



“I don’t mind. I do love that you tried.” He put his hand softly under my chin, tilting my head so he could kiss me. “I love you.” We kissed again but were interrupted by my growling stomach. “Let’s get you something to eat.”

Parker filled the kettle with water then put it on the stove, lighting the kindling to heat it. He found a skillet while I sat on a stool, watching him pulling eggs and butter out of the cool closet. He cracked several eggs into a bowl, stirring them into a fluffy mix before he dropped a chunk of butter into the heating skillet. Once the butter melted, he poured in the eggs and, in minutes, he scooped them on a plate and filled a cup with my tea after adding honey and lemon.

“You’ve been hiding a few secrets from me.” I smiled at him, sitting on the stool next me.

“Drink some tea.” Parker handed me the cup. “Mama wanted all of us to be able to cook a little, but I never got past eggs. Vern could cook a whole meal if he had too.” He took the fork and fed me a bite of eggs.

“Knock. Knock,” a girl’s voice whispered from the door.

“Cammy. I didn’t know you were still here.” I chewed on the bite of eggs in my mouth. “Parker, this is Cammy. We shared a room at school after Pearl died.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Cammy,” Parker greeted.

“Kylie, how are you feeling? You really had us scared last night.” Cammy moved into the room.

“I’m hungry and Parker is falling down on his job.”

“Hey.” He picked up the fork and loaded it down with eggs. “You better open wide. Don’t laugh.” He put the pile in my mouth while he laughed and Cammy smiled. He kissed me as I tried to chew.

Cammy started giggling. “You know, Matty’s a pain in the ass.” She let her smile fill her face. “She’s been jealous of you since we were little. She always wanted to be the first to get married.”

“Cam, what did she tell you?” I asked.

“She said you married a poor slaver from Missouri after he raped you and got you pregnant.” Cammy paused. “She also said, he wanted your money and when you told him no, he beat you with a whip that he used on his slaves.

I looked at Parker when he whispered, “You finish eating.”

“Parker?”

“I am fine.” He kissed my cheek.

“Stay, don’t go,” I pleaded.

“Yes. Please don’t go,” Cammy added. “We all saw the fear in your eyes when Kylie yelled at us, but when she broke down, we all knew Matty was lying. No man who beats his wife would have cared so much. You held her and never left her side.” Cammy’s smile reassured Parker. “Those are the actions of a man who truly loves his wife.” She paused and moved closer to us. “Parker, it’s nice to meet you. Truly nice.”

“Thank you, Cammy.” Parker showed his appreciation with his smile.

“Thanks Cam.”

“I am going back to bed. And Kylie, may I have your permission to kick Matty’s ass.” Cammy smiled.

Parker and I just laughed. “You have our permission.” He nodded at her.

“Cam, don’t go. Parker can make some more eggs, because I’m still hungry.” They laughed, and Cammy ended up joining us, talking until the sun came up. We told her everything that had happened since I went home to Missouri. We laughed until our stomachs hurt.

“What’s going on in my kitchen?” Betsy came in while I put a plate in the sink. “Miss Kylie, were you cooking? You know I don’t allow you in here cooking.”

“I wasn’t cooking. Parker was,” I answered. “Let’s go out to the terrace.”

“You best get out of here before I make you clean up this mess,” Betsy scolded me, looking at the plates and dishes in the sink.

“Sorry about the mess, Betsy.” Parker held his hand out to me.

“That’s fine Mr. Parker, just get her out of my kitchen or I’ll end up with food in every nook and cranny.” Betsy pumped water into a pot to heat.

“I’m not that bad,” I complained.

“Out.” She pointed.

“Kylie, you’re not safe in a kitchen and you know it. Now come on.” Cammy tugged on my arm. I stuck out my tongue at Betsy.

She grabbed a wooden spoon and began to chase me out the door. I screamed and darted out into the garden. “Miss Kylie, I’m going to tan your hide when I catch you,” Betsy shouted, chasing after me.

“How often do they do this?” I heard Parker ask Cammy.

“At least once a week,” Cammy answered laughing.

“Does Betsy ever catch her?” Parker asked, sitting on the wall surrounding the terrace, laughing, watching Betsy chase me through the orchard.

“Every once in a while, mostly when Kylie lets her.” Cammy sat in a chair next to the wall. “It’s good to see her so happy.”

“Kylie. Come here,” Parker shouted.

I ran up to him, leaving Betsy struggling to catch up. “What?”

“This.” He put his hands on my cheeks, pulling me into a very tender kiss.

“Ow.” I pulled away when Betsy swatted my behind. “That hurt. You might have hurt the baby.” I pointed at Betsy.

“Miss Kylie, you’ve enough padding back there, it ain’t gonna hurt the baby.” She frowned at me. “I’m going to go cook breakfast.”

“You do that, you old biddie,” I called back at her.

“You keep that up and you’ll scrub the whole house.” Betsy pointed her spoon at me once more.

“You-”

“Ky. Hush.” Parker covered my mouth with his hand. “Betsy, I’ll keep her here.”

“Thank you Mr. Parker.”

We burst out laughing when she walked back into the kitchen. Parker held me while Cammy told stories about life in Boston until the others joined us for a lively morning. Especially, when my friends began to tell stories about me, and Parker told them of me pulling a knife on him the morning we met, which set them to howling.

Betsy carried out a large pieces of ham fried with small pieces of garlic, crushed fried potatoes, biscuits and gravy and a large pile of scrambled eggs. Heidi followed her with pitchers of coffee, tea, and milk. We moved the table that sat in the kitchen out to the terrace, where we

started the day the way we should have ended the previous day. Parker laughed when I filled my plate for the fourth time, and my friends started placing bets on whether I could eat it.

“She may eat it, but the true bet is will it come back to visit her.” I hit him, but he took my hand, kissing it lightly.

When we finished eating, my friends had to get back to their lives. Parker and I walked them out to the coach and horses. “Parker, it’s been a delight meeting you.” Patricia nodded to him.

“Patty, it’s been fun.” Parker said.

“Parker.” Wayne moved up. “I hope to get to know you better.”

“I’d like that.” The men shook hands, then they loaded up and left. We watched them leave before walking back to our room in each other’s arms.

Parker held me close, as we lay naked in the bed, enjoying tender touches to carry each other over in love.

## Chapter 23

We woke just before lunch, which consisted of a ham wrapped in bread, pickles and peas, none of which I was able to keep down. Parker stayed at my side as I sat in the bay window until I felt able to guide him into town, where we stopped at the bank, my lawyer’s office, and my two clothing shops next door to each other. Bernie, who ran the ladies’ shop, danced around measuring and estimating my future sizes while trying to encourage me, with Parker’s help, to let her make me some dresses. I got my revenge on Parker when I took him to see Andre’, the man who made all the clothes in his closet. After dropping matching letters off to each, we went back

home to a meeting with the owners of my other shops. I also wanted to check into assisting at least four more new businesses before I left.

It turned into a very productive week, We visited all the shops giving each a copy of my letter. Henry went with us when we visited the Carver farm and two possible new businesses, one a leather shop and the other a gunsmith. Henry and Parker took over the negotiation because they knew more about guns and leather. We also visited four more prospective businesses. Henry handled most of my contracts.

Katie informed us of the party on the following Saturday. It would start in the morning with a teacakes, finger sandwiches and fresh fruits. Followed by afternoon socializing with a cake. The elaborate meal would consist of clam chowder and roasted lamb and many vegetables, and finishing the evening filled with a dance later that evening. I rolled my eyes when Parker expressed his desire that I wear a dress. So, I would be spending my days with Bernie's, having a dress made over the next week.

I did insist on Parker getting a new suit made because I had agreed to the dress. We also made an agreement that we couldn't see each other's outfits until the night of the party. It did surprise me that he allowed me to go shopping without him, but he did insist that Heidi or Katie go with me.

He had spent his days on the farm with Henry, working with the horses, which I know made him happy. He came in smelling like them as his eyes danced while his smile lit up his face as he spoke of all the work he did. Henry helped him take our horses over to the Carver farm and made plans for Henry and George Carver to come back to Missouri with us to bring more of Parker's stock back. Parker expressed his desire to make a name for himself. They also planned to visit more equine farms around Boston, two days after the party.

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Kylie woke up on Saturday morning before sunrise, throwing up. I had decided to leave her side when she didn't stop.

"Ky. Lie here." I helped me onto the sofa and moved the empty water basin to the table next to her. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She placed a cool rag over her eyes before I kissed her forehead and then ran out the doors shouting.

"Betsy."

"Mr. Parker, what is it?" She came out with a cloth wrapped around her head and wearing a long black robe.

"Kylie's really sick, and I need some help with her." I paced quickly and kept glancing over his shoulder.

"What does she need besides her tea?" Betsy turned to go back to the kitchen.

"Toast or biscuits, something that she can keep down. I need to get back to her." I turned and ran back through the house, only to find her holding her stomach as she tried to throw up nothing.

"Ky." Pulling her into my arms, I held her, moving her back to our bed.

In a few minutes, Heidi and Andrew came rushing into help. "Parker, how bad is she?" Heidi moved up to take the rag from me to wet it down again. "How long has she been sick?"

"She's been like this for about a half hour. It's been almost constant." I lay beside her in my longhandles as my hand gently caressing her cheek, hoping she wouldn't throw up, again.

"Parker. Why don't you slip into some clothes?" Andrew patted my leg, once Kylie settled back down. "Betsy should have some toast and chicken broth for her. I'm going to go

help her.” Andrew left but when I tried to get off the bed to get dressed, she got sick again, but this time I passed out. I dressed quickly then sat on the bed next to her.

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“Ky,” I whispered, taking the rag and washed it gently over her forehead and cheeks, then I began to pace. Betsy brought up the food and tea. I held her and forced her to take small sips of the tea, but she threw it up again.

“Andrew, I think we need a doctor,” I finally whispered. “We also need to tell Katie the party’s off. I don’t want Kylie doing anything today.”

“I’ll get the doctor,” Heidi told them. “Andrew, you go out to the Schmidts, so Katie will have time to tell everyone. Betsy, you stay here and help Parker.” She turned back to me, where Kylie lay in my arms. “Parker, you need to try to get some rest. You’re not going to do Kylie any good if you get ill too.” She leaned over Kylie and gently kissed her cheek. “Get some rest.”

Betsy or I tried to get her to eat, but she vomited it back up. She was too weak to move and finally fell asleep again.

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“Mr. Parker, try to get some sleep. I’m going downstairs to get some breakfast going. I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.” Betsy’s own worry shown on her face.

“Betsy, how long have you worked for Kylie?” I asked not wanting to sleep.

“I’ve known this child from the first time she came to Boston. I worked at the school as a cook. Lord, this child was a handful even then.” Her expression made me smile. “I never saw a child that could create more mischief. Her and Pearl couldn’t stay out of trouble. They were like night and day. Pearl, she was shy, quiet, and very polite but when Miss Kylie came with her big



ideas, Pearl came out of her shyness. I think they found what they needed in each other.” Betsy began to laugh. “That was the first time the kitchen caught fire. Miss Kylie and Pearl got into a huge fight with some girls at least four years older than ’em. They got caught cutting one of the girl’s hair in the middle of the night.”

I fought not to laugh too loud but my body still trembled. “What happened?”

“Miss Pearl was forced to clean the whole school by herself. Now for Miss Kylie, they didn’t trust her. So, it was decided that she’d work with me in the kitchen. I had her washing the tables, dishes, and such. I found out that this little lost girl was scared; she didn’t feel any love except for her friendship with Pearl.” A tear ran down Betsy’s cheek. “That’s when I talked with Heidi about how to help her. While we were trying to figure that out, Miss Kylie, when we wasn’t looking, stuffed a bunch of towels on some cooling embers in the oven. The towels were filled with garlic and onions.”

“That must have smelled horrible?”

“It did, considering that we had just brought in the new onion crop. I smelled something and Miss Kylie was near the door washing a table off. When I opened the oven door, the flames and smoke, not to mention the smell, rushed out, sending me to the floor.” She rubbed her fingertips over her eyebrows. “That child singed my eyebrows off.”

I laughed so hard, the bed shook, “Where was Kylie after that?”

“She was gone. She ran out the door; it was a Friday and she was spending the weekend at Pearl’s.” Tears ran down her cheeks again. “That was the weekend Miss Pearl died. Andrew, Heidi and me went out to pick them up, to bring them back to the school, but they was nowhere to be found. It was well into the evening when they found them. Miss Kylie was plum tuckered out. She carried Miss Pearl over five miles. You know where you turn north after you pass the

school?" I nodded. "It was almost exactly between the turn and the farm, where Miss Pearl fell. Miss Kylie carried her all the way home. Pearl stood a head taller than Kylie and outweighed her by at least ten pounds, but they found them on the hill leading down to the farm." Betsy tears streamed, wetting her cheeks.

"Betsy, are you all right?" I whispered.

"Yes. I went with Andrew and Heidi to fetch Miss Kylie back to school. She didn't know that Miss Pearl died in her arms as she carried her. Miss Kylie's body was bloody and bruised. She had fallen several times; she'd been to the farm hundreds of times. I was there when they took Miss Pearl's body from her. She screamed until she passed out from exhaustion." Betsy wiped a silk kerchief over her cheeks. "It was then that we, Andrew, Heidi, and me decided to help Miss Kylie. She started working with the horses and stopped causing so much trouble at school. She and Miss Cammy became roommates and eventually friends, but it was when she befriended Miss Matty that she started to get into trouble again."

"What are they like when they get along?" I tried not to laugh.

"Miss Kylie would've clobbered Miss Matty, but Miss Kylie would have ended up bleeding from somewhere." Betsy laughed. "It's a good thing you kept her from fighting because she taught Matty how to fight. I believe they were molded from the same block of clay, with Miss Kylie getting just a little more."

"Why are they so close?" I couldn't help but stare at the woman who had spent so much time with my beloved wife.

