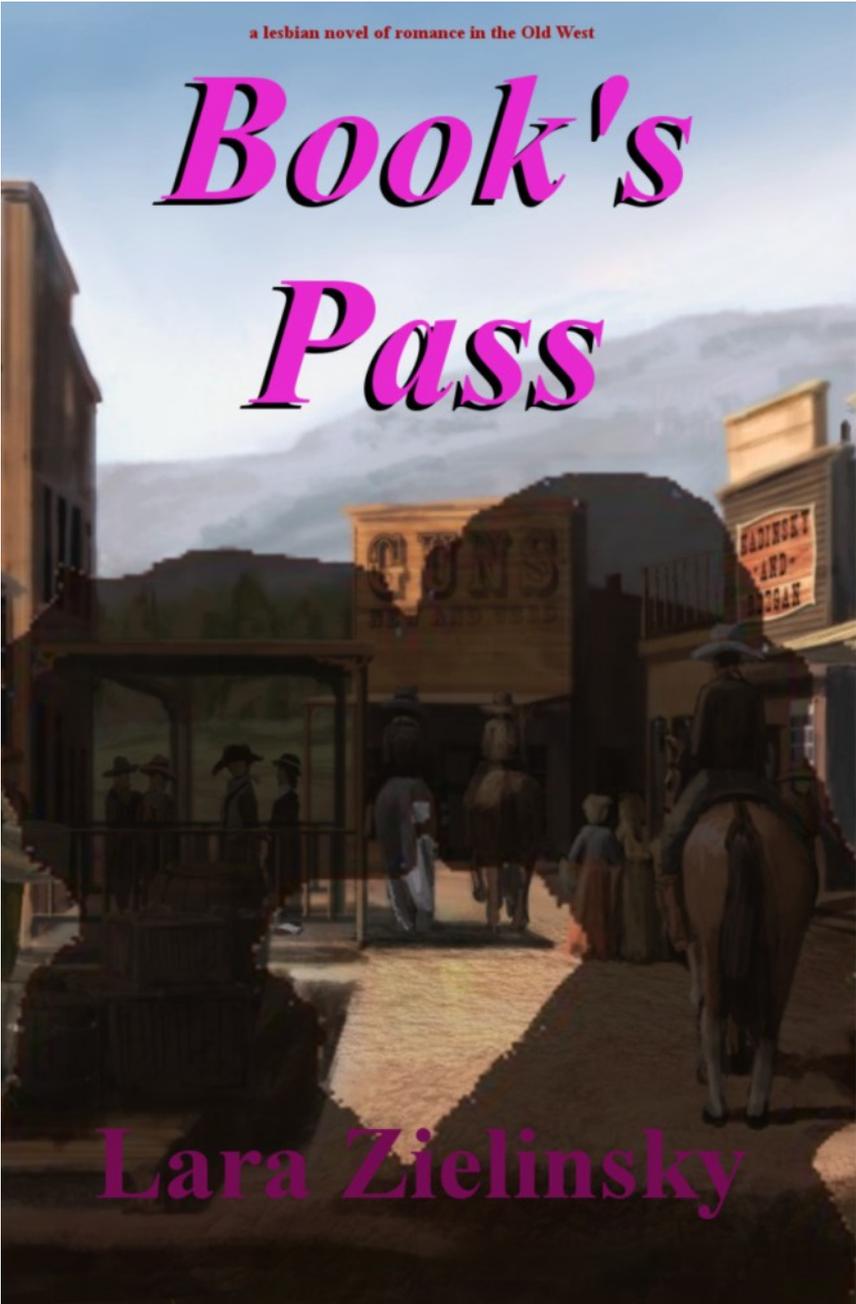


a lesbian novel of romance in the Old West

Book's Pass

Lara Zielinsky



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by Lara Zielinsky

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Chapter 1

Emmeline rounded the side of a building. She noted the mercantile -- Mead's Supplies for Every Day -- with stacks of seed still out on the front porch. A few buildings further on she found a farrier's with the shed doors still open as she passed by. and guided her horse onto the well-packed dirt of the main street. The lack of people in any of the establishments raised her curiosity. Then she heard the hollerin'.

Turning her horse's head to the noise, she searched beyond the buildings for the source, not readily seeing any cause in the two- and three-story houses she passed. All were just as still as the establishments on the main street.

She finally found the saloon's, its wooden doors were still, no one entering or exiting. No, the noise was coming from somewheres else.

Emmeline geed her horse forward, watching his ears atwitchin', and looking around herself as she tried to decide what the sounds were about. The more she went forward the more sounds began to separate into voices. She heard men, and some women, and then one woman's in particular, arguing. But she still couldn't make out all the words. Somethin' about getting off her property.

With one hand staying on the reins, easy and steady, eyes darting this way and that, she slid her hand down over her leggings and fingered off the leather strap off her holstered gun. She was definitely gettin' a feel it was gonna be needed.

Slowly she removed her left foot from its stirrup, threw a leg over, and slid off Bug's back, landing soundlessly on the ground. Slapping his rump, her signal to find a safe place to hole out, she watched him lift his nose before trotting off down a side street. That was likely the direction of the town livery.

They'd traveled a long road together, she and Bug, and he'd never failed to reappear or find himself a sweet hay bale given out by an even sweeter hand. Emmeline smiled. She'd often had a touches from those sweet hands herself, tending a wound, or tending other needs. Silently she wished Bug luck and then focused her mind on handling whatever this was coming up ahead.

She strode around the corner and found herself on the edges, looking toward a two story home set wide on the lane with a raised wall separating the property from the lower street level. A mob milled before it, some shaking fists, others barking at their neighbors. There seemed to be a good measure of shovin' and hollerin' and, now that she was at ground level with 'em, Emmeline was again hard pressed to separate one voice from another. No one had noticed her yet, so she circled around the crowd, seeking a clear line of sight to identify the central characters in the conflict.

On the house stoop she found them. A woman in tightly bodiced gown with Spanish styling at the wrists and shoulders stood with her hands on her hips regally staring down upon a burly man in duster at the bottom of her short set of steps. He was covered in the typical trail threads of a cattleman. The dark brown hair piled artfully atop the woman's head added to a general "don't mess with me" attitude coming off the woman in waves. Emmeline smiled at the sight of another woman who clearly, like herself, didn't take shit from nobody.

"Bring her out here right now!" the man shouted. He put his hands on the step railing, looking about to haul himself up. He even put his booted right foot on the lowest of the steps. Emmeline leaned forward, fingering her pistol, already gauging distances. But the brunette took one step forward to the edge of her porch and he released the railing. Emmeline smirked.

Then the woman spoke and Emmeline could have sworn there was laughter in her tone. She knew her movement had had the desired effect on her opponent. "The young miss doesn't want to come to the likes of you."

"She's mine, and she'd come when told if'n you wasn't keepin' her!" The man's bluster was rapidly shortening his speech. Emmeline sensed that physical violence was only a word or two away now.

Since everyone's eyes were on the man and woman facing off, Emmeline slipped in along the group unnoticed and was just behind a man encouraging, "You tell 'er, Jameson!"

"And you keep out of this, Mr. Walton, or I'll deny you entry to my house when you come in from the trail next."

"But Miss Reina, she's his."

"She has decided to end her association, and I won't tell her different. A woman has a right to her own choices."

"She's no woman. She's my girl and I make her decisions!" Jameson hollered.

In a move that surprised both Emmeline and Reina, he stormed onto the porch of the house. Reina was suddenly backed against her own railing. Emmeline darted forward.

Spittle flying from his uneven teeth and unshaven jaw, the man had obviously, finally, had enough of talk. "I found her a good 'un and she's gonna take him."

Emmeline sprang over the railing, grabbing his raised fist with the barrel before he finished speaking. Even in her awkward stretch, she wrapped her hand around his wrist, turning the bones, taking the strength from his hand. "It ain't your place to school the lady, sir."

His eyes were wide, startled, and then, as she twisted his wrist further, rapidly filled with pain. "Who t'hell are you?" he shouted.

Throwing her leg over the railing and putting herself on the porch between Reina and Jameson, Emmeline twisted his wrist further, a move which dropped him to his knees. Staring up at her, his eyes were wide as silver dollars. "Ain't you nevermind that. I aim to see this lady is left alone." She lifted her gun out of her holster with her other hand and cocked it in the same motion, barrel pointing

down and not at him, but the implication clear. She'd shoot him if he made a move.

Silence reigned and she quirked a satisfied smile. "Now, this is a mite better."

"Who are you?" came at Emmeline from behind her. She glanced back at the well-dressed woman who now had a name. Reina.

"Name's Soule," Emmeline replied. "So's I got it clear, you wanna tell me the story?"

Shocked sounds rippled through the crowd. Emmeline twitched her gun and for good measure twisted Jameson's wrist again. He whimpered, then everything fell to silence once more.

"His daughter came to my house last night and asked for my help."

"Why your house? What's your relationship to the girl?"

Her back straightening, Reina's brown eyes leveled at Emmeline as if daring her to judge. "I run a women's boarding house."

"Brothel," shouted someone in the crowd. "Bagnio!" shouted another.

Emmeline nodded. "And shelter to runaway girls it would seem." The woman inclined her head slightly, but did not reply. "Where's the girl?"

"In the parlor."

"Fetch her."

"But..."

"Fetch her. We'll all hear what she has to say."

Reina looked around at the crowd, then back to Soule, who nodded reassuringly. She disappeared into the house. A moment later Emmeline could just make out the low sounds of two, no three, females talking. She wondered who else was inside the house.

Reina stepped outside again, this time holding open the door for a young girl who looked to be nowhere near womanhood. The blond was just getting her womanly curves, but still had much of her baby face about her. And she wore her hair still in child's braids. Jameson had been planning to marry her off? Emmeline's stomach turned at the idea of some man having this child to wife.

Jameson tried to wrest his hand away from Emmeline and she warned him down with another sharp twist. Too bad she couldn't muzzle him. He shouted at the girl, "Grace, darlin'! You gotta come home."

Grace looked around at the mob assembled then at Emmeline. "Who're you?"

"Just givin' you the space to make your own choices."

The girl looked at her father. "I don't want to marry Mister Whale, Pa."

"He's paid twenty-three head of cattle for you."

"Just twenty-three?" Emmeline interjected. "Your daughter and she's worth only twenty-three cows?"

"Around here that's a goodly sum, Soule," Reina informed her.

"It's ridiculous." Emmeline pushed Jameson away from her, kicking her boot solidly into his chest. He tumbled down the first step, but stormed quickly to his feet. She leveled her gun at his chest, causing him to draw up short. "And what do I get if I shoot him dead right now for sellin' his girl for 23 cows?"

"A passel o' trouble," Jameson growled. "My hands and my town. You walkin' out o' here wouldn't be in the cards, girl."

"How much does twenty-three head go for over at the yard?" Emmeline said; she'd intended the money for lodging, but, well, it seemed it was meant to be spent elsewhere.

"Almost a hunnert bucks," the man Reina had previously told would be denied entry to her house said. Emmeline recalled Reina had called him Mr. Wilson.

Emmeline scowled, but nodded. That would very nearly wipe out her funds. "Buyin' and sellin' people went out with the War," she said while reaching inside her shirt to her moneybelt. Withdrawing a wad of bills, she threw them with only a cursory glance she'd grabbed enough, at Jameson. "There's your hundred bucks. I just bought your girl."

"You cain't do that. You're a woman."

"My money's same as another's, now git out. Your girl's mine now. And I defend what's mine." She put her thumb on her trigger to back up her words.

Jameson looked at the money, then at Emmeline again. He pocketed the bills. At that sight, the mob, some mumbling, began to break up.

When Emmeline turned to watch him go, still guarding her trigger, she saw Reina out of the corner of her eye. The woman held Grace by the shoulder and the three women watched the town walk away. A few glanced back when Emmeline uncocked her gun, slipping it back in her gunbelt.

Reina spoke. "Soule?" Emmeline looked at her. "Is that your first name or family name?"

"No family. First name's Emmeline."

"Well... Emmeline. How would you like a glass of the best apple cider you've ever tasted?"

"Got anything stronger?" She let out her breath quietly, but the nerves were slower in dissipating.

Reina smiled and Emmeline noticed the soft brown of the woman's eyes. "I might."

To cover her shaking hand, Emmeline patted Grace's shoulder. Reina turned and entered the house, followed by Grace. Finally, Emmeline scanned the empty street one last time before following the madam and the runaway inside.