"They were both sent here away from their families, so they bonded until Matty's folks moved here. Matty's folks looked down on Miss Kylie. That's when she started building this place. She was tired of people not accepting her and somehow her businesses grew. She broke

almost one hundred horses each month while keeping her grades up at school. She got to the point she collapsed. It took her a week to get back on her feet and she went right back to working just as hard.” We both laughed. “She’s finally happy. You made her happy. Now try to get some sleep.”

“Betsy, thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being there for her.” I kissed Kylie’s head then rested my cheek on her curls.

“Thank you, for making her so happy.” Betsy smiled and went to start breakfast.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ky, eat.” Parker held a small piece of biscuit to my lips but I pushed it away. My body hurt and I didn’t want to throw up any more.

“Kylie please. Doctor Pritchard will be here soon.” Heidi had come back after the doctor’s son went to find him. “Just take a small bite.”

I took a small bite and a sip of tea, which felt good, so I decided to try several more bites and drank some tea, lying back and trying to rest but after several minutes, it all came back up. I cried from the pain in my stomach as I lay in Parker’s arms once the dry heaves stopped. He wiped his hand through my hair. “Ky. I wish I knew what to do.” I finally cried myself to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Parker, has she eaten anything?” Tears came to Heidi’s eyes when he shook his head; she stepped out onto the balcony but returned quickly. “Andrew is coming down the drive with Dr. Pritchard.” She left to meet with him.

“Katie has gone to so much trouble putting this party together.” I snuggled more into Parker’s arms. “If anything I could rest during the day and not dance at the party.”

“Ky, you’re not going to the party. Katie will have to reschedule because you have to dance at least one dance.” Parker’s voice softened as his hand stroked my cheek.

“Why once?” I looked up at him.

“The one that Katie has planned to start the night.” Parker kissed my hair.

“What do you know?” I tried to sit up but he tightened his grip.

“Katie asked me, whether I could dance. She was glad to hear that I could, and since the party is in our honor, she wants us to start the dance, just you and me.”

“Parker, Kylie,” Heidi called from the doorway.

“Come in, Heidi,” he answered.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, moving up next to the bed.

“As long as I don’t move, I don’t get sick.” I turned a little to face her.

“Dr. Pritchard will be here in a minute.” Heidi showed her own worry.

“Ky, can you shift so I can get up?” Parker helped me sit up a little before he could get out from behind me; I grabbed the bowl and began to dry heave again. He pulled me into his embrace as I began to cry again.

“Has she been like this long?” Dr. Pritchard asked as he moved into the room.

“About four hours now,” Parker replied.

“Does she get sick every morning?” Dr. Pritchard continued talking with Parker, ignoring me.

“No. She hasn’t ever been this sick. When she does get sick, it’s late in the evening every few days and then it’s maybe just once.” Parker rubbed his hand over my hair.

“How does she keep from getting sick?” the questions continued.

I didn't even try to answer because they didn't need me too. Parker held me tight. “She has a tea that helps but it's not working this morning.”

“Has she been able to keep anything down?”

“No.”

“Parker.” I rolled to the edge of the bed, only to experience more dry heaves, while Parker held me as Heidi gently washed my face.

“Dr. Pritchard, is there anything we can do?” Heidi fought back her tears again.

“When was the last time she tried her tea or to eat?”

“Over an hour ago.” Parker kissed my forehead.

“Try her tea and see whether she can eat.” Dr. Pritchard sat his bag on the end of the bed.

“If anything, it may keep her from losing the baby.”

“What?” Parker shouted.

“The pain she is suffering may cause her to lose the baby. She maybe doing it anyway.”

Dr. Pritchard's voice held no compassion.

“Parker.” I cried.

“Shh. Ky.” He leaned over me so I couldn't see anyone but him. “Shh.” He kissed me then turned to the others.

“Heidi, please go get her a fresh biscuit,” Parker said.

“I do need to examine Kylie to be sure.” Dr. Pritchard's eyes were as cold as they had been for all the years he had been my doctor.

“Ky. I’ll be right back. Andrew, please sit with her.” Parker kissed my forehead. He moved to stand in front of Dr. Pritchard. “Doc, I’m Parker Monroe, Kylie’s husband, and I want to see you out in the hall.”

I watched them leave as Andrew took the seat beside me. The door opened, and Heidi carried in a tray with fresh biscuits and tea.

“Well, Kylie do you think you can sit up?” Heidi sat the tray on the table near the sofa, while Andrew helped me sit up.

“I hope so.” I tried to smile.

“Here’s a biscuit and some tea.” I stared at it before taking a small bite, allowing the butter to saturate my tongue before taking a sip of my tea. It tasted good, so I ate some more.

“Parker’s not very happy with Dr. Pritchard.” Heidi smiled.

“You should’ve seen him when Dr. Reynolds first examined me,” I said with my mouth full. “He thought I might be expecting a baby, but he didn’t want to say anything, until he was sure. I had to make Parker to leave the room.” I smiled, taking a sip of my tea. It felt good to talk and not be ignored or feel like getting sick. I started laughing. “Parker pulled his gun on Dr. Reynolds.” Heidi and Andrew began to laugh, but we all stopped when the door opened with Parker and Dr. Pritchard. Neither of them looked happy.

“Well, you’re smiling.” Parker took the seat Andrew had vacated then leaned down and kissed me. “I promise to behave, but he does need to examine you.” He kissed me again.

“Andrew, please go let Katie know that Kylie’s not leaving this bed.”

“Tell her to send some food,” I added.

“You have to keep this down before you get anything else.” Parker laughed.

Heidi escorted Andrew out as Parker helped me off the bed to get undressed. He lowered me down to the bed, then stood by the chamber room door with his hand behind his back while Dr. Pritchard took a position in front of me. Dr. Pritchard listened to my stomach before he gently mashed on it, then began the dreadful part. He put two fingers into me then began to mash on my lower belly. After a few moments, he went back to feeling my belly.

“You can get dressed. I want you to try to eat a little at a time, and I do agree with your husband. You need to stay in bed for the next couple of days.” Dr. Pritchard walked into the chamber room; we could hear him washing his hands. He came back out but didn’t say anything about the baby. He watched Parker tilt his head toward the door.

“I’ll be right back,” Parker said as he covered me up. “Eat.” I laughed then took a bite of my biscuit. The men walked out as they had done previously, leaving me by myself, sitting on the bed, finally able to hold something down longer than a few minutes. The door opened sooner than it had earlier. Parker’s smile lit up his face with each step he took toward me, watching as I took another bite of my biscuit. He kissed me, chewing when he pulled away.

“What was that for?”

“Because he said that you and the baby are fine.”

“Then what is wrong?”

“He thinks your stomach may be irritated.” Parker kissed me again. “I love you. I just have to ask you one thing.”

“What?”

“Will you please stop scaring the shit out of me?” We laughed with him holding the biscuit up to me to take a bite. “You seem to be keeping this down.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Say what?”

“Don’t say what you just said.”

“What? About you keep-” I put my hand to his lips.

“Yes. That. You don’t say the obvious if you don’t want it to come back.” I took another bite of the biscuit then laid it on the table next to the bed and took a couple of sips of tea. “Come back to bed.” Parker smiled then climbed up next to me and pulled me into his embrace.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Parker. Someone’s at the door.”

“I heard,” he moaned, climbing off the bed, leaving me to curl up under the silk covers and wrapping my arms around one of the extra pillows on the bed. Parker kept his voice low as he spoke to someone.

“Stay there.” He came softly back to me, stroking my hair. “Ky, do you feel like a little company.”

“That’d be nice,” I whispered into the covers.

He laughed then returned to the door. “Let them come, but she’s still asleep. Wake us in a couple of hours.” He closed and locked the door before returning and crawling on the bed behind me. He laid his hand on my hip with his legs tucked securely next to mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

I climbed out of the bed to relieve myself, and then found Parker getting dressed. He picked out a light blue vest with pale brown pants and silky white shirt that he had thrown onto the bed. I stood by the door, watching him and enjoying his muscles flexing as he pulled his pants over his tight ass. He smiled then walked up to me, putting his shirt on.



“How do you feel?”

“I feel fine, but you look tired.” I helped him button his shirt.

“I’m fine, and we need to get you dressed.” I moved into my closet, shuffling through my drawer of clean underclothes while Parker picked out my other clothes. I laughed that he picked out almost identical clothes for me to wear.

“What?” he asked. “Andre’ said that it was proper for a wife to compliment her husband’s clothing.”

“So you picked a vest that matches your shirt and a shirt that matches your vest but...” I still laughed.

“But you don’t have any pants that match and fit.” He wrapped his arms around me. “I love you.” He knelt down in front of me, lowering my pantaloons. “I love you, too.” He kissed my stomach gently before pulling my camisole off and throwing it in a basket in the back of my closet. He picked up my clean silk underclothes and helped me into them. “This corset is too tight on you stomach.”

“Wait, what are you doing with your knife?”

He clipped the ribbon at my waist, unlacing several layers, then tied it, leaving my breast secured in place. After he inspected his work, a smile crossed his face.

“Well, I know how to fix the others.”

When I finished dressing, I took Parker’s arm, letting him lead me downstairs while he carried our boots. We proceeded to the terrace where my friends and business owners greeted us.

“Kylie.” Katie came over to me. “When will you get rid of that silly rule of no shoes in the house?” She had moved the party to my home.

I looked up at her after pulling my boots on. “When someone pays me double the price that I paid for it.”

She frowned at me. “Kylie, will you ever change?”

“I hope not,” Parker answered.

They placed a chair and footstool on the terrace for me to sit in while everyone, including Parker, fussed over me. I felt like a complete burden, but Parker made it worse when he called me a queen. Dr. Pritchard attended the party and insisted I rest for at least two hours during the heat of the day. Parker didn’t complain because he got to be alone with me.

Around four in the afternoon, he kissed me and left, when all the women went to dress for the evening. I lay on my bed, hoping to get out of wearing my new dress, but Katie, Heidi and Parker, all had plans of their own for me and they all knew each other’s plan.

Katie laid out my dress of dark blue that looked almost black as it lay on the bed. Heidi took out the matching undergarments insisting that I change into them.

“Kylie, will you hurry?” Heidi stood just outside the chamber room door.

“I’m coming.”

“I told you to get out of those pants.” Heidi put her hands on her hips. “And Parker told me about the boots at your birthday party. No boots. You have very pretty shoes that go with this dress. Now hurry up.” I frowned, pulling my underclothes off and watching Katie take my knife, and cut the lower ribbon of the matching corset. Parker must have also told them how he made the other corset fit.

“Here, Kylie.” Heidi helped me wrap the corset around my body, then tie it. Both the women lifted the new silk dress for me to slip it over my head. They took turns fastening the

buttons. Bernie had made the dress to hide my growing belly, but I frowned, looking into the full-length mirror.

“Stop that,” Heidi complained.

“Come here and sit down,” Katie ordered. They began to brush and pull my hair up, weaving small white flowers in the curls. I sat watching them when someone knocked on the door. Katie went to the door, whispering so I couldn’t hear, making me want to hide until another knock sounded on the door.

Heidi went to the door this time and she came back with a small package, handing it to me. “Who’s it from?” I asked.

“Who do you think?” She smiled.

I smiled and slowly opened it, revealing a small cameo surrounded by a deep blue sapphire embedded in a silver pin. Heidi picked it up then pinned it to the neck of my lace collar. I reached into a drawer, pulling out a small box.

“Heidi, can you give this to Parker?”

“I am surprised by the both of you,” Heidi stated.

“Why?” I smiled.

“I’ve been married for many years and I’ve yet to buy my husband a gift except for holidays and his birthday.” Heidi stated.

“Heidi, they are still in the early stages.” Katie giggled. “It’ll change.”

“I hope not.” I stared at them, causing us all to laugh.

“Well, I will be right back,” Heidi told us. I sat on the bed for a few moments, waiting for Parker to come, but Heidi returned. “Everyone is ready and Parker is waiting at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Well, how do I look?” I asked them, spinning and making the skirt to billow.

“Beautiful,” they both answered.

“Well, let’s go to a party.” We walked out of my room and then toward the stairs, when I hesitated not knowing why. “Go on.” I nudged the women forward, while trembling against my doorframe. I could break a horse and think nothing of it, but my heart raced and it was keeping me from seeing my husband. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I walked to the top of the stairs, holding to the rails, and my legs trembled as I stepped down toward Parker, who stood facing the door.

Andrew nudged him, pointing up to me. I watched him turn; he wore a coat made of the same dark blue as my dress. It had silver threads all the way down to the coat tails by his knees. His vest matched the coat completely and glistened with the silver buttons. A small silver chain, attached to the watch I gave him, hung across the front of his vest. He wore a silk white shirt with a cravat at the neck. The dark blue pants hid nothing of his manly physique, while the knee high, polished boots glistened in the light coming from the windows.

I continued my progress down the stairs, watching Parker’s face light up. His eyes twinkled as he stared at me while others whispered around us. My loving husband offered me his hand, and I lightly placed mine in his.

“You’re beautiful.” He leaned in and kissed me.

“I must tell Andre´ he outdid himself.” I kissed Parker, allowing his tongue to tease my lips.

“Hey, you two. We’re waiting to start the dance.” Katie complained, but Parker kissed me again and then turned, offering me his arm as we followed Katie to the terrace. “Ladies and gentlemen.” She waited for everyone to be quiet. “As all of you have heard, our little Kylie has

snuck off and got married.” The crowd applauded, causing me to roll my eyes while Parker kissed my forehead and laughed. “For those of you who haven’t had a chance to meet him, this is Parker Monroe, the man who won the heart of our Kylie. I’ve thrown this party to celebrate, so Parker, if you will, lead Kylie out to the dance floor.”

Parker held his hand out to me, leading me onto the dance floor. He held me tight when the music began to play, pulling me close and leading me around the dance floor. We gently spun, causing the hem of my skirt to flare. Smiling, Parker drew me into a tighter embrace, kissing me as the music ended.