Chapter 2

Reina sent Grace to the kitchen with a quiet word against the girl's hair before she turned around to gesture her guest into the parlor. "Miss Soule?" She saw the woman had stopped in the foyer studying the large gilt edged mirror. She answered the unspoken question. "I find the men will straighten themselves a bit, as if courting the lady. It enforces the respect I expect to be given in my establishment."

Emmeline removed her bandanna from around her throat and used it to dab at her cheeks, removing some trail dust. Apparently satisfied with the effort, the woman tucked the brown cloth into her jeans pocket. "Where is your usual muscle? I find it hard to believe-

"This may be Jameson's town but I have been here just as long."

"No need to get your back up. I'm just surprised is all."

"No more than I at your appearance." Reina opened a cabinet and withdrew a long necked bottle filled with amber liquid. Two glasses were poured.

"What would you have done if I hadn't come along?" Emmeline accepted one of the glasses, her fingers just brushing those of the madam.

"I still had a few options." Reina considered the Widow Cavanagh who ran the diner and boarding house since her husband's death in the range war. The woman could fell a beast at a hundred paces; but Reina had to admit the widow had not been among the townspeople assembled at her doorstep.

Emmeline said nothing, and Reina looked up from her thoughts to see gold-flecked green eyes studying Reina over the rim of the glass. "You consider your protection the fact that you offer a service most men wouldn't want to see gone." It wasn't a question.

Reina bristled. "I don't allow my girls or my clients to be maligned, Miss Soule."

"I didn't say you did. Just, you didn't have a lot of options before I came along." Emmeline finished the glass and held it toward Reina with a lift of her brow.

Reina took the glass and refilled it. "Are you fishing for a compliment? I didn't think you were the type."

"Nah. Compliments are worthless. I was just noticing a few things." Emmeline shrugged. "I like to know the lay of the land."

The double entendre was not lost on Reina. "You are uncouth."

"I'd say you are as well. But you hide it prettily," Emmeline stepped into Reina's personal space. Their gazes held for a long breath before Emmeline took back her glass from Reina's hand, again brushing the woman's silken olive skin. "Thanks for the drink, Madam."

"My name is Reina Suarez, not Madam."

"I didn't say it wasn't, but thank you. I much prefer Reina."

"Miss Soule." Emmeline Soule simply smirked that Reina had made a point of the more formal address. Then Reina frowned and decided to try another tack. "What brought you here, Miss Soule?"

"I'm hunting someone," Emmeline replied simply, an answer, yet not. The blonde was private, that much was clear.

Reina sipped her cider, pleased with the warm confidence it provided. "That sounds like self-appointed justice."

"It is," Emmeline agreed. She tossed back the final swallow of cider, smacking her lips appreciatively. "Thank you for the drink, Reina. I should be seeing to my Bug."

"Your what?"

"My horse."

"You have a horse?" Reina hadn't seen a horse outside. "Where is it?"

"Most people who travel do." Emmeline chuckled. "I'm sure he found his way to the livery. So I'm gonna go handle that."

Reina watched Emmeline place the glass on a table and turn away. She thought of Jameson possibly out there looking to avenge his humiliation on the new blond interloper to their town. She said quickly, "Be careful." *What the hell am I doing?* Reina thought. The blonde was no one of importance. She would be moving along soon, and her arrival and departure would be quickly forgotten, by everyone.

Emmeline paused with her hand on the doorknob, the door still closed. A smile twitched on her lips as her face turned in profile. She nodded. "You're very welcome, Reina Suarez."

Reina stood, cider glass in hand but untouched, for many minutes in the silence following the latch of the door snicking securely into place. She stared at the knob and wondered why she felt so bereft.

The walk to the livery was easy, just following her nose. Emmeline was glad she didn't need to think too hard about that. She was too on her guard after leaving the brothel. She'd been touched at the concern by the mad- *Reina*, she mentally corrected, extra pleased at their exchange of familiar names. The woman had been telling her to be safe though she didn't need the reminder. Emmeline had been on the receiving end of face-saving revenge a time or two in the past.

Eyes watched her from behind curtains in windows, some plain, some frilly. If everyone hadn't been at the brothel to see the confrontation, clearly they had all heard about it. Emmeline sometimes wished she'd had plainer looks, dark hair instead of blonde, and she could have used a wool dye to cover it up, or cut it shorter, but for her objective, looking exactly like herself was

important. When she found her quarry, she intended for them to know her at first sight.

She quickened her stride and soon rounded the corner of a silent blacksmith's shop and stood in front of the closed doors of the town livery. In reality a big barn, the livery was brightly painted in red, proudly announcing Book's Pass Livery on the sign overhead. So now she had a town name.

The structure was well-kept, a good sign pointing toward the animals being well-treated inside. To the left of the livery stood a small building about double the size of an outhouse but it looked cheerful, also painted red, sporting a tiny porch shading a door and single window. No light on in the window.

Emmeline walked around to the right side of the livery, headed toward the stalls that emptied out onto the fenced paddock. The quiet thumps of hoofbeats against dirt grew louder. Finally she could see moonlight illuminated her golden Bug, prancing in the paddock, as he circled a bay mare. Not disturbing the scene for a moment, Emmeline laid her head on her arms across the top of the paddock fence, watching her horse ply his wiles on the delicately boned bay which was, to all appearances, a truly fine piece of horseflesh.

Bug danced toward the bay, who lifted her slender head from cropping at the grass. When she saw him, he danced backward and to the side, tossing his head. Emmeline smiled. *Playboy*, she thought with warm amusement.

The bay stretched a foreleg forward toward Bug, shifting her weight, but then dropped her nose back into the grass. Emmeline watched Bug stop dancing and his head lifted, as though he was surprised. Emmeline laughed.

The sound brought both horses' heads swiveling around to find her. "Ah, Bug," she said, finishing with another chuckle as she climbed to the top of the paddock fence and threw a leg over. "C'mere." She patted the thick denim covering her thigh.

The golden horse trotted to her. She patted his withers and wondered aloud, "Who took off your saddle and my bags, eh, boy?"

"I did."

Emmeline turned as the bay nosed in front of Bug to scent her. The move would have knocked Emmeline from the fence if not for her quick reflexes in grabbing the wood slat between her thighs.

Emerging from the shadows was a slender woman, dark brunette, younger than Emmeline, brown eyes. She wore a bright red bandanna around her neck and dark blue denim coveralls cut off above the knees. Her shirt was a serviceable red and white plaid.

Emmeline swung down into the paddock, straightening to meet the woman striding toward her. Emmeline held out her hand. "My thanks, then. What do I owe you for the tendin'?"

"You're that woman the town's talkin' 'bout from Miss Reina's place."

Emmeline nodded. "I s'pose."

"What's your name?"

"Soule. And you? You own this place?"

"Name's Caer. My grandmother owns the livery."

"So, Caer," Emmeline stepped closer, enjoying the way the younger woman smiled while absently petting the bay who'd come up to them both. Bug nosed into Emmeline's other side and she held his nose, keeping it from exploring inside her shirt. "What do you I owe you for taking care of Bug here for me?"

"Depends."

"Depends?" Emmeline's smile broadened. "On what?"

"On whether you're staying or just passing through."

"Why's that matter?"

"Passing through pays. Staying," she gestured at a big two-story house on the far side of the paddock, "at the boarding house gets free livery."

"You get many takers on that offer?" Emmeline asked, bemused.

"Don't get many visitors."

"Show me where you stowed my saddlebags and I'll pay for a week upfront. How's that sound?"

"Right this way." Caer turned around and walked into the open stall from where she'd come. The bay followed her, and Bug followed the bay. Emmeline shook her head and followed the trio, a smile playing on her lips.

Chapter 3

Reina Suarez awoke with the dawn as she had every morning since coming to Book's Pass. Slipping from beneath her sheets, she bathed her face in the bracing cool water from the small basin beneath an oval gilded mirror hanging from a knot in the wood beam wall. She sat on the small three-legged stained wood stool before the mirror. Taking up the horsehair brush, she pulled it in long continuous strokes through her mahogany locks, meeting her own gaze in the reflection. She counted her strokes and considered the plan for her day ahead.

The girls would already have collected the eggs from the laying hens. But she could probably start looking at the sheep and determining which were in need of shearing. She could trade eggs to the loom man along with his usual deal for some of the wool. That should be bargain enough to have a winter shawl made for Grace.

Reina hesitated. Would Grace even still be here when winter set into the valley? The air in the evenings was beginning to nip. If Grace wanted to leave Book's Pass, she should do it now, or she'd have to wait until spring. Did the girl know this? Did she intend to leave? Reina realized she needed to answer those questions before she took her day any further.

Pulling off her nightgown, Reina took a linen shift from the squat drawers at the foot of her bed. She pulled a day dress, simple cotton dyed tan, on over that and tied on a darker tan cloth belt to accentuate her waist. She slipped her feet into brown soft leather calf boots.

"Marybelle?" She called out for one of the women who kept her kitchen. Reina looked in the woman's bedroom across from her own. Probably already downstairs. Reina walked to the end of the second floor corridor and reached out for the railing.

"Miss Reina?"

Reina turned to find Grace, in what she suspected was a borrowed nightgown, leaning out from another bedroom. Rachel's and Sally's, Reina knew. OK. So the girls readily had taken the runaway under their wings. The girl's bright blue eyes were still staring at Reina.

"Why don't you walk with me down to the kitchen. We have a great deal to discuss."

Reina smiled as the girl showed her youth by readily jumping into the corridor without taking the time to grab a dressing gown to cover herself. So young. Reina shook her head, but said nothing.

The girl walked behind Reina but she was quite the chatterbox.

"Miss Reina, I must thank you for helping me yesterday. I know that it wasn't well thought out of me, but it's just... Have you met Mr. Whale?" The girl made a sound, a cross between what one might make when surprised by a snake and when cleaning up vomit from the floors of a saloon. It made Reina bite her lip to prevent a chuckle from escaping.

"I have, my dear. And that is a rather... vivid reaction. Thankfully we are not yet eating."

Grace laughed. It was a pretty sound, all tinkling like bells. And appropriate to the carefree youth she was. Reina envied the child's innocence.

But that youth was to be short-lived now. Grace had several grown up decisions to make, in relatively short order. "While we eat, you can tell me what you wish to do next."

"I don't know."

"Do you intend to leave Book's Pass?"

"Can I stay here? I'm a hard worker."

They had entered the kitchen. Marybelle, who ruled here with Reina's blessing, sat in the corner by the hearth, stirring a pot with one hand while reading a book in the other.

"There's only one open position in my establishment, Grace, and you're not old enough for it yet."

"You don't have anything else I can do? I can run a house. I've been running my papa's for two years since Mama died."

"Those are useful skills, but I do not have a place for them here." Reina accepted a bowl of oatmeal from Marybelle. She passed the dish to Grace. She nodded to a drawer and the girl withdrew a spoon from the silver laid within.

"Then why'd you take me in?" Grace sat in a chair at the polished wood table. Reina took her own bowl from Marybelle and the spoon Grace held out and sat down beside her.

"Exactly as the gunslinger said, to give you space to make your own choices."

"She had gone when I came back downstairs," Grace said. "I wanted to thank her, too."

"I am sure the woman has already moved on, my dear. She didn't seem the type to stay anyplace very long."

Grace pouted then her expression cleared. She dove into her oatmeal. Reina poured a bit of honey from a small jar in the middle of the table. Taking an apple from the fruit bowl laden with them, she lifted her hand. Marybelle placed a paring knife in her palm. "Thank you, Marybelle."

"You're welcome, Miss Reina. There's fresh milk in the pitcher. Sammy brought it in from the guernsey."

"Thank you." Reina reached for the aforementioned pitcher as Marybelle brought two mugs to the table.

"Will there be anythin' else?"

"I can wash the dishes," Grace offered eagerly.

"Well then, there you have it. Go finish your book in the parlor, Marybelle. Miss Grace Jameson will do the dishes."

"Yes, Miss Reina."

"Do scribe a list of things you need. I'm making a trip to the general store when I come back from seeing to the shearing."

"Yes, Miss Reina." Following her words, Marybelle quit the kitchen leaving Reina and Grace alone eating their oatmeal.

"Shearing?" Grace asked.

"Yes, I also own a flock of 47 sheep."

"I could watch them for you."