“Everyone enjoy tonight’s festivities.” Katie’s voice held her excitement. As at all parties, many of the women clustered together talking about their husbands and forcing me to join them, because my chair sat next to theirs. Parker stayed close but avoided the women, several of whom asked him to dance, but he politely refused.

A cluster of men and soldiers stood near enough for me to over hear them discussing politics and the possibility of war, my most hated topic. Parker only spoke of it on rare occasions. Frowning, I left the security of my chair looking for a better topic. I found Parker and Henry in another cluster, enjoying themselves talking about horses. He reached his hand out to me, waiting on me to take it, then wrapped his arm around me, embracing me tenderly.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“No.” I glanced up to him when he chuckled. “This is one of her best parties; everyone seems to be enjoying themselves. How about you?”

“I am.” He leaned to whisper, “As long as I’m not near the crones.” I laughed, encouraging him to lead me to dance floor again. He spent the next couple of hours weaving in and out of the masses of bodies dancing, and he allowed me to dance with Andrew and Henry

while Katie and Heidi ran off all the other offers. Parker and I danced our last dance, then he thanked everyone for coming, but he felt I needed to lie down, and we left the party.

Parker complained about the buttons on my dress in the quietness in the room, and I complained about his not letting me take my shoes off before coming back into my house. He peeled off the layers of the dress, and I sighed with each.

“I like pants better.” He stated when he got to my pantaloons and camisole, tracing the edge of the dark blue silk that ran over my breasts. “These are beautiful.”

“You could do more.”

“Ky.” He backed away. “You were sick earlier and you’ve been on your feet. You are going to bed and that’s it.” We climbed into bed and held each other listening to the music drift through the open balcony doors.

## Chapter 24

I woke to an empty bed. Parker left early to meet with Henry and Carver and arrange for them to go with us back to Missouri and then return to Boston with some of Parker’s stock. Ignoring the complaints of Heidi and Betsy, Andrew and I spent my last week in Boston finalizing my partnership in six new businesses. I also found time to visit Cammy and Bernie, who had made more clothes for me wear, with plans on sending me more each month. On one of my outings, I rode out to visit the Schmidt farm.

“Kylie, you’re supposed to be resting!” Parker shouted while we stood inside an empty stall.

“I’ve been resting and needed to get out of the house.” I matched his tone.

“You need to go back home and rest. You know how hard the train ride will be, and I don’t want you worn out before we leave.” Parker paced, running his hand through his hair.

“I’m fine. I haven’t been sick since Saturday. I plan to visit my friends before I leave, whether you like it or not.” I stormed out of the stall and headed to the house to see Katie.

“Son.” Henry walked up behind Parker, placing his hand on his shoulder. “You know that she’s been doing what she wants for a long time.” Parker just nodded and returned to help Henry in the barn.

I joined Katie in her kitchen. “Kylie, what are you doing here?”

“I came to see you before we leave.” I smiled but she saw my unhappiness.

“What is wrong?” Her smile matched mine as she placed a piece of chocolate pie in front of me while we sat at the table in the kitchen. I stared at the pie and began to cry. “You and Parker had a fight.”

“Yes. He’s being overly protective of me, not wanting me to go out or do anything.” I played in the meringue with my fork.

“That’s not all of what’s bothering you.” Katie placed her hand over mine. “What is it?”

“Parker hasn’t touched me since before the party.” My crying turned to sobs.

“Kylie.” Katie moved and wrapped me in her arms. “Shh. Parker loves you; I’ve seen it. He told Henry, how worried he is about you.”

“He talked with Henry?” I took a deep breath, trying to get control of my crying so I could see her face.

“Yes. Henry told him how lonely you used to get and how he has made you lose the lost little girl look.” She hugged me then the door burst open with Parker racing toward me.

“Ky.” He knelt in front of me and wrapped me in his arms. “Shh.” He held me as I continued to cry.

“How did he know?” Katie turned to Henry.

“I don’t know. We were shoeing one of the mares when he looked up, whispered her name then ran to the house.” Henry cut himself a piece a pie. “He loves her.”

“Ky. Shh.” Parker kissed my forehead. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” I finally whispered. “You smell.”

Parker laughed, then tilted my head so he could kiss me. “I love you.” He reached over and cut a piece of the pie, sitting in front of me. “Here eat or I’ll feed it to you another way.” I opened my mouth, trying not to laugh while he fed it to me before kissing me.

“What is it with you, taking my food while I am trying to eat?” I stared at him chewing on the pie he fed me.

“Eat it, stay a little while and visit, but I want you back home in a couple of hours.” He ate another bite of my pie then left me sitting, eating the rest of my pie.

“I told you he loves you.” Katie smiled and returned to her seat. I stayed and joined them for lunch, after which Parker insisted that I go home and rest, alone. I never heard Parker come in, which was becoming a nightly event.

He’d clean himself up, then curl up next to me, pretending to be asleep when I would caress his penis, but I didn’t want to fight, so he got away with it. Occasionally, Parker’s hand would brush over the curls at the apex of my thighs, but he with no more than a gentle touch, increasing my desire to make love to my husband, but he never responded.

The night before our departure, I decided to pursue my desires by any means to get him to accept my invitation. Betsy would cook a huge steak on the outside stove with onions, butter,



and seasonings served it with baked potatoes, green beans and a brandy for Parker. We would finish up with a slice of chocolate cake covered in chocolate icing.

When he arrived home that evening, I led him out to a table lit with candles on the back terrace. He smiled while cocking his eyebrow at me, revealing his mistrust of me. I responded only by wrapping my arms around his neck, drawing him down into a kiss where he allowed my tongue to explore his mouth. I kept my hands secure behind his head, but enjoyed his hands as they moved down to grip my hips.

He pulled back from the kiss. “What are you up to?” he said, then he kissed me more deeply than I had him. He offered me his arm, escorting me to the table as Betsy brought out all his favorite foods. “I hoped Betsy cooked this.” He smiled, teasing me.

“Why?”

“Because, I don’t want my baby to starve,” he laughed when I pouted at him. We enjoyed our conversation on expanding herds. “Henry and Jacob will meet us at the train station, along with Antwone and several of the other men.” He fed me, bites of chocolate cake until the richness nearly made me sick.

I escorted Parker up to a waiting bath where I lay against his chest and he allowed me to caress his chest and body with a lot of my attention on his shaft. He didn’t stop me, when my tongue and lips wrapped around it, relishing the feeling. Before I finished he pushed me out of the tub, watching me dry off when he took my towel as he stared at my body.

“What are you looking at?”

“You,” he spoke so softly, looking at me with loving eyes. “You’re showing. I have been so preoccupied I didn’t notice.”

“I don’t see anything but me getting fat.”

“Ky.” My husband moved us in front of the standing mirror, turning me sideways to expose my body. “See.” He rubbed his hand down my belly. “Do you know how beautiful you are?” I took his hand, leading him into the bedroom, where a gentle breeze blew through the French doors. I wanted his mind off my growing stomach and on pleasing me.

He lifted me up, then gently laid me on the bed as he knelt between my thighs, caressing my clitoris with his tongue. He gently teased me until my body began to quake, making me crave him deep inside me. He pulled back and entered me slowly and cautiously, filling my canal. He didn't like my position, so he held my legs apart, pushing himself faster and deeper. I screamed when he found the end of my canal. The horror that crossed his face forced him to pull away, leaving me crying on the bed. The pump in the chamber room squeaked as he pumped water into the basin then he came back to clean me up.

He dressed in clean longhandles then helped me into my silk underclothes. I stood by the balcony door, knowing he wouldn't touch me again until the baby was born. His arms wrapped around me with his hands, resting on our baby. He didn't say anything but held me while I cried.

## Chapter 25

I couldn't believe that my trip to Boston was already over and I pouted and moped around not wanting to leave my home and go back to Missouri. Parker had our luggage loaded on the train while I sat with Heidi, Betsy, and Katie. All of them were crying and begging us not to leave because we didn't know when I'd be allowed to come back.

“Kylie, you need to drink more of your tea.” Heidi sat with her arm around my shoulder. “Parker is worried and wants more tea down you before you leave.”

“If I drink any more, I’ll have to go pee every few minutes, which is what I need to be doing right now.” I frowned, then stood up and made my way to the outhouse on the far side of the train track. While I sat there, I heard the conductor shout, “All aboard.”

“Hold the train.” I heard Katie and the others, trying to keep it from leaving me.

“Kylie, are you about done in there?” Heidi stood outside the door.

I opened the door, leaving my shirt hanging loose, then ran toward the train, and with quick hugs to all my family, Parker and I boarded the train. We sat across from Henry and Jacob, watching the sad faces as the train pulled out of the station. I leaned against my husband crying.

“Ky. Shh. Try to sleep.” Parker rubbed his hand over my arm, coaxing me down into his lap. “Shh.”

“Is she going to be all right?” Henry asked.

“If I can get her to go to sleep.” Parker continued his comforting gesture as I sniffled. Deep down, I wanted to jump from the train and run into the arms of my mother and father.

“Ky. Please. We’ll come back and see them. I promise.” Parker’s voice cracked with his own sadness. As the train moved at full steam, drowsiness pulled me into a deep sleep before I threw up.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Will she sleep all the way?” Henry asked.

“I hope so. Her tea has laudanum in it and it helps her travel. I don’t want her hurting herself or the baby.” I gently touched Kylie’s cheek. I had managed to keep her asleep for most of the train rides but let her walk around and go to the restroom when we stopped for a while. The laudanum had been working so each time I fill up her canteen, I put a few drops in.

“Where are we?” She asked, trying to sit up.

“We’re about half way home.” I patted her hip.

“Remind me to shoot you when we get home.” She took another sip, then lay back down.

\* \* \* \* \*

I stopped giving her the tea on the last day, so she would be awake when we arrived in St. Louis. With Henry’s and Jacobs help, I was able to carry Kylie when we needed to change trains and wait. She hadn’t eaten very much, but she hadn’t thrown up either.

“Next stop St. Louis,” the conductor called.

“Ky.” I forced Kylie to sit up but she rolled my eyes, and collapsed back on me. “Shit.”

“Has she done this before?” Jacob frowned.

“No.”

“How much did you put it?” Henry asked.

“None, since yesterday,” I said, frowning as the train pulled into the station. I picked her up and carried her down the steps.

“Parker,” a man shouted.

“Vern,” I greeted.

“Well, she’s still being a pain in the ass,” Vern howled.

“Where’s Mike and the wagon?” I looked around for it.

“He’s over there.” Vern pointed to the side of the train station.

“Vern, this is Henry and Jacob. Go help them with the horses and luggage. I’ll be there as soon as I get her settled.” The men headed for the train, while I took Kylie to the wagon.

“Mike.”

“Parker.” Mike walked around from behind the wagon. “What is wrong with the princess?”

“She’s still asleep. I couldn’t get her to wake up.” I shifted my hold trying to get a better grip. “Do you still have the front of the wagon fixed for sleeping?”

“Yes. Give her to me, then I can hand her up to you.” Mike held Kylie as I climbed into the wagon. Mike lifted her up, to where I could take her and lay her on the seat. I climbed over the seat then picked Kylie and laid her on the blankets in the back. She moaned.

“Ky. Shh.” I kissed her cheek and whispered, “Stay here. Mike, keep an eye on you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oh my head,” I complained, bouncing in the back of the wagon. My stomach rolled while my head pounded. Scraping my feet over the seat, I jumped from the wagon, falling to the ground as I threw up the nothingness in my stomach.

“Miss Kylie.” Mike stopped the wagon and climbed down to help me.

I curled up from the pain of the dry heaves while Mike hovered over me, grabbing a canteen of water to wipe my face down with his kerchief. “Mike, where am I?”

“We left St. Louis about an hour ago.” He sat next to me.

“My head is hurting so bad. Is there any food?” I lay on the ground rolling, trying to get the pain to go away, but I needed something to eat.

“Here’s a biscuit.” Mike sat next to me, pulling me into the shade of the wagon. I nibbled, trying not to let the pain in my head keep me from eating.

“Where’s Parker and the others?”

“He’s with the herd and will be expecting us to make camp, because they’ll all be hungry in a couple of hours.” Mike sat beside me.

“I’m not going anywhere. You go on. Send Parker back for me.” I covered my head with my arms. “I can’t move; my head is pounding.” I nibbled on another bite of the bread.

“They’ll have to fend for themselves, because I’m not leaving you.” Mike pulled several blankets out of the wagon, then laid one on the ground; he rolled one up, creating a pillow for my head. The last one he attached it to the wagon, creating a shade so I would be out of the sun, while I sipped some water and finished off two biscuits before closing my eyes against the pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Where are they?” I paced around the camp.

“Mike’s with her.” Vern tried to comfort me.

“Something’s wrong.” I bit into a piece of jerky that Vern and the others brought with them.

“Wagon. Parker there’s a wagon coming.” Antwone said without his French accent.

“Where?”

“Over there.” Antwone pointed at the small light, bouncing in the air. I ran down the hill toward the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Miss Kylie, you’re exhausted, please get in the wagon.” Mike growled his plea.

“Mike, we’ve been through this before, I’m not getting into that wagon,” I argued. “My feet hurt, but if we stop for a while, I can rest.”

“Kylie.” I heard a distant cry. “Kylie.” The sound of someone running followed by the clomping of horses’ hooves on the ground made me wish I had a gun. “Ky,” came the breathless voice of my husband, running into the light. He wrapped his arms around me, kissing me while trying to breath.

“Where’ve you been?”

“She got sick and we had to wait on her to feel better, then she insisted on walking.”

Mike frowned.

“Walking? How far?” Parker looked up at Mike as Antwone and Vern rode up to us.

“Over six hours.” The light glow from the lamp couldn’t hide the anger on Mike’s face.

“I threatened to hogtie her, but she still wouldn’t give in.”

“Ky, you should’ve ridden in the wagon.” Parker looked down at me.

“We need to get her to camp because she’s been complaining about her feet hurting,”

Mike went on to say.

“Parker.” Antwone said with a crisp French accent. “Please take my majestic steed, who will gladly carry our stubborn rose to camp.” He dismounted, handing Parker the reins then turned to Mike. “Would you mind, kind sir, a little company on the rest of this evening’s journey? I could regale you with several stories about a very thorny rose.”

“Mike, don’t believe anything Antwone tells you.” I grimaced as Parker lifted me into the saddle.

“Mike, his stories are probably true because the rose has stabbed him several times.”

Parker laughed after joining me. “Antwone, thank you.”

“It is my pleasure.” He bowed then climbed up next to Mike.

“Hello, Kylie,” Vern whispered as we rode up next to him.

“Hello, Vern. How are Becca and the others?” I asked, leaning back into Parker as my body began to argue with me.

“They’re fine, but I have a feeling you won’t be soon.” Vern laughed.

“Ky, how are you feeling?” Parker held me close.

“My feet and legs really hurt, but I think it’s from me not being on my feet so much.” I moaned and shifted a little. “I just need to sit down.”

“You can in a little bit.” Parker pushed the horse a little faster, wanting to get me into the light of camp.

“Kylie,” came the call from all the men around camp, as we rode up into it.

“Here.” Parker held his arms up to me, helping me off Antwone’s horse. I leaned into him, allowing him to take all my weight before lowering my feet to the ground.

“Ugh.” I cried when I put my weight back on them. Parker didn’t ask, he just picked me up again. “Vern, get some water and a rag.” He laid me in the firelight then began to slowly remove my boots. “Ugh.”

Henry and Pappa moved up next to me. “What’s wrong with her?” Pappa asked, sitting on the log I leaned against.

“She refused to ride in the wagon; she’s been walking for over six hours.” He tugged on my left boot, causing me to moan. He tossed my boot away from us so I wouldn’t get sick. Parker pulled off my stocking, revealing my foot covered in blisters and blood.

“Ky.” He frowned while fighting his anger. “You should’ve ridden in the wagon.”

I turned toward the sound of laughter coming from Mike and Antwone, entering the camp. “Great,” I whispered. “Ugh,” I moaned when Parker pulled on my other boot.

“Parker, how is our thorny rose?” Antwone asked as he walked up next to us.

“See for yourself.” Parker moved up to take the water and rag from Vern.

“Shit.” Antwone frowned. “Your pigheadedness has hurt you again.” His French accent disappeared as he looked down on my feet.

“Antwone, go away!” I smiled at him, knowing he has seen me in a similar situation.



“This is almost as bad as the time you guided those boys through the brambles.”

Antwone looked up at Henry. I heard Henry laughing behind me, causing Parker and the others to look over at him.

“Ky.” Parker cocked his eyebrow at me. I just rolled my eyes, trying to ignore the pain from him washing my feet.

“Our delicate rose offered to guide several boys out to the farm to sell them some horses,” Antwone accent returned as he continued his story. “She wanted to get back at them for some indiscretions toward her. She’d been taunting them with her chestnut and his dancing. She agreed to guide them to farm on a short cut that comes out behind the barn. Our delicate rose came out covered in cuts, scrapes, and thorns, sticking out of her and her dear chestnut.”

Antwone started laughing with Parker fought not to join him.

“It took Heidi, Betsy, and Katie almost three days to get all the thorns out of her,” Henry added, laughing even more.

“Ky. You’re not going to be able to wear your boots for a while. These have to get some air.” Parker gently wrapped some bandages around my feet. “Mike, do you have any food and some of Ky’s tea?”

“She won’t drink it because she’s afraid I’ll put laudanum in it.” Mike produced some bread and jerky for me. “I can have something else made in a little while if you like,”

“No. We’ll have to get by on jerky and bread until morning.” Parker got up to make me some tea.

“I’m not drinking any tea that you give me.” I frowned at Parker, who was glaring at me.

“Ky. You need your tea.” He stood, then joined Mike getting the water and tea. “I promise not to put anything in it but sugar.”

“Make it right here in front of me, facing me. I want to watch every move you make.” I met his stare, determined not to sleep anymore. He laughed when Antwone patted him on the shoulder. I drank the offered tea and ate some biscuits before my exhaustion caught up with me.

\* \* \* \* \*

I rode my stallion the next day and the rest of the way home, but Parker insisted I stay with the wagon to keep the fresh bandages clean or he would tie up and make me ride in the wagon. It took us almost two days to get home, and I managed not to get sick. I racing my stallion up the drive when Becca came out screaming my name.

“Ky. I want you in the house and off your feet,” Parker ordered just before I passed him.

“Becca.” I greeted her before lowering myself into Vernon Sr. arms.

“What have you done now?” Becca frowned as he carried me inside the main house.

“I went for a very long walk.” I laughed as Parker walked through the door.

“Who can go get Doc Reynolds?” I rolled my eyes to meet a very harsh look of my husband. “Don’t.”

“I can.” Vernon Sr. moved to stand by his son. “What’s wrong?”

“I need him to check on the baby, but I also need him to look at her feet.” Parker knelt down, removing my stocking then the bandages.

“Kylie.” Becca came out of the kitchen with some water and a rag. “Parker, you go finish with the horses. I have this.”

“Thanks, Becca.” Parker leaned over me as she began to fuss with my feet. “You behave. If they have to come get me, I will tie you to a bed, and remember stay off your feet.” He left to join the others.

I sat quietly while Becca and Martha fussed with my feet until one of the women slaves moved up next to me and began to touch my stomach. “What are you doing?” I shouted trying to stand. “Get your hands off me.”

“Kylie. She’s a midwife.” Martha moved up next to her.

“I don’t care who she is. I don’t want or need her touching me.” The woman stood in front of me dirty and her clothes worn out, but her smell sent me falling to the floor, throwing up. “Get her away from me. Now.”

“Gerty, go out and get Master Parker.” Martha knelt beside me as I continued to empty my stomach until I passed out.

\* \* \* \* \*

I woke to find Doc Reynolds standing over me as he examined my feet with Gerty, still dressed in dirty clothing behind him. “Get her out of here,” I shouted.

“Nice to see you too, Kylie.” Doc Reynolds glared down at me.

“If you don’t want me getting sick again get her out of here,” I said, keeping my voice just under a shout.

“Ky.” Parker came out from behind the others. “Gerty, go downstairs to see if they have any tea ready.”

“Yes, sir.” Gerty curtsied to him then left.

“I don’t want her any where near me.” I stared at his face.

“Before you get in an argument, let’s get Kylie checked out.” Doc Reynolds moved up next to me. After Parker helped me undress, I lay down opening myself up for the examination.

“Parker. Come here.” Doc Reynolds moved out of his way. “Put your hands here and here then lightly mash.” I frowned while he did it. “Do you feel the tightness?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the baby’s sac. Eventually we’ll be able to feel the baby. Now.” He put two fingers into me then lightly mashed. “You know what she feels like normally, but now she will be tighter and feel swollen. The mashing will bring her body closer to you. You try.” Parker didn’t say anything but did as Doc Reynolds directed. “Do you notice the difference?”

“Yes.”

“If you ever come out with blood on your fingers, you’ll need to keep a watch on her.” Doc Reynolds went on. I lay there on the bed for over an hour as they discussed my body as an object. I suffered through four more examinations between the two of them.

Gerty interrupted the examination when she walked back through the door. “Get her out of here!” I screamed and climbed over the bed to stand naked on the far side of the room.

“Ky. She’s only here to look out for you.” Parker moved up next to me.

“I don’t want or need her near me,” I said, raising my voice even though he stood in front of me. “Get her away from me!”

“Gerty, go back downstairs and wait for us.” Parker shouted, struggling to hold me in his arms.

When the door finally closed, I settled down. “Parker, you have your hands full; I’ll come back in a couple of days to check on how she’s doing. Kylie, you need to control your temper. It’s not good on the baby.” Doc Reynolds frowned at me.

“Thank you, Doc.” Parker kept holding me even after he left. “Ky, can I let you go?”

“Yes.” He released me then I turned and hit him in the face with my fist.

“Kylie!” he shouted. “What was that for?”

“I know she’s here because of you.” I moved across the room. “I don’t need a slave to fuss over me, and I won’t put up with it.”

“Ky, she’s also the midwife on the farm. She’s delivered a lot of babies.” He frowned at me.

“I don’t care. I won’t have her fussing over me.” My voice held my anger and got dressed again. “I’m going to our house, and she won’t be coming over there.” I stormed out of the room, leaving him wiping blood from his nose.

I walked into my home, closing the door then sat down in the cherrywood rocker. Looking at the dirt on my feet, I went into the kitchen, got a bowl, and filled it with water. Retrieving a rag and towel, I sat in the floor of the kitchen and began to wash my feet, not wanting them to become infected. I expected Parker to join me, but when he didn’t show up, I went upstairs to draw myself a warm bath.

Henry and Jacob would be staying in our home, while Antwone and the other riders would stay in the cabin and one of the huts used by the slaves. I went and got some clean clothes to wear after my bath. I listened to the chunks of wood pop in the stove as it heated water. Opening the windows to allow fresh air to circulate in the room, I pumped cool water into the tub then dropped rose petals into the water. I waited until four pots of water steamed to take the chill off the water. I stripped out of my clothes, smelling the roses in the water as I lowered myself into the quiet tub.

The water caressed my skin with only a mild stinging on my feet as I lost myself to the quiet. My aching muscles still complained about the six-hour hike as I rubbed soap over my swollen belly, crying about my loss of independence. I loved Parker, but I would not allow

anyone to treat me as helpless. I thought about how Andrew and Heidi encouraged me to seek out what I wanted. I had to figure out a way to get my husband to see what I needed.

“Knock. Knock,” Becca whispered from the door. “Kylie, can I come in.”

“Yes.” I put my head into the water so I could wash the grime out of it.

“Are you all right?” Becca stepped into the room.

“I’m fine, but I’m not going to be catered to by that woman.” I looked at Becca. She seemed really happy. “How are you doing?”

“I am glad that you’re home. Martha is making a huge dinner for everyone.” She smiled. “Parker is pacing outside. He’s worried.”

“Is his nose still bleeding?”

“No, but Vern’s not going to let him forget his tiny wife just bloodied his nose.” We both laughed. “Parker sent a telegram last week telling us he wanted us to bring her in to help you.”

“He told us you’re having difficulties since you left, and he can’t be at your side all the time. He wanted someone to help you.”

“He should have asked me first. I’ve not been sick since the Saturday before we left Boston. I take one-step into the house with her standing over me, and I get sick. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Go smell her. Look at her clothes. She can go back to where she came from. If she has things she uses in the births, I don’t want anything she has anywhere near me. Tell my husband to send her away.” I shivered to the coolness of the water.

“Kylie.”

“Help me up.” I held my hand out to her.

“You’re showing.” Becca rubbed her fingers over my stomach. I rolled my eyes.

“Becca. Don’t tell Parker.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to be pregnant. I want to be with him, but I don’t want this baby.” I let tears come to my eyes. “It’s hard enough getting to know Parker, but this baby is taking my life away. I hate it.”

“Kylie, don’t say that, you’ve been blessed. I’ve been with Vern for four years and I have yet to have a baby.” Becca smiled. “You and Parker love each other, and he believes he has to protect you. Give him a little time.”

“Well, he has to allow me to be me.” I frowned as she tugged on my corset. “Grab my knife.”

“Why?” She handed it to me. Horror crossed her face when I pointed it at my stomach, but I laughed at her relief when I cut the ribbon at the bottom of the corset then began to unlace it.

“Kylie.” She frowned at me but helped me finish dressing; we were laughing by the time we walked down the stairs to a very worried man. “I’ll go get some more bandages.”

“Ky.” Parker knelt in front of the rocker where I sat.

“I’m fine, but I’m not sorry for hitting you,” but I did lean in and kissed him.

“I didn’t mean to make you so angry. I want you to have some help, and I thought you would understand.”

“You should have smelled her and asked me first.” I touched his bruised cheek. “Thank you for thinking about me, but you saw my world. I won’t be catered to by anyone but you.”

He kissed my hand, sniffing it at the same time. “You smell wonderful.”

I smiled. “You don’t.”

He laughed then kissed me. “Come back to the main house and lay down your own rules for Gerty.” He picked me up and carried me over to the main house. “Gerty. Mama. Becca. Kylie wants to talk to all of you.” He sat me in a chair so Becca could wrap the bandages around my feet. He kissed me, then smelled my hair before he walked out to join Henry and the others.

The women stared at me. “First Gerty, you will take a bath every other day. You will need clean clothes. When is anyone going to town?” I turned to the others, but the looks on their faces said they didn’t know. “Next, I want to see all the things that you use when attending at a child’s birth. Finally, you will keep your distance unless I need your help, and you’re not allowed in my home or my room upstairs. Do any of you have any questions?” I set my jaw, frustrated by my current situation.

“Yes.” Martha looked at me. “Where is she to sleep?”

“Anywhere but near me.” I met her frown with my own. “Isn’t there a room by the kitchen not being used?”

“Yes,” Martha answered.

“Let her stay in there, that way she’ll be within calling distance.” I didn’t smile, but I needed to make the best of this situation. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have something that I have to get done.” I walked upstairs to my room. I found a pair of Parker’s boots, and I pulled them on my feet over the bandages, then clomped back down the stairs and out the door. Even with the thick bandages, the boots flopped with each step I took.

“Kylie,” Vern howled. “What are you up to?”

“Where’s Parker?”

“He’s showing the men around.”



“Who’s free?”

“No one. What do you want?” Vern looked at me.

“I need a fresh horse so I can ride into town. I have an errand to run.” I smiled and moved into the barn to find a friend. “Cornell.”

“Miss Kylie. How was the trip?”

“It was wonderful.” I walked up to my stallion where he stood in his stall, brushed, fed, and ready to ride. “Hey, gorgeous, are you want to go for a run?” I backed him out, singing to him as I proceeded to saddle him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Cornell asked, moving up to stand next to me, taking over saddling him.