Reina appreciated the girl's quick thinking. "I already have several girls do that in shifts." Grace's face fell. "However, until you do decide what to do, I suppose you could help out."

The bright smile returned to the girl's face and Reina frowned at herself as she turned her attention back to her breakfast. When they were finished, Reina left the girl washing the dishes and went to the parlor to get the list from Marybelle.

"Marybelle, do you have it?"

"On the table, ma'am," the woman said, not looking up from her paperback.

"What are you reading today?"

"A new one from Mr. Twain," she replied absently.

"Is it good?" Grace asked.

"I find it so," Marybelle replied.

Reina watched the interaction with detachment. "I'm going to take Grace with me to the shearing then the store."

"You going alone?" Marybelle asked.

Reina nodded. "Of course. Who else would I go with?"

"Visitor outside," Marybelle replied before retreating behind her book once more.

Reina stalked to the door. If it was Jameson, she'd get the shotgun, she vowed. Yanking the door open, she stormed onto the porch. "Miss Soule?" she blurted in surprise.

Emmeline Soule had made herself at home on the wood slats, feet kicked up on the railing with Reina's shotgun lain across her thighs. Her clothes were clean, and her boots were even shined from the usual trail dust.

Feeling her blood boil, Reina snapped, "How long have you been out here?"

Soule looked up at her, hands still crossed over the shotgun stock and barrel.

"Long enough to assure your night remained quiet."

"Miss Soule, I do not need your protection. It is more likely I will have more trouble if it gets 'round I have a guard."

"Where're you headed this fine morning?" Emmeline unfolded to her feet, standing before Reina and glancing at Grace. "Good mornin' to you, Miss Grace."

"Miss Soule," Grace gushed. "You stayed! I wanted to thank you for yesterday."

"No problem, kid." Emmeline smiled at the girl then turned that smile on Reina.

"So where're you goin' today?"

Reina was disinclined to say, but Grace, silly girl, was guileless and excited. "We're going to shear the sheep!"

Emmeline looked to Reina for confirmation. Setting her jaw, Reina only looked at Grace. "Come along, dear."

Reina ignored Emmeline as she led Grace down the steps and into the street. There was a clatter and then footsteps followed. She glared over her shoulder, grabbed Grace's shoulders and steered

her another way. "This way, dear." Over her shoulder she cast, "Not you, Miss Soule."

"Can I interest you in a bit of breakfast?" Emmeline replied, moseying as casual as you please, thumbs hanging from the loops of her denims.

"Grace and I have already eaten." Reina said nothing more, stalking away from Emmeline Soule and her proprietary looks. Grace was running after her to keep up. Once she reached the livery, Reina looked over her shoulder. Good, she thought, not seeing Emmeline Soule anywhere behind her.

"Miss Reina, what are you doing here?"

"Grace and I are going for a ride," she said, still looking around. "Would you saddle my horse?"

Caer set aside the hay fork she'd had in her hands, leaning it against the livery wall, and disappeared inside the stable.

When her bay was led out, Reina lifted Grace into the saddle first then swung up behind her, riding astride with her split skirt. "Ready, dear?" Grace was holding onto the pommel with white knuckles, but she nodded vigorously.

Reina walked her horse down Main Street, looking this way and that as she held the girl before her on the saddle.

Mr. Carter, the blacksmith, stopped hammering and watched her pass. Mr. Innaker, the potter, stopped his wheel. Both men said nothing and went back to their work, casting their eyes quickly away. Reina was used to this treatment, the odd detente between seeing Reina as a woman and then remembering what business she had in their town.

Shaking off the melancholy, Reina turned her horse off the Main Street and told Grace to hold tightly. She geed her horse to a smooth loping gallop. Snug between her arms, Grace's anxiety soon gave way to breathless giggles.

Reina, too, was light of heart by the time she spotted the sheep herd milling on the lee side of a rocky outcropping. Vivian and Caroline leaned on crooked staffs in the shade of a large poplar. Both women looked up at the sound of hoofbeats. Their expressions were warm at first then to Reina's surprise turned consternated and wary. Vivian went to the red gingham covered pile nearby and came up shouldering the shotgun. "Miss Reina!" she said, and her voice held clear warning.

"Put down the gun, Vivian. It's just me. This is Grace."

"Get down," Vivian said. She hadn't lowered the shotgun.

Reina dismounted, pulling Grace down as Caroline came hurrying up. "Who's your shadow?" Caroline asked.

"My what?" Reina turned then and felt the heat rise fast and furious to her face. "Miss Soule!" she yelled, grabbing the shotgun from Vivian. "I told you to leave me alone."

Emmeline stopped her horse, remained mounted, and her gun remained holstered. The shotgun she'd taken from Reina's porch nowhere in sight. Wary but curious, Reina slowly lowered her shotgun.

"Why are you still here?" she demanded.

"May I dismount and trust you not to put a plug in my stomach?"

Reina directed with the barrel of the shotgun. "Toss your gun belt first."

"I'm no danger to you," Emmeline replied.

"I'll be the judge of what and what is not a danger to me and mine."

Emmeline slid from the back of her horse. It's name flitted through Reina's memory. Bug. The golden horse stepped away from Emmeline and began cropping at the grass.

Reina stared at Emmeline. "Why do you call him Bug?" She frowned at the curiosity which had seized control of her tongue.

Emmeline came closer and Reina found her gun barrel lowering, her arms acting on a will of their own.

"He was always bugging me for treats when he was a foal," Emmeline replied easily, conversationally.

"You've had him since he was a foal?"

Emmeline smiled. "Yeah."

Reina felt the heat of her anger recede from her chest. Under Emmeline Soule's steady regard, a faint smile playing at the corner of pale lips, the heat moved to Reina's cheeks. Unaccountably her stomach fluttered.

"So," Emmeline said, turning away to take in the other women and the sheep quietly cropping grass. "This is your flock?"

"Yes."

"You're a resourceful woman, Miss Reina."

"Thank you." Reina watched Vivian and Caroline stare between her and Emmeline Soule. "These are Vivian and Caroline."

Emmeline nodded and smiled at both women. "Emmeline," she introduced herself.

Both women looked at Emmeline with awe, and a knot of frustration made Reina curt. "We'd better start the shearing. We don't have all day."

"We started separating the ewes," Vivian said.