“I have errands to run and I need someone to bring the wagon. Are you free?” I asked, kissing my steed’s nose.

“No, and you best ask Parker.”

I rolled my eyes. “You can help me on him, or I’ll do it myself.” Cornell frowned but helped me up. “Thanks, Cornell.” I rode down the drive headed for town without my guns and only a small knife in my waistband.

“Kylie!” Vern shouted, mounting his horse to catch up with me. “Cornell, find Parker.” The clattering of hooves echoed behind me. “Kylie.” Ignoring Vern, I kept on riding toward town until he grabbed my reins. “What the hell do you think you are doing?”

I jerked my reins from him. “Running an errand.”

“You’re not even armed.”

“I have my knife.”

“Kylie, you're not going anywhere.” Vern reached for my reins again, but I jerked them away before he could get them.

Urging my stallion into a run, I left Vern trailing behind. The town bustled with people as I stopped just outside the dress shop. I climbed down, ignoring the angry glare I got from Vern. Inside the shop, I picked out five dresses, cotton camisoles, corsets and pantaloons, then turned to the stockings, finding a matching pair for each dress. I paid for the clothes, wrapped them in to a tight bundle, and handed it to Vern before heading to the general store.

“Mrs. Monroe. When did you get back?” Mr. Jameson smiled at me from behind his counter.

“About two hours ago.” I smiled, looking around the store.

“What can I get for you this afternoon?”

“I need a pair of ladies’ shoes.” I laughed as he looked at my feet. “They’re not for me.”

“I was wondering. What are you doing in those boots?” he asked.

“I went for a very long walk,” I started.

“And her feet are covered in blisters.” Parker reached around me, securing my gun belt to my body. “What are you doing here?”

“Making it where I can put up with that woman.” I frowned up at my husband.

“Mrs. Monroe, what size of ladies’ shoe do you need?” Mr. Jameson looked at me.

“I have no idea. I did notice her feet were longer than mine.” I looked at the shoes.

“Give me that pair and that one.” I grabbed ink, paper, and another pen for writing.

“How much?” Parker asked.

“Ten,” Mr. Jameson answered.

Parker paid him then took my hand, leading me out to the horses where Vern waited. “Ky. You should have waited for me and you came unarmed. That little knife is not enough.” He went to help me on my horse, but stopped.

“Kylie.” I turned to see my father, standing at the end of my horse. Parker moved me behind him. “Your Mama said that you should start showing in another month or two, but I see you’re doing it now.”

“What do you want?” Parker blocked my father’s view of me as Vern moved his horse between Parker and me.

“I just wanted to offer my apology to my daughter,” he said. “Kylie, I am truly sorry.”

“You offered it; now, we have been on the road for several days. My wife needs to go home to rest.” Parker blocked my father from coming closer to me.

“Take care of her, Parker.” My father nodded then walked away.

Parker watched him with his hand on his gun. “Ky,” he finally said and held his hand out to me while Vern kept an eye on my father, until we headed back toward home.

## Chapter 26

Parker, Henry, and Jacob sorted out thirty horses to take back to Boston. I spent most of my time on the porch in my bare feet, allowing the blisters to heal. My journals and books became my constant companion in my loneliness while everyone else worked.

“Get away from me!” I shouted.

“Miss Kylie. You need to put your feet up. They’re swelling.” Gerty followed her orders to care for me and not leave my side for any reason. “It’d be easier on you if you wore a dress.”

“I’m going to my house. You’re not allowed in there.” I got up and walked over to hide in my home. I agreed to let her fuss over me while in the main house, which had become a daily ritual. Closing all of the shutters and locking the doors, I cleaned my feet then began to clean my home, giving me something to occupy my time until I could start working with the horses again.

“Ky. Let me in!” Parker shouted from outside the front door.

“No.” I walked up the stairs to gather up some work clothes. I locked myself in the room across the hall from our bedroom. A loud bang sounded while I examined my growing stomach as I finished changing. I slipped my feet back into my boots for the first time in over a week. Satisfied about my wardrobe, my footsteps echoed on the hard wood floor, giving me joy.

The door creaked open, allowing me to find my unhappy husband, staring down at me as he leaned against our bedroom door. I went to walk past him but he grabbed my arm, pulling me into his embrace. He leaned down, smelling my hair. “Ky, please.” He put his hands on my belly. “You’re growing so quickly; please don’t fight with her.”

I pulled away from him. “I’m more likely to get hurt if you, her, and everyone else keep hovering over me than I am taking care of myself.” I stared into his soft blue eyes. “I’m having a baby. I’m not crippled and plan on working.”

“What are you going to do?” His frown added to his worry.

“What I do best. Break horses.”

“Ky.”

“I’m not going to do anything where I’ll get hurt. I plan to use Cornell and Boomer to help me. We can do three at a time with them doing all things that I can’t do. I’ll take it easy.”

We stared silently at each other for several minutes.

“Is there anything else?”

“Yes.” I laughed when he rolled his eyes. “I’ve been cooped up in this house since we got back. I want to go riding.” I lifted his hand to my lips never taking my eyes from his.

“Please honey. I do love you, and I promise to be really careful.” I wrapped my fingers around his neck, pulling him down to my lips, knowing he would accept the invitation.

“You’re impossible.” He kissed me again. “Let’s go. A short ride.”

We rode through the field for about an hour before he took me to the barn. He gave Cornell and Boomer instructions but only allowed me to have two horses at a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

I enjoyed working with horses but used the time to plan a party for Parker’s birthday. I invited Royre and several of Parker’s friends, along with my family, hoping to ease the tension between our families. I sent Parker to town to pick up a delivery for me. While he was away, everyone gathered between the houses for dinner and the party.

“Parker’s coming up the drive and he doesn’t look happy,” Luke said coming to join everyone else. I looked around at the happy faces gathered which included my mother, grandparents and all my siblings. I jumped at the sound of the front door of the main house slamming.

“Kylie Ruth Monroe!” Parker shouted as he walked through the house finding it empty. “Kylie!” His voice told us he was angry. “Ky.” He stepped out the back door to find all his

friends and family laughing, while I hid behind Royre and Vern. He joined them, “Where is she?”

My statues moved, revealing my hiding spot. “Traitors.” Everyone clapped as Parker strolled toward me.

His placed his hands on my cheeks. “Thank you.” He drew me into a kiss. “I love you.”

“Happy Birthday.” I kissed him again. Music began to play while I led him to the area set aside for dancing. He pulled me close never taking his eyes off me.

“Are you still angry with me?”

“Yes.” He laughed. “Because you didn’t need to do all this.”

“You’d do it for me.” I smiled until he began to kiss me again. The party continued for most of the afternoon and Parker kept me wrapped in his arms. Royre and Vern teased him while he opened his presents. I used them as a distraction and left to go help retrieve his present from me. “Pappa, let me help. It’s heavy.”

“Kylie girl, it’s too heavy for you. Go get Vernon Sr.” He ordered, so I went and did what he wanted.

“Ky. Where did she go?” Parker looked at the howling hyenas still laughing at their own jokes. They both shrugged. “Ky,” he called louder.

“Parker, I’m right here.” I stood in front Pappa and Vernon Sr. as they held the present between them.

“What’s this?” Parker moved to stand in front of me. He stared at the two men holding the large covered object that stood on the ground between them. With its four foot width and six foot height, it towered over me.

“It’s your birthday present.” I smiled as his hand slid around my waist to rest just above my hip.

“I have all the presents I need right here.” He leaned down and lightly brushed his lips across mine before he knelt and kissed my belly.

“Well, if you do not want it, I guess, I could use it for target practice.” I giggled.

“Let me see it first.” Parker moved up to the large square object before lifting the material off it to expose a portrait of me, wearing my wedding dress. “Kylie. When?”

“While I was doing the fittings for the party dress,” I wrapped my arms around him.

“Well, do I get to use it for target practice?”

“No, and I know where I want to hang it.” He smiled.

“Where?”

“Above the fireplace in Boston.”

“If it makes it that far.”

“Don’t touch it.” He kissed me. “Keep your hands off my picture.” He led us into our house, moving the trunk that sat against the far wall. “Vern, go get a hammer and some nails.” Parker and the rest of the Monroe men took several hours to hang the portrait along the barren living room wall. Becca and I couldn’t help but stand back and laugh because each one knew the best way to attach the portrait to the wall but none were successful. It wasn’t until they asked how the portraits at my home were hung. I laughed more after giving them the small hooks that attached to the wall and the frame hung from them.

After the party, I caught my husband sitting in the big cushioned chair staring at my image. I hated to interrupt his thoughts, but I needed sleep and wanted him in our bed. He held his hand out, pulling my round body into his lap.

“Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Not today,” I whispered. “But you could show me.”

“Don’t ruin this moment.” His hand rubbed along the back of my camisole. “I love you.” He kissed me. “How tired are you?”

“Why?”

“I just want to sit here and hold you for a little while before we go to bed.” He kissed my hair and wrapped me in a gentle embrace. We sat there until I started nodding off to sleep. “Ky. Stand up.”

My hand lay on my belly when I felt a strong push. “No!” I screamed.

“Kylie, you need to go to bed,” he spoke softly.

The strong pushed happened again, forcing me to the floor as I held my belly crying. “I’ve been so careful. I didn’t want to hurt you.” Tears streamed down my face as Parker knelt in front of me. He went to help me up. “No! You might hurt the baby.” I held onto my stomach, pushing his hands away from me.

“I’ll be right back.” He left me lying on the floor crying, only to return in a few minutes with Martha, and Becca. “Ky. What’s wrong?”

“Parker, get her off that floor,” Martha ordered.

“Don’t touch me.” I curled up tighter, embracing the swollen mound as tightly as I could.

“Honey. Please.” Parker wiped my tears away.

Martha knelt down beside her son. “Kylie, what’s wrong?” She brushed my hair out of my face. “Shh. Tell me what’s wrong?”



I pointed to the spot where I felt the pressure. Parker helped me shift to where he could hold me until I could speak. “There is a hard pressure right here.” I rubbed my palm around the area.

Martha gently rubbed her fingers across it, bringing a smile to her face and a quiet laugh. “Parker, give me your hand.” She took his hand over the same spot. “Do you feel this? That little hard bump.”

“Yes. What is it?” He continued to caress the area.

“Kylie, look at me.” Martha put her hand under my chin, forcing me to stare at her. “The baby’s fine. You haven’t hurt it.”

“I know I have, or there wouldn’t be a knot there.” I let my tears continue.

“Kylie, with all your schooling, I can’t believe you don’t know this.” Martha gave me a calming smile.

“Mama. What’s wrong?” Parker interrupted her.

“There’s nothing wrong. I suspect that you may begin to feel more pressure all over your belly.” Martha rubbed her hand across my cheek as Parker pulled me into a tighter embrace. “That’s just the baby’s elbow or knee.” Her voice soothed my fears. “The baby is starting to move around. It’s just the baby growing, and you can feel it when it moves.”

“Are you sure I haven’t hurt it?” I stared at her. “Maybe Parker needs to get Doc Reynolds?”

“Kylie, you just need to get off this cold floor and go up to bed and get some rest. Parker, help her up and take her to bed.” Martha let Becca help her stand. “Kylie, if it would make you feel better, Becca, and I’ll stay here with you. But I promise the baby is fine.” Parker

helped me up then guided me to our bedroom where I continued to cry waiting on exhausted sleep.

## Chapter 27

The fall passed quickly with signs of winter coming late this year. The unusually warm weather kept me busy with the horses, while Parker kept an even closer eye on me. The baby moved continuously, giving me very little peace until its father's hands or voice touched it. I still got to ride my horse, as long as it didn't hurt when I mounted him. We had an appointment in town to sell more of our horses. I needed to negotiate the price for the stock.

"Looks like you need to adjust your pants again," Parker said as he helped me button them together. "You need to send another telegram to Bernie with new measurements." He kissed his child before escorting me to breakfast.

"Parker, if Kylie gets any bigger, she'll have to put a cart under her belly just to walk around." Vern's daily torment greeted us as we entered the living room through the kitchen for breakfast.

"Leave her alone, Vern." Parker glared at him.

"But she looks like she swallowed a watermelon this past summer." Vern howled more.

"At least Parker is able show he can perform," I said, narrowing my eyes and sneering at Vern.

"Ky." Parker turned to me. "No fighting this morning, either of you."

"It's a shame that Becca hasn't been able to show how capable you are of servicing her."

I sat down in my seat.

“Kylie.” Parker grabbed my arm, pulling me up from my seat. “Come with me.” He led me out to the porch. “No fighting, and I mean it or you’ll stay here.”

“Fine,” I pouted. “But if he starts it, I’ll have to finish it.”

“No. I’ll finish it and I’ll talk with him.” We returned to our seats at the table. “Vern, no more teasing Kylie. She has enough on her mind.” We ate a rather quiet breakfast except for Luke’s continuous nudging my belly.

“Luke, I’ll break your arm if you do that one more time.” I elbowed him.

Luke’s head went forward when Parker reached around me and popped the back of his head. “Leave Kylie alone.” I had become a part of the Monroe family with Vern’s teasing, Luke’s constant harassment at meals and Cord tattling to Parker about everything. I swear the boy had a ledger of my daily life.

I watched from my seat on the porch, while Parker and the others herded the horses together. Martha complained about me going to town, but my job consisted of handling the arrangements of the sale, so she reluctantly gave her blessing.

“Ky, come here!” Parker shouted from outside the barn.

“Coming.”

“I want you to be careful. Turn around.” He grabbed the gun hidden and tucked in the back of my pants under my coat. He checked to make sure it was loaded before placing it back into holster. “I don’t want you to go anywhere without someone else with you, preferably me, but Vern’ll do.” He kissed my head. “Let’s get you mounted.” He helped me up on my stallion. “Ky, stay with me or behind the herd and don’t go picking up the strays.” I smiled but rolled my eyes when he turned away. “And Kylie, if you roll your eyes at me again, you’ll stay home.”

“What are you talking about?” I tried to sound innocent, causing Vern to howl.

“Don’t do it again,” he told me as he climbed up on his bay. “Let’s move out.” Parker rode at the back of the herd, forcing me to remain behind him. I felt like a prisoner because my husband demanded I stay safe at home and he wouldn’t consider letting me go with him when he helped Henry and Jacob move their horses back to St. Louis.

I yawned at the slow pace but didn’t complain because it made it easier and required fewer men to move the herd. We passed my brothers and sisters making their way to school, along with several other children who lived out this way. I couldn’t imagine walking to school everyday. As Carthage came into view, people crowded the streets. Parker planned to go around the town and came up behind the livery. I shifted in my saddle, watching Parker and the others pen the horses in the corral. We had over an hour before our meeting with the buyer.

“Parker.”

“Yes dear.” He laid his hand on my thigh.

“Can we go get some pie? I really would like a piece of pecan pie,” I said, gently caressing his cheek.

“Do you know what time it is?” He smiled, clicking open the watch I had bought for him in Boston. “You know mama has a big Christmas dinner planned, which includes chocolate and pecan pies.” His hands held me as I slid into his arms.

“Christmas is still two weeks away. I don’t think I can wait that long.” I pouted until he held his arm out to me.

“Kylie Ruth!” my mother shouted as she stormed toward us. “What do you think you’re doing on that horse and you, Parker, do you not realize how dangerous it is for her to be on a horse?”

“Good morning, Mama.”

“Mother Bellows.”

“I don’t want to see you on that horse again,” she said.

“Mama, are you going to stand there screaming at me, or would you rather give me a hug, because I’d prefer the hug.” I grew up not being yelled at, and I wouldn’t allow it from her.

“Kylie. I’m sorry, but it scares me to see you on a horse, especially now.” She reached over and hugged me. “How are you feeling?”

“Hungry,” Parker laughed.

I just looked at him. “I’m fine. We’re on our way to Miss Pearl’s. Would you like to come with us?”

“No. You go.” She hugged me again. “Can we expect to see you both sometime on Christmas day?” We’d been able to visit each other during the last three months, as we started to mend the brokenness of our family.

“If the weather’s not too bad, we could come over,” Parker answered.

“Well, you go get something to eat. We’ll hope the weather holds out.” She hugged me again. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I whispered as we continued our hug. “I love you, mama.”

She let me go then touched my cheek. “I love you too. See you soon.” She gave Parker a hug. “I know you’ll take care of her.”

“Yes, I will.” Parker kissed her cheek before we left her standing near the corral, and I could hear her sniffing behind us.

My coat whipped around my legs as we walked down to the diner; it hung down to my ankles, with a split in the back, to make it easier for riding. I practically bounced trying to walk more quickly toward my pie. The diner bustled with the early morning visitors.

“Good morning,” Miss Pearl greeted us, as we stepped into the diner. Parker nodded, then pointed me to a table near a window. “What can I get for you this morning?”

“I’ll take coffee, and Kylie would like a piece of pecan pie,” Parker told her.

“Are you sure?” She laughed.

“Yes.” Parker laughed too as she nodded and then walked toward the kitchen, taking only a few minutes before she returned with our order.

Parker sipped his coffee as I cut into my piece of pie, closing my eyes, saturating my tongue with the sweet taste before I began to chew it. My husband chuckled at me, interrupting my tasteful enjoyment, so I offered him a bite, then ordered a second piece.

I stared out the window and thought I saw Asa across the street. We hadn’t seen him in several months. I looked again but he was gone. Shaking my head, I took another sweet bite of the pecan pie. About halfway through my second piece, Becca and Martha pulled up, across the street at the general store.

“Shit. I forgot.” I choked.

“Forgot what?” Parker sat his empty coffee cup on the table.

“I have several deliveries that are supposed to be in at any time. I need to go check on them.” I chewed quickly, not wanting to leave any of my pie.

“You’re also supposed to check in with Doc Reynolds.” He took the bite I held out to him. “You finish eating. I’ll go check on the deliveries and meet you at Doc’s.” He kissed me, then left me to finish eating my pie after putting money down on the table.

Doctor Reynolds’s office stood two doors down from Miss Pearl’s. “Ah. Kylie. Good morning. How are you today?”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, shall we see how the baby is this morning?” He pointed me into the examination room, where he closed the curtain to allow me to undress. The door to his office creaked as it opened again. “Parker, I was beginning to wonder where you were.”

“Doc,” he greeted him.

“Kylie, are you ready in there?” Doc Reynolds asked.

“Yes.” I climbed up on the table as the men walked into the room. They took their usual turns examining me, discussing how things should feel and what to look for the closer it got to the baby coming. It surprised me when the exam took less time than usual, which made me happy.

“Kylie, you can get dressed. You need to stay off your feet, and if the weather gets to cold or bad don’t go out. Parker, it will get harder on her so you’ll need to be patient.” Doc Reynolds walked out, closing the curtain behind him.

Parker helped me get dressed, smiling with the news that the baby. Parker paid Doc Reynolds before we went out to greet the people, bustling through the town. “I have to go see Royre and his father.” Parker told me, knowing I couldn’t handle the smell of gun oil.

“Well. I have some errands of my own to do.”

“Ky.”

I cut him off with my fingers on his lips. “We have a little time before we meet with the buyer. I am just going to be with Mama and Becca, then I will join you at the livery.”

“Be careful.” He kissed me, then watched me walk back across the street to where Martha instructed Luke and Cord how to organize the supplies that they had purchased. I laughed but stopped and looked back toward Miss Pearls’. Asa leaned against a post with his thumbs tucked under his gun belt.

“Kylie.” Becca hugged me, distracting me from Asa. “Why are you not at the sale?”

“It’s not for another thirty minutes, and I need your help.” I wrapped my arm around hers. We walked around Carthage gathering up a few extra presents I wanted to purchase before heading to the livery for the sale. I kept watching the streets, and every so often, I found Asa staring at me.

Parker was already talking with a major from Texas and smiled when I waddled toward him before turning the major my way. “Major Richmond, I’d like to you to meet my partner and wife, Kylie.” He slid his hand behind my back.

“Mrs. Monroe. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The major tipped his hat at me.

“Major.” I smiled, feeling the comfort in my husband’s touch.

“Major. Kylie will handle everything else. I’ve had another appointment come up.” Parker shook the officer’s hand before he turned and kissed me. “She’s the smart one.” He turned me to face him. “I’ll meet you by the horses.” He kissed me again, then patted my rump.

“I’ll be fine.” I looked into his worried eyes, then he kissed me one more time before he left. “Now Major, we brought twelve extra horses.” I started with all intentions not to let the major run the negotiations. It didn’t take him long to discover I got what I wanted, and we stood talking after we had completed the sale. I felt a chill crawl up my spine, but not from the cold. I looked around the streets. I hadn’t paid attention since I joined Parker and the major. Now something made me shiver.

“Are you all right?” the major asked.

“Yes, I am.” I reached under my coat, wrapping my fingers around the handle of my gun as we continued talking. I rubbed the back of my neck with my free hand as the chills continued. I turned around, looking out over the streets again, trying to discover why cold shivers ran



through my body. I felt scared. I trembled again and tried to resume my conversation with the major. After several minutes, I turned my attention back to the street, searching for the reason for my anxiousness. I tightened my grip on my gun, seeking simple comfort from it.

“Mrs. Monroe, are you sure you feel all right?” the major asked.

“I don’t know what has me so twitchy,” I answered.

“Corporal. Go find Mr. Monroe,” the major ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you need to have a seat?” he continued.

“No. I’ll be fine,” I said, turning my attention back to the street. Several horses moved to reveal the cause of my fears. My heart stopped. Asa stood staring at me from ten feet away. Gasping, I struggled to regain control over my body. My heart raced as I moved my shirt so I would have no problem retrieving my gun if the need called for it.

“Well. Hello Kylie.” Asa started. “Or should I say Monroe’s little bitch. The whore.”

“Listen here sir. This is a lady. Gentlemen don’t speak like that in the presence of a woman.” The major raced to my rescue.

Ignoring the major, I stared at reason for my fears as he spit onto the street. My heart raced in my chest as my breathing shortened. I had to remain calm and not struggle to keep focused on a man I detested.

“Asa.” My voice was cool and confident as my mind screamed for Parker.

“Where’s your man?” Asa shifted, revealing his gun.

“I don’t need my husband to protect me.”

“Mrs. Monroe, is everything all right?” the major moved up beside me.

“It’s fine,” I answered, not taking my eyes off the man in front of me and squeezing the handle of my gun for comfort. “Asa, you can’t beat Parker.”

Asa laughed, looking around. “Parker’s not here.”

I tightened my grip on my gun, smiling. “No, but I am.” Asa stared at me with his hand racing to his gun; a shot rang out before his gun left the holster. He stared at the gun in my hand while I watched the blood run down his chest. Everything stopped, but the red liquid spreading across his once white shirt as he fell to his knees, and I stood frozen even as his body crumpled into the dirt.

I couldn’t hear anything going on around me until familiar hands touched me, one hand wrapped around my waist while the other wrapped around the gun I still held out in my hand. The gun slipped out of my fingers when a soft voice breached my ears.

“Ky.” I looked up at Parker then I could hear all the chaos. My husband wrapped me in his arms, whispering indistinct words in my ears.

“Parker, is she all right?” Vern asked.

“Was she hit?” My mother came running up, trying to pull me out of his arms.

“What happened here?” Sheriff Dayton came to investigate, but stared at Asa’s body still lying on the ground. I just held onto Parker wrapped, in his protective arms while the major told the sheriff what had happened as my family fussed around me. I stood with the side of my belly against Parker’s stomach and my arms wrapped tightly around him.

“Parker, I think you need to take her home. I don’t want either of you here in town when the Worleys get word of this,” Dayton instructed us.

“Kylie, come get on your stallion.” Parker coaxed me away from everyone, then held his hand out for me to step in to the saddle. I trembled, grabbing hold of the saddle, and stepped on

Parker's palm for him to help lift higher. My husband swung up behind me after I sat securely in place, and I leaned back into his arms as we headed for home.

We sat on our bed in the main house as I cried, with both our families gathered in the hallway and the living room downstairs. Martha and my mother stood in the doorway, unable to do anything, except watch Parker hold me until I calmed down. He undressed me, then covered me up, before leaving our mothers sitting next to me.

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"Parker, how is she doing?" Becca asked, bringing him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks. She's finally quiet." He sipped from the cup. "I wanted her to be able to protect herself, but I didn't expect her to have to do it this soon."

My father looked at him. "If you hadn't taught her, we would have lost them both."

"I know," he whispered, then took another sip. "If you will excuse me, I need to visit the outhouse, then get back up to her." Parker left but when he came back, he carried up some food and tried to encourage me to feed our baby.

## Chapter 28

Christmas morning came, bringing with it a severe ice storm, and since Asa's shooting, we had stayed in the main house. I stormed downstairs, away from my husband.

"Kylie," he called, following me down the stairs.

"Parker, I want to go to my mother's. I have presents for them. I have never missed a Christmas." I glared at him.

"I don't care if it's a tradition; you're not going out of this house." He met my stare.

“Watch me.” I stormed to the door, jerking it open, but Parker grabbed me before I could step outside.

“I will tie you to the bed if you try that again. Do you hear me?” Parker moved me to the big chair in the living room by the fireplace. “Now, sit down and stay put.”

I sat in the chair for a moment then stood up. “Parker, have you ever seen a Boston winter?”

“No. You know that.”

“This is nothing. I’ve been in colder weather than what is outside!” I shouted.

“Who will win this one?” I heard Vern ask Becca.

“Parker,” she whispered.

“Ky. First, you’re not in Boston. Second, I don’t give a damn about what you’ve done in the past, and third, you’re my wife and carrying my baby, and I say that you’re not leaving this house.” He stood over me angrier than I’d ever seen him; I shoved him and headed back upstairs. My own anger was fueled by feeling trapped. Picking up a water pitcher, I threw it, sending it crashing into the window by our bed, shattering them both.

“Kylie!” Parker shouted, racing into the room. He stared at the window when I picked up a flower vase and threw it at him. “Kylie. Damn-it. Stop this.” He wrapped me in his arms, holding me while Vern and the others looked at the window. “Kylie, sit still.” I threw my head back, slamming it into his face. “Becca. In the third drawer of the dresser are silk ribbons, hand me several.” Parker shouted, shifting from behind me so he could pin me to the floor.

“Get off me!” I shouted.

“No. You have two choices. Calm down, or I’ll tie you down. Which is it?” His patience with me was almost gone. “Well?”

“Get off me.” I stared into his face.

“I’m so glad you don’t react like she does.” Vern leaned down and kissed Becca.  
“Thank you.”

Parker lifted himself off me, offering me his hand, then led me downstairs to the kitchen. He made me sit while he cleaned up. “Ky.” He knelt in front of me. “I know you’re tired of being cooped up and protected, but it’s not safe for anyone, especially you, to go outside.” I took the rag from him and finished washing his face. “Honey, I love you and don’t want you to get hurt. I’m sorry, we can’t get your family their presents, but they’ll understand.” He kissed my forehead, taking the rag to wash blood out of my hair. When he finished he guided me to the sofa, getting me to lie down as he covered me with a quilt.

“Please stay here. I have to go help cover the window,” he whispered, then went to help fix with window.

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An hour later, the men had covered the window. “I am glad that’s finished.” Vern said as he and I walked down the stairs.

“Shh.” Becca scolded from near the large table. “She’s asleep.”

“She needs it. She’s not sleeping well at night.” I looked over the back of the sofa Ky looked so peaceful.