"Good. Well..." Reina looked around. It would take her and Vivian all their attention to shear the sheep. "Grace, would you assist Caroline with herding?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Caroline took Grace under her right arm and walked toward the main body of the flock.

Reina resolutely ignored Emmeline Soule, turning her back on the woman to meet Vivian's curious gaze. "All right, let's get to work."

Reina felt Emmeline Soule's eyes on her as she worked, and it itched as much as the sweat that was soon pouring down her back from the strenuous task of wrestling a ewe between the two stakes and tying it in place. Vivian worked with one blade on the animal's right side while Reina worked on the left. A burlap bag took the clippings.

Reina knew the next sheep would fill the first bag and started looking around for the second bag.

Suddenly Emmeline Soule was holding a burlap sack outstretched and opened between her hands. "Here you go."

In her surprise, Reina lost her grip on the sheep and the straight razor slipped against her hand. "Ow!"

A tan bandanna was pulled tightly around her wrist where the blade had caught. She tried to pull her hand to her chest, but Emmeline Soule would not relinquish it. "Let me go!"

"Just hold on a sec." Emmeline's voice was calm, businesslike. Soothing. Reina growled. Emmeline chuckled. "I ain't wrestled anyone as contrary as you about takin' help, Reina. Just be still. I gotta see if you hit anything vital."

Reina looked down at her hand and wrist wrapped in the bandanna. The tan cloth was liberally stained with blood, her blood, and she felt her pulse throbbing in the other woman's grip. Her vision swam and she swayed. Emmeline's grabbed her and pulled her to a boulder nearby. "Sit," Emmeline said. Reina felt behind her with the other hand and gradually lowered to the stone surface.

The bandanna was gingerly pulled away and Emmeline poked and prodded the skin. Finally she declared, "A nick only. It's already stopped bleeding."

"I have bandages in my saddlebags," Reina said, her head lowered between her shoulders, trying to recover from her near faint. And truthfully, to keep from looking at Soule and seeing an "I told you so" expression.

"All right." Emmeline's touch vanished and Reina found herself lifting her head enough to follow boots walking across the ground. She heard a whistle and then hoofbeats. Golden legs stopped alongside dusty denim, and Reina heard the slap and pull of leather straps as Emmeline opened her saddlebags.

Clean white cloth pressed to Reina's damaged wrist, and then whiskey splashed the torn skin. A helpless gasp escaped Reina's lips at the pain, then a different clean white cloth was gently wrapped around her wrist and efficiently tied off in a little knot. Reina stared at the knotted cloth, not reacting as Emmeline Soule stepped away.

A handkerchief appeared under her nose. Reina looked up at Emmeline as she took it. "For your face," Emmeline said quietly. Reina was suddenly very aware of the tear tracks beginning to dry on her cheeks.

Reina rubbed her cheeks and dabbed at her eyes, then she squared her shoulders and stood. She felt Emmeline's eyes on her but turned instead to Vivian. "Let's finish things, shall we?"

"Yes, ma'am."

As Reina returned to shearing, Emmeline Soule settled on the boulder and Reina couldn't help but glance frequently over as the woman idly stroked her golden horse's head, eyes scanning this way and that, watching over the area. A self-appointed guard.

Chapter 4

By midday, even exuberant Grace was exhausted. The girl constantly had circulated between Caroline, Vivian and Reina, and Emmeline filled with curious questions. Each time Emmeline stood from her perch, behavior Reina classified as 'gentlemanly', she patiently explained something different about her attire, her horse, or her weapons.

So close by, and since distracting herself from the smells of the sheep's wool wasn't completely accomplished with the chatter from Vivian, Reina found herself listening to these little tidbits of the life and ways of the gunslinger. Emmeline referred to the work she did as "bounty hunting." She also said she'd never had to kill anyone, though she had nearly lost her own life twice. Grace's gasp had covered Reina's own at this point. On another visit from the curious girl, Emmeline described her Colt Frontier .45 as a gift, and but the knife from her boot as a trophy.

Beyond learning again the origin of Bug's name, Reina also overheard Emmeline tell Grace about bedding down in the Sonoran Desert and Bug smashing a "rattler long as a rifle" beneath his hooves before it could strike. That had been, Emmeline confessed to Grace, one of the two times she'd almost lost her life. Grace had oohed as expected; Reina's curiosity had grown. She couldn't help wondering what had happened the other time?

Finally, sweat-soaked, Reina waved at Vivian over the last ewe, her signal to desist. The woman nodded gratefully, used her forearm to wipe her brow, and fetched a canteen from among the gingham-covered supplies keeping relatively cool in the shade of a rock shelf about six feet off the ground.

Reina strode to her horse, calling to Grace and Caroline as she untied her canteen from beneath a saddle flap. "Break time," she said. "Grace, come drink some water before we head back."

The sand rustled behind Reina. Studiously she ignored the approach of Emmeline Soule despite the fact that she could feel the blonde woman approaching as though a wave of heat preceded her. It warmed her back, then her belly, and finally her stomach flipped. She splashed water from the canteen on the back of her neck and took a healthy swallow from the open spout. Grace accepted the canteen and drank heartily while Reina splashed a bit of water on the back of the girl's neck as well. "Time to go," she repeated to the girl.

"I could stay," Grace said. "I can help."

Reina hesitated, but Caroline approached and, after a nod to Reina, spoke. "We always can use another set of willing hands. I can send her back with Vivian for supper." Caroline settled a companionable hand on Grace's shoulder.

Reina took the two bags of wool from Vivian who had tied each at the top with several loops of rope. They were ridiculously heavy and Reina felt her back twinge as she accepted the weight.

Straining, she dropped one before lifting the other up until she could tie the remaining length of rope to a buckle on her saddle. Suddenly the heft was less strenuous, and Reina turned to find Emmeline Soule standing inches away, both arms engaged in lifting the bag from below.

The other woman made no sound while Reina finished securing the bag, causing the saddle to lean hard to the weighted side.

Reina stifled her exhalation as she picked up the second bag and waddled with to the other side of her horse. Emmeline was there, again, without a word, lifting it to make the tying go much more quickly.

The saddle adjusted back to the center with the equally balanced weight. Reina lifted her body onto the saddle and turned her horse back to town.

She was dozens of lengths away when she realized she had neglected to say goodbye to Vivian and Caroline as was normal. A

turn in the saddle found Emmeline Soule following on her steed, lazy a pace as you please.

Reina snapped her gaze forward, resolute to ignore the gunslinger. However, her shadow continued to follow at an unsettling distance that was both too close and too far away for Reina's comfort, the sounds of their horses' hooves slapping against the earth breaking the monotonous silence.

Reina rode back to Book's Pass Livery and swung down inside the barn. She growled at Caer Cavanagh when the woman offered to see to her horse. Reina's frustration had mounted over the miles to town, Emmeline Soule's green gaze a heat against her spine and neck. She felt vulnerable and out of control. Taking off the bridle, Reina tied the lead rope to his halter and secured to the peg over the stall trough. While he nosed through the water, light puffs of air the only sign she had been pushing him hard the last mile, Reina unbelted his saddle and slipped it from his back, before tossing it over the top railing of the stall. The metal of her stirrups banged against the wood and it sounded as angry as she felt. Grimly she smiled before retrieving the brush from the outside rack. A glance around found her alone and she minutely exhaled. She stepped out the back to the handpump and filled two buckets full of water before returning to her horse's side.

He eyed her gratefully while she dumped the buckets into the trough. She patted his neck and started brushing his coat, short strokes forward, then long strokes back, conditioning it.

She was working down his foreleg, about to lift his hoof into her hands to examine the frog and check the shoe and nail, when she felt warmth return to her neck. She straightened rigidly, squeezing her hands into fists at her sides, and whirled. "Miss Soule! Kindly _"

Her words died in her throat. Caer Cavanagh stood in the stall opening, holding out a jug to the full length of her arms, and they were shaking. The young woman's eyes were wide, the whites startling in contrast to her tanned skin. She watched Reina closely, uncertainly, as though Reina was a bobcat as likely to use its claws as retreat.

Reina's ire had nowhere to go, and the drain of it left her body weak and shaking. She stumbled to the wall and laid her head against it. "Miss Cavanagh," she said, her voice shaking.

"It's just water," Caer said and her voice wasn't quite steady either. "Thought you might want some."

Reina took the jug and lifted the opening to her mouth, drinking several swallows before returning it. "I... I apologize. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Reina stepped out of the stall, dropping the cross bar into place. She looked up and down the line of stalls.

"She's not here," Caer said. "She was behind you when you entered the livery, but turned her horse's head to the south when you came inside."

Reina nodded, too tired to deny that she had been searching for Emmeline Soule. South. A strange taint emerged in her mouth, bitter. South was the way out of town. So Emmeline Soule was finally leaving Book's Pass.

"I must be getting home," she murmured, her throat surprisingly tight.

"You have a nice afternoon, Miss Reina."

Emmeline Soule leaned against the wall in the shadows of the General Store porch, eyes spying on Miss Reina conversing with

Caer Cavanagh in front of the livery at the other end of the street. The two dark-haired women were as different as night and day. Caer was all gangly and youthful eagerness, bare elbows and knees with her short overalls, and midnight black hair hanging in a braid down her back. Reina, on the other hand, drew Emmeline's attention with an air of reserve as dark and varied as the browns in the woman's hair pinned up artfully, if a bit raggedly now after the morning's work. The dress, though clearly well-sewn at the hands of a skilled seamstress, was function more than fashion. And it showed the curves of a mature woman's figure.

Reina's chin was tight, the jaw squared, a dare to the world to deny her a place in it. Brown eyes looked briefly toward the General Store and Emmeline held her breath, freezing in place, not wanting to be seen.

Whatever thought then crossed Reina's face brought with it lowered lids and rounded shoulders. Sadness, Emmeline read far too easily. The sight of it affected her, as everything about Miss Reina Suarez had affected Emmeline Soule since that first meeting on the porch of the woman's establishment.

Her gaze followed the woman until she had walked out of sight down the street leading to the brothel.

Chapter 5

Caer Cavanagh almost dropped the plates she carried from the kitchen to the small dining room where she and her grandmother planned to take their morning meal. Sitting near a window, Emmeline Soule turned at the ominous clattering.

The blonde woman was dressed in a snug fitting, green plaid flannel shirt. She wore suspenders over each shoulder and the shirt's sleeves were rolled to her elbows. Caer had previously admired the woman's strength watching her on horseback, but presented with it cleaned up and with an easy, welcoming smile like now, made Caer feel like swooning. And she never swooned.

Setting down the plates, Caer said, "I thought you'd left."

"Bug likes the treats you snuck him yesterday." Emmeline shrugged and continued to smile, but there was something tense about her close up. Caer noticed she kept glancing to the window.

Caer started to ask if Emmeline wanted something to eat when the woman pulled a plate across the table and plucked fork from her hand. "I take it, you're stayin'." She heard footsteps and turned to see her grandmother emerging from the kitchen. "We need another plate. Seems we still have a let room."

Gray-white hair tidily in a bun at her nape, Caer's grandmother, Widow Cavanagh, paused in the act of wiping her hands on a linen. "Miss Soule," she greeted. "I would be put out if you hadn't already paid the room for a week."

"My... business can make my hours unpredictable," Emmeline said. She'd been out to the stagecoach office already checking with the telegraph office about noise on the wires.

Widow sat and shooed Caer back to the kitchen as she took the remaining plate on the table for herself. She studied the blonde

who had returned to eating in silence. "What's your business in Book's Pass?"

"Just passing through."

"I know you followed Grace and Reina out to the sheep herd and back in yesterday. Only you turned south 'stead of comin' in for the night."

Emmeline cocked her head to the side but didn't lift her eyes, only lifting a forkful of eggs to her mouth. She made a sound of appreciation as she chewed and swallowed.

"Them's her eggs," Widow said.

"Hmm?"

"The eggs you're eatin'. Come from Miss Reina's chickens."

Speaking around a mouthful, Emmeline said, "In'erestin'," not sounding really interested at all.

"I believe in givin' thanks where 'tis due," Widow replied, taking a bite of the eggs herself.

"Just so," Emmeline said. "And the bacon?"

"Lemulson hog."

"Be sure to pass along my compliments."

"I c'n do that." Widow went on. "You looked out for Grace t'other night."

"Who?"

"The girl Reina took in?"

"Oh. Yeah."

Widow's brow knit close. "I'm gonna ask you a question, Miss Emmeline, and I want you to answer true."