“I remembered when I carried you.” Mama came to stand next to me. “I was pretty feisty myself, though I don’t think I bloodied your father’s nose. Let her sleep. Come get some breakfast.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The smell of cooking ham filled the big room. I sat up, then ran out the back door, and fell on a patch of ice. I landed on my knees, throwing up on the back porch. “Kylie!” Becca screamed, following out the door with a blanket. “Did you fall on the baby?”

“No,” I gasped. “Where’s Parker?”

“He took your family’s presents over to them. Vern went with him.” Becca held my hair.

“Kylie girl, looks like you could use some help.” Pappa and Vernon Sr. stepped out onto the porch to help me stand.

“I really need to go to the outhouse,” I complained.

“Sorry. You’ll have to make due with a chamber pot.” Vernon Sr. told me. “Are you hurt?” he asked as he helped me stand.

“No. I am fine.” I held onto his arm as he walked me back into the house.

“Martha!” Vernon Sr. shouted.

“Yes,” she answered, coming around the corner.

“Kylie needs some help,” he said, handing me off to her so she and Becca could escort me into Martha’s bedroom, where she sat the chamber pot on a small stool so I wouldn’t have to lean down very far. After I finished I rejoined everyone in living room, where they put me back down on the sofa, then brought me a plate of food.

I ate, then went to help in the kitchen, but they ordered me back to the couch. I sat there for a little while then went upstairs to my room, staring at the boarded up window covered with a thick blanket, to keep out the cold air. I lay on the bed and cried. I covered up while holding Parker’s pillow in my hand, forgetting all about Christmas.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How long has she been asleep?” I whispered from across the room.

“Couple of hours,” Mama answered. “She’s exhausted. How much sleep is she getting?”

“Not much?” I move up a little closer to the bed to see if she really was sleeping. “Let her sleep, I don’t want another episode like this morning.”

“She’s not used to being told what to do.” Martha sat in a chair beside the bed. “What was she like in Boston?”

“Mama, she owns part of sixteen different businesses, but growing up she went to school and worked on two farms. Heidi and Andrew didn’t let her ever think that she couldn’t do something.” I laughed, shaking my head. “You remember Antwone?” Mama nodded. “He wanted to court Ky, but he pushed her too far. He has a scar from below his belt to up to his chest, and he’s not the only one.” I smiled. “I consider myself lucky, because she’s only pulled a knife on me once.”

“What?” Martha’s voice rose.

“Shh. She didn’t want me to know, she was hurting. It was the morning we met.” I lightly stroked Kylie’s hip under the heavy blankets. “This life here is such a big change for her, and the baby’s not making it easy.”

“You need to get some rest, and I need to go help in the kitchen.” Mama kissed my cheek, and then I curled up next to Kylie and fell asleep with my hand on her belly.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ky, wake up.” Parker rubbed my back. “Mama has dinner ready.”

“How long did I sleep?”

“Several hours. Let me help you up.” He helped me stand, then held my arm as we made our way back downstairs to the long table covered in food. We sat down to the normal

harassment that happened during meals. Luke started his nudging, until Vernon Sr. threatened to take his presents away.

After dinner, we gathered around in the living room with Parker sitting at my feet while the younger boys passed out all the presents.

Vern smiled when Becca opened a new silk dress, but Martha cried when she opened hers. All the men and boys got new silk shirts and wool suits except Parker. I opened a present from my family: a quilt with beautiful gold rings. I couldn't contain my laughter when Parker opened a package containing longhandles from his mother. He refused to open his gift from me until I opened mine from him.

I opened a box with a deep red ribbon. I moved the cotton, covering a small silver bell with the inscription, "Ky always Parker" on one side and an oval with a rose crossing a heart on the other, just like my charm. "It's beautiful."

Parker began to unwrap a long slender box that I had given him. He opened it to reveal a matching pair of six-inch Bowie knives with high polished handles wrapped in strips of gold. "Ky. These are the ones I saw in Boston."

"Yes they are. I knew you wanted them." I kissed him. "I'm sorry about earlier."

"You're forgiven." He kissed me again. "You need to go get some sleep." After saying goodnight to every one, we went back upstairs where I quietly lay down with no arguments, but Parker's pacing kept me awake. Hours passed when he finally decided to lie down with his hand lying on my belly.

Parker hadn't been in bed long when a pain in my stomach woke me and I struggled to keep from waking my husband, but another pain hit. I lay as perfectly still until a stronger pain hit. "Ugh."



“Ky. What’s wrong?” Parker sat up from a sound sleep.

“I don’t know,” keeping my hands on my belly. “Help me go pee.” Setting the pot on the stool, he held my arm until I finished, then put me back into the bed. Leaving me resting, he left the room, only to return moments later with a glass of tea. I drank the tea and only had a couple more pains before they stopped completely. Parker lay with my back to his chest and his hand resting on my belly while we waited for the pains to start again.

## Chapter 29

“Parker. Where is Kylie?” Martha asked, looking at the tired face of her son. “Have you slept any?”

“A little. It has been over a month since the false contractions started. I don’t think she’s slept a full night since Christmas.”

“She is getting close, so be patient with her.” Martha set a cup of coffee down in front of him.

“Vern, get out of my way!” I shouted

“Kylie, you’re going to fall over, you need someone to catch you,” Vern teased.

“Vern, I’m going to hurt you.” I punched him in the arm. “Get out of my way and I mean it.”

“Vern. Don’t start with Kylie this morning. You gave her all kinds of grief last night, so don’t start on her today.” Martha scowled at her oldest child.

I sat down at the table next to Parker to wait for breakfast. Vernon Sr. and Pappa came in the door talking about the latest attack by the jayhawkers and Lincoln's stance on politics. "I'm leaving." I got up to leave.

"Ky, sit down. Pappa, Daddy, please no war talk this morning." Parker pulled me close.

"Another bad night for Kylie girl." Pappa leaned down and kissed my head.

"Yes. Worse than the others." Parker frowned, giving me a kiss on the forehead. I sat eating a small plate of biscuits and gravy with bacon on the side, but no eggs. "Ky, you need to eat more." Parker looked at me as I left after only a few bites.

I walked out onto the porch, leaving everyone behind. I stood looking over the farm and leaning against a porch rail. My hands rested on my large belly as I stared at the sun, glad to see it even though it was still cold, I could leave my temporary prison. I rubbed my hand across my hip, trying to relieve the nagging backache.

Horses danced around the corral, reminding me that Parker wanted to make another trip to Boston to deliver more mares. We also expected several deliveries of horses to the farm; the largest wouldn't arrive until March, and all of them had to be broken by June. I couldn't wait until Parker would let me start working again.

Only little traces of snow covered the ground as I walked around the porch. The chill felt good but my body craved sleep; my once constant companion had become a complete stranger. Parker worked without much sleep, complaining, but he kept me close. He and Vern scared me when they stepped out the door.

"Ky." Parker wrapped his arms around me, resting his hands on my belly. "You need to try to rest today. You didn't get much sleep last night."

“I will, but that’s all I seem to be doing.” I laid my hands on his, intertwining our fingers. “I can’t sleep because all I am doing is resting. Take me on a walk.”

“I’ve work to do.” He kissed my head, then laid his cheek on it. “I don’t want you to overdo it.” I leaned my head against his chest putting more weight on his arms. “That’s not fair, Ky.”

“I know.” I smiled.

“A short walk.” Parker offered me his arm, guiding us down the path in front of Becca’s house to sit on the small bench. “Ky, what’s wrong? You’ve been restless and not eating.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t felt like myself. My back’s aching.” I leaned against his arm.

“Have you told anyone?”

“No. I don’t need or want anymore attention.” I squeezed his arm, while the tiredness of my body called.

“I have lots of work to do. Let’s get you back to the house.” Parker held his hand out to help me stand.

I looked down as moisture ran into my boots. “Parker, I can’t stop it.” I squeezed his hand when a pain shot through my back, buckling me over. “Ugh.”

“Ky.” He lifted me into his arms and carried me back to the house. “Mama!” His shouts vibrated in my ears while his arms kept a tight grip on my body as his feet echoed on the floor.

“Vern, go get Doc Reynolds.”

“Parker?” Martha rushed into the room.

“What’s wrong?” Becca came in just behind her.

“The baby’s coming!” he called, lowering me to stand at the end of the bed. Covers flew off the bed before he helped me sit down. Jerking my boots off, he threw them across the room. I clutched his shoulder and wailed from another pain. “Ky. Stand up. Lean on me.”

“It hurts.”

“Yes dear, it does,” Martha said as she walked through the door. “Here, hold on to me, so Parker can get your pants.” She held me with Parker barely touching me when I cried from the pain again.

“Becca!” Martha shouted.

“Coming!” Becca called from downstairs.

“Lay her across the bed.” Martha helped adjust me on the bed. “Becca.”

“Yes,” she said as she entered the room with water and a stack of rags.

“Go get Gerty,” Martha ordered.

“I sent Vern for Doc Reynolds.” Parker turned, looking toward his mother.

“She’s getting the things she’ll need,” Becca told them. “Cord and Luke went to get Kylie’s folks.” I interrupted their conversation with another scream.

“Ky.”

“Hold her leg, Parker. Becca, get the other one,” Martha ordered.

“It hurts!” My agony continued.

“Where’s Gerty?” Martha stormed to the door. “Gerty, get yourself up here. The baby’s coming fast.” Martha came back, lifting me up so I could lean my back against her.

Gerty walked through the door, carrying a bundle with her. “Get her out of here!” I shouted not wanting her near me, but another pain hit, increasing the pressure between my hips, causing me to grab the bed and Parker’s arm.

“I can see the head,” Gerty said, drawing Parker’s attention to see for himself.

“Why’s she bleeding?” he asked.

“It’s natural. The blood helps move the baby out.” Gerty never looked up from my body.

“Ugh.” Parker moaned when I dug my fingers into the flesh on his arm with my next pain, causing me to push against the pain. I had a second of relief before it started again. “Ky, I can see the head.”

“Miss Kylie. I want you to count to three, then push again.” Gerty instructed me.

“One, two, three.” I pushed again, screaming in agony while my body split itself in two.

“The shoulder’s almost out. Now push again.” Gerty went on.

“Take a breath and push,” Martha whispered. I took a deep breath, then pushed hard, digging my fingers deeper into the bed and Parker’s arm. I felt the air leaving my lungs until I thought I would pass out, but all at once, the pressure stopped.

“Oh my,” Becca said.

Parker relaxed his hold on my leg, reaching across my body to caress my cheek. “We have a son.” Parker’s face beamed when we heard our son begin to cry while Martha wiped my face then kissed my head.

Gerty wiped the baby down before she wrapped him in a blanket. “Mr. Monroe would you like to hold your son?” She laid him gently into his father’s arms.

Parker stood slowly, as he moved around the bed to sit next to me. His face showed so much fear and pride. “Mrs. Monroe, would you like to hold our son?” He lowered the baby onto my chest.

I held the tiny bundle in my arms with his little hands folded into fists. “What shall we call him?”

“I have no idea.” Parker smiled. “I do know I could never love anyone as much as I do you.” He leaned down and kissed me. “Where’s your charm?” His finger traced my neck. “I’ve never seen you without it.”

“My ribbon broke this morning.” I looked into his loving eyes. “I meant to tell you but didn’t get the chance.”

“I’m sorry, but I need to get Miss Kylie cleaned up,” Gerty said.

“Becca, come take the baby,” Martha told her. “Parker, you need to go see where everyone else is.” He looked at his mother, not wanting to leave my side. “I’ll stay with her but we need to get her cleaned up. Please.”

Becca stood over Parker while I held my son, kissing him softly. “I will see you in a bit my little Kennedy.”

“Kennedy?” His father looked at me.

“Yes. Kennedy Elias Monroe.” I handed my tiny babe to his father.

He kissed his son. “Kennedy Elias,” he whispered before handing him to Becca then turned back to me. “I love you.” His lips hovered inches from mine. “I’ll be back soon.” He kissed me again with our tongues gently caressing each other’s then he left.

I lay on the bed with Martha and Gerty working together to clean me up. I moaned each time they mashed on my belly, but I was all dressed and resting in the bed when Doc Reynolds walked through the door.

“You didn’t wait on me,” he laughed, examining me and my son. He had just finished when word came that all my family had arrived. “You get some rest.” He turned to Parker, who had been standing quietly in the corner. “Congratulations, you have a beautiful family.”

“Thank you.” Parker shook his hand then came over to me, taking his son before leaning down, and kissing me. “I love you.” He touched my cheek. “Do you feel like going downstairs or staying up here?”

“Downstairs.” I smiled. He stood, holding his son close, then offered me his arm. He took it very slowly because it was the first time since Kennedy’s birth that I had been on my feet. “I do need to go pee and not on a chamber pot.” He laughed as we stepped into the living room to greet my family.

“Kylie, why are you out of bed?” My mother scolded, but my siblings interrupted her by wanting to see the baby.

“Go sit down,” Parker told them. “Or you’ll not get to see him.” He laughed when they sat around the room. “Go put your boots on,” he told me before he walked over to my father then laid our son in his grandfather’s arms.

Tears came to my father’s eyes as he gently touched Kennedy’s cheek. I watched him, knowing it would never be the same between us. He kissed his grandson’s forehead.

“Kennedy. I am truly sorry for my actions toward you, your Mama, and your Papa. I was a fool to think my daughter couldn’t love a man so quickly. I had forgotten how easy it is to love someone with all your heart at first sight.” He held Kennedy close, not wanting to let him go.

Parker wiped the tears off my face. “Let’s take you to go pee.” He walked me out to our house and up to our chamber room.

“Can we come home?” I asked.

“Not tonight. Maybe in a few days when you’re stronger.” He helped me get redressed.

“Let’s go see our son.” Back in the main house, we found my mother trying to soothe my son.

“Kylie, have you fed him yet?” She looked up giggling at the tiny sound.

“No.” I tightened my grip on Parker’s arm.

“Kylie, we need to go upstairs so you can learn how to feed your son.” Martha moved up, smiling. I frowned, scared to face my life; Parker helped me to our room and sat next to me on the bed.

“Kylie, you need to wash the nipple before you offer it to him.” My mother started; she handed me a rag from the water basin so I could clean it, while my husband watched everything.

“Kylie.” Martha moved to sit in the chair near me. “For a little while you may have some pain in your stomach.”

“No. I can’t do this.” I looked into Parker’s worried face, trembling.

“Ky. You can do this. You have to do this. There’s nobody we can get for a wet nurse.” He whispered and reached in front of me, holding our son with one hand while he waited for me to comfort him.

“Turn his little head, placing your nipple into his mouth.” My mother spoke gently, after seeing the terrified look on my face.

I just held my son, frozen from fright. “Ky.” Parker pulled me tight before he gently turned our son’s head. He touched his lips, drawing his attention away from the screams. “Ky, rub his cheek with the nipple.”

“How do you know?” I stared at him.



“Its how we get a colt to feed, you know that?” Parker tilted my head so he could look at me. “You need to get him to eat. You know how.” He kissed me.

I looked back at the tiny babe in my arms. I held my breast in my hand, gently caressing my son’s cheek. He took it but let it go, so I did it again and he took it then released it again. “Ugh,” I moaned.

“Ky, take it easy.” He kissed my cheek then he held Kennedy’s tiny head still so I could touch my nipple to the little lips. Kennedy took it this time and began to suck. I tried to pull him away from my chest but Parker wrapped us in his embrace, giving as much comfort as he could. “Honey, please relax. Mama said that this would happen.” He kissed the back of my hair then he touched our son’s tiny cheek. “He has a good hold on it.” We sat there until Kennedy fell asleep in my arms.

“You both need to get some rest.” My mother moved up to kiss us both on the cheek. “We’ll come by tomorrow, and I bet that you’ll have to chase Karri Ann and Ashley off.”

“Thanks for coming, Mother Bellows.” Parker hugged her. “Ky, do you need to go outside?”

“Yes.” He took Kennedy from me, laying him in the cradle, which sat away from the window. He helped me stand, then led me downstairs to say good-bye to my family. Parker stood close as my father hugged me for the first time since June. We waved at my family while they departed before escorting me to visit our home again. He helped me wash, then we returned to watch our son sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ky. Wake up.” Parker nudged me, pushing me into a sitting position.

“I need to pee,” I complained.

“Use the chamber pot.”

“Ugh,” I complained.

“Use it.” Parker lifted Kennedy out of the cradle. “Hurry up. He’s wet.” Parker went to the dresser that held all of Kennedy’s clothes.

I sat on the pot, watching my husband change his son’s diaper. “Where’d you learn to do that?”

“I do have two younger brothers.” He laughed. “Mama made sure that if she needed help, I could change a diaper.” He picked up our son. “Here, take Kennedy.”

“Hello, Gorgeous.” I kissed my son, who was still crying.

“Kylie, do you need any help?” Martha stepped into the room.

“No. Just bleeding more than I’m used to.” I frowned.

“Let me show you the best way to make them work.” She folded some rags up twice as thick and long as the one I was wearing. “You will probably need to do them this way for at least three or four weeks.”

“Three or four weeks!” I shouted. “One week is bad enough.”

“Ky. Quit worrying about that now, Kennedy needs feeding.” Parker held his hand out to me. I took it, letting him draw me into his lap. He gently washed my nipple then helped me adjust our son so we could hold him together while he suckled at my breast. I stiffened as the pain hit. “Ky. Close your eyes; lean against me, and take a deep breath.” He tilted my head so he could look at me. “I love you, Ky.” He kissed me, caressing my tongue, and getting my mind off the pain.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I can’t do it anymore,” I cried, frustrated from having to feed my son every couple of hours.

“Ky. Please. Relax. He doesn’t eat well, if you’re upset.” Parker held me close.

“Honey, please.”

“Parker, it’s just too hard.” My tears flowed.

“Ky, will you accept a wet nurse, if I can find one?” Parker whispered. “The pain has stopped, and I am getting behind in the breaking.”

“I could help.”

“It’s too soon for you to be out there.” He touched my cheek. “I can’t wait to see you out there, but Kennedy is only a week old.”

“If you get a wet nurse, I want her clean, and she can have Gerty’s old room and she’ll need new clothes.” I leaned into Parker.

“Are you feeling all right?” My husband put his hands on my cheeks and forehead.

“Stop. I am fine.” I elbowed him.

“I love you,” he whispered, laughing at his joke.

## Chapter 30

Three weeks had passed since Kennedy’s birth, and I still bled, which kept Parker at a distance. My body craved his touch, and I was determined to draw his attention away from the horses and back to me. I kept an eye on the blood flow until it almost stopped, making it possible to satisfy my desires.

“Mama.” I walked into the kitchen. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Kylie, are you going to help Parker?” she asked, holding a plate of chicken livers.

I stole a liver, biting into it. “Yes, but I want to ask you something?”

“What is it?” She slapped my hand when I tried to take another one.

“Would you be able to watch Kennedy for a night? I want to spend time with Parker.”

“I would love to watch my grandson.” Martha smiled. “But will Parker allow it?”

“He will if he knows what’s good for him.” I stole two more livers and ran toward the door.

“Kylie!” she shouted, causing me to turn and face her. “When?”

“I’ll let you know when I get it arranged.” I darted back into the kitchen, stealing more liver, and grabbing my coat and guns.

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I waited three more days, and the time came to put my plan into action. “Cornell. Do you have this?” I asked, walking out from behind a mare.

“Yes, Miss Kylie,” he said, looking up from where he massaged the leg of another mare.

“Good. I’ll be back after lunch.”

“All right, Miss Kylie.” Cornell took over the care of the two I had been working with.

I went into the kitchen of the main house to wash my hands, trying to remove as much of the horse smell as possible. Kennedy lay in his cradle in the living room, waving his arms to the sound of Martha’s singing.

“How’s Mama’s little boy?” His eyes twinkled up at me when I picked him up, and carried him to our bedroom.

I laid him on the bed and changed him before loosening my shirt and corset so he could eat. My nipple ached while I cleaned it before putting my son against my chest to relieve the

pressure held tightly within. I looked across the room at the pallet where the wet nurse slept. Parker didn't want me to have find her when Kennedy needed to be fed during the night. He had bought her from one of the other farms after her own baby died. I fed my son in the mornings and evenings while she did all the rest. She hardly spoke, and I had seen the markings of a recent whipping and suspected it caused her baby's death. To add to my suspicions she flinched each time somebody yelled.

I sat in the rocker that had once rocked Parker, because we had yet to move back into our home. Closing my eyes, the gentle sucking sensation brought back distant memories of Parker, holding my nipple between his teeth.

"You're so beautiful when you do that." Parker stood in the doorway, smiling at me. "I wondered why you left."

"Why are you here?" I asked, trying to ignore my wayward thoughts.

"I wanted to watch." He closed the door, then came to sit on the bed near me. "I never thought I'd like being a father."

"Wait. This is the easy part, especially for you." I kissed his hand when he touched my cheek. "How long do you plan on working this evening?"

"We're behind, and several are requiring more time. For some reason, my best helper keeps sneaking off to allow another man to suck on her breasts." He cocked his eyebrow up. "And we have more horses coming in on Friday."

"I'm a little tired and thought it would be nice to go to bed with my husband."

"I've been waking you." He looked upset.

"No, but I sleep better when you're there, and I do get lonely going to bed without you."

"If it will help you, I'll be in early."

“How early?”

His smile went crooked, “When do you want?”

I lifted his hand to my lips. “No going back after dinner. Vern and the others are good at what they do.” I paused. “Or are you trying to avoid me?”

Parker knelt in front of me, kissing his son’s tiny head. “I’ll be glad when you get older, so you can help me keep an eye on your Mama. I know she’s up to something.” I pushed him away playfully. “If I want everything lined up and ready for this evening, I need to go now.” He kissed me softly. “I’ve been missing you too.” He kissed me again then walked to the door. “You know, I’m a little jealous of Kennedy.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because, he can put those in his mouth every few hours,” Parker smiled and winked, then walked out the door as I continued to feed our son. Kennedy would need feeding one more time before leaving him with his nurse. After putting my son back in his cradle, I ate some lunch, then went back out to work with the horses.

The afternoon moved slowly; my own anxiety made it hard for me to focus. Parker agreed to come in early, not as a husband but as a lover, my lover. Leaving Cornell in charge of the horses, it gave me about two hours before dinner, and I wanted everything ready. I stepped into our home to begin my preparations, laying out the dinner plates with tea for me to drink and brandy for Parker. Several pots of water heated on the stove in the chamber room, so we could start with a warm bath, and I left the water to cool on its own with two more pots heating on the stove.

The last task, I needed to feed my son, the softness of his lips sucking on my breast added to my desires to feel Parker, touching and holding them. The door to our room opened to reveal

my husband's face, showing he wanted time with me. We didn't speak; he only gave me a tender kiss before sitting on the bed to watch our son. He took Kennedy when he pulled away, holding him with tenderness and love.

"You want to know something?" he whispered while stroking the cheek of his son. "I really don't like to share but since I love you so much I can make an exception." A hand reached out to me. "Are you coming?" After covering myself back up, I accepted my husband's hand as he led me downstairs.

"Hanna, here is Kennedy. If there are any problems come get us." Handing our son to his wet nurse, he offered me his arm after we had both kissed our baby. "See everyone in the morning." We left with my arm wrapped around the strong arm I longed to hold me.

Our home stood quiet and warm, except for the flames dancing in the fireplace while I guided us up to the chamber room to wash off the smell of our lives. We poured the two pots of hot water into the tub then slowly began to undress each other one piece at a time. Our passion began to fuel our desires as Parker lifted me into his arms before stepping into the tub.

We kissed, exploring each other's body as the water cooled. "Get up." Parker pushed me out of the tub. "We can't afford for either of us to get sick. He dried us off, then helped me slide into my camisole and pantaloons, finishing with a thick soft robe. I watched his muscles flex with his movements while he dressed before we headed downstairs to the waiting dinner.

"This is nice." Parker smiled at the full plates of food with only the distant glow of the fireplace for light. He kissed me. "Do you really want to eat first?"

"Yes, because you'll need all your strength." I smiled at him while he chuckled. "Besides you may have to practice a little." I winked, letting him know how much I wanted him.

“You’re going to regret saying that.” He kissed me, pushing his tongue against my lips and giving me a taste of what he planned to do. “Let’s eat so I can show you how much practice I don’t need.” We nibbled at the food sitting in front of us and found it hard to focus on anything but our desires. Dropping his napkin in his plate, Parker threw me over his shoulder forcing me to hang onto his waist.

Parker’s feet barely touched the steps before he threw me onto the thick coverings on the bed. I looked up as he dropped his robe, exposing his muscled chest. He stared at me, hesitating about what to do first.

“Parker?”

“Shh.” He removed his longhandles. “Stand up.” My fingers wrapped around the hard calluses on his offered hand.

I stared up at his face until he untied the belt that held my robe together, pushing it off my shoulders. He traced the lace lightly touching my skin, guiding him to the single ribbon holding my camisole in place. His fingers held the soft cloth, slowly pulling on it, waiting for it to expose my breast. The light material fluttered down until it lay on top of the robe.

Dropping to his knees, Parker’s hands trembled until he wrapped them around my breast and began to feed at them. My head fell back at the sensation and the release of pressure held within them. Deep desires drifted inside me, wanting more, craving more, and needing more. My husband’s lips suckled at my nipples and his fingers slowly removed my pantaloons.

His hands pushed against my inner thighs, forcing them farther apart until he was satisfied. I tensed with the unexpected touch of his fingers on my lower lips, since the last time he explored them had been in Boston. He continued his teasing, creating a hunger that I couldn’t control. My hands twined in his hair, jerking his head away from my breast.



His blue eyes stared at me, glowing as he fought to control himself. I leaned down, taking his tongue into my mouth, holding tight to his neck and tasting the remnants of the milk. Tightening his arms around me, while sliding his fingers inside my canal, he lowered my body to the bed. Lying next to me, he found the same rhythm with both his tongue and fingers, causing me to grimace from the unexpected pain.

“Ky?” Parker pulled away so he could look into my eyes.

“I am all right. It has just been a while.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I shifted out of his grip, bringing his already thick shaft into my mouth, wrapping my hand around the base. I began to tease his jewels, closing my eyes, enjoying the feel of my husband’s body. The taste of his clean soft skin brought on deeper sensations.

I moaned my satisfaction as Parker nibbled on my lower lips. He sucked and licked gently, sliding his fingers inside my body, revealing the tenderness of my flesh. Ignoring the pain, I allowed my desire drive me forward, encouraging my husband to continue his search for his own relief.

Parker pulled away first, scooting back up to my face, kissing me with juices still moist on his lips. He shifted my legs to drape over his before slowly sliding inside. I bit my lip so I wouldn’t scream, grabbing the covers to fight against the pain when he pushed in deeper. My back bowed with his weight, tightening his hold between my hips.

The pain forced me to bite harder on my lip as my lover found his rhythm, mashing continuously on the bruises inside my canal created by Kennedy’s birth. I wrapped my legs around his back, tightening my hold and locking my feet together. I could taste the blood from

my lip, while tears streamed down my face and into my hair. It had been so long since I last felt these familiar sensations.

“I love you,” I gasped.

He forced my hands to release the covers, and held my hands in his. He stopped. “I love you.” He kissed my forehead. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He smiled. “Scream, if you want.” He kissed me again. “Please scream.” He squeezed my hand, kissing me enjoying the closeness. My body quaked at the faster pace of his movements. “Scream.” I shook uncontrollably to the deep, fast pressure growing in my body, which caused me to moan. With several more hard thrusts, I squeezed his hands and screamed to his pulsation when he called my name.

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We lay on our bed wrapped in each other’s embrace. I listened to his heartbeat as he began to relax. “Ky, I wanted to tell you, I’ll be leaving in a few days to join the Missouri Irregular forces.”

“What!”