Green eyes glanced up but then quickly lowered again. Widow waited, expecting a denial. Emmeline finished her eggs. Then she

wiped her mouth with the napkin cloth, before setting it on the table under her fist.

"There's a mountain of worry behind a request like that," Emmeline finally said. "And shoulders should never be bowed by such things." Emmeline nodded. "Ask your question, Widow Cavanagh."

The choice of address threw Widow and she asked, "Where'd you learn I was a widow?"

"Aren't you?" Emmeline smiled. "You wear a wedding band on a chain round your neck. You have a granddaughter, so you must have had a daughter, by birth or marriage. You have a fine couple of businesses here, but a man would have established it. Such is the way of these parts."

Emmeline stood.

"Where're you goin'? I haven't asked my question yet."

"On the contrary, you have now asked two. I shall answer the second as true as the first. I am going to the general store to buy a hat." Emmeline bowed like a man, at the waist, and left the breakfast room of the inn.

Widow shook her head in disbelief at being outwitted. She was standing up to collect the plates when Caer emerged from the kitchen. They both turned at the sound of boots on the steps outside.

"Where's Emmeline goin'?" Caer asked.

"Gen'ral store."

"But it's Sunday." Caer raised her eyebrow. She followed Widow into the kitchen where they began to clean up from their meal.

"I don't think that'll make no never mind to Miss Soule. And you know George'll open to anyone with cash, no matter it's the Lord's Day." Widow chuckled and shook her head again. That Emmeline Soule was a wily one and determined too.

Half an hour later, Emmeline Soule emerged from the general store with a brand new dark brown leather hat on her head. Its wide brim shadowed her eyes from view, and she held a box of goods under one arm. She made her way down the street walking jauntily in the warmth from the early morning sun.

The general store owner, George Mead, watched the peculiar woman go, counting the stack of crisp bank notes she had pressed into his hand "for his finest quality hat." The only other person to spend so much cash on a single item had been Jameson when he bought the wedding dress his daughter had decided she wouldn't use.

Emmeline Soule hadn't blustered about the price like Jameson. She had also purchased a variety of other things. Mead was hoping she'd enter his establishment again soon. Fine upstanding customers like that kept a man happy in his business.

He stepped back inside, closing and locking his door. A closed sign rattled against the pane. Time for church.

Reina sat at the head of the long table watching everyone else eat as she sipped her sweet apple juice. Grace sat between Caroline and Areliz, who had loaned the girl a frock for the day. When she fled her father's house, Grace hadn't taken more than the clothes on her back, not thinking things through much.

The girl was so young, Reina lamented. What on earth could she realistically do? She'd done all the schooling a place like Book's Pass deemed necessary for a female. Marriage, as her father had planned, was typical at this age, but Reina wouldn't suggest it. Unless... Maybe there was already a boy. "Grace?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am?" Grace promptly looked up from her bowl.

"Is there someone you hope to see at church today?"

"I... didn't ... I can go to church with you?"

"Of course," Reina said.

"I've never... Are you going, Miss Reina?"

"No, dear, I'll have a lovely lunch ready for when you return."

"C'mon," Areliz said suddenly at the sound of a click striking the hour in the parlor. She wiped her face and tossed down her napkin.

"Time to go."

Reina remained seated as the table was vacated. Once everyone was gone and she no longer heard the commotion of the girls in the parlor, Reina rose slowly from her seat. Methodically she moved around the table gathering the bowls and silver, stacking each on the tray that had been used to carry the food out from the kitchen.

Once in the kitchen she took the hot water pot from the iron stovetop and slowly poured it over the dishes in the washtub. Plunging her hands with the washrag into the scalding water, Reina welcomed the tears to her eyes.

She was only on the second bowl when she heard knocking. It didn't sound like the front door. She looked around the kitchen then out the window toward the chicken coops. Her gaze met green eyes that widened and disappeared. The back door slammed against the inside wall when Emmeline Soule kicked it in.

A foot and a box came into sight first. The box landed with a thump as did the foot. The foot was followed by a big lean body topped by an unfamiliar brown hat and familiar blond hair. "Miss Soule!"

"What happened?" Emmeline demanded. "Why are you crying?" The blonde rushed toward Reina.

Reina stood her ground and anger quickly heated her face and dried her tears. "You kicked in my door!"

"What's wrong?"

"What is wrong with you! What are you doing here?" Reina asked, bewildered. "I thought you'd left?"

"I bought some things for Grace," Emmeline said, retreating to pick up the box from the floor where she had dropped it.

"Grace? She's left for church with the other girls."

"You have girls who go to church?"

"Yes, they do."

"Here in Book's Pass?"

"No, they go to next town over, a half day away - of course here!"

"And the men? They don't bother 'em?"

"Would you bother another woman if your wife was sitting right beside you in a church pew?"

"What about the reverend?"

"He's more likely to chastise the men for their drinking and gambling than their... trysts."

"What about Grace? Was the reverend here the other night? What's he think about the girl? Does Jameson go to church?"

Reina hesitated. She hadn't considered that. Her expression must have alarmed Emmeline because the blonde suddenly grabbed her hand and ran for the door. "C'mon!"

Reina's heart thudded painfully against her ribcage, and she tried to wrest free of Emmeline's far too warm and comforting grip. The sensation of it made her stomach flip. "Let me go!"

"I threw a hundred bucks at that man to keep Grace safe. You took her into your home. We have a responsibility now." Emmeline wouldn't release Reina's hand as they ran down the street.

Chapter 6

Emmeline and Reina ran to the building which served Book's Pass a church and meeting hall, drawing up when they recognized the impact of what they are about to do. They faced a sea of wagons and a few horses. But they knew, like themselves, even more people came on foot. The building was going to be packed.

Reina held her free hand to her chest, and she breathed deeply, the run having winded her. Emmeline bit her lip at the sight. She herself hadn't set a foot in a prayer meeting in years.

She squared her shoulders. But Grace and Jameson were in there, and Emmeline had an obligation. She stepped forward, putting a booted foot on the first step up into the church. She felt a tug on her arm and looked down to see Reina still held her hand.

"Are you sure we really need to do this?" Reina asked. "Certainly no one is going to hurt Grace while the pastor's watching."

Following the arm back and up, she met widening brown eyes. When was the last time Reina had entered a church? Emmeline rubbed her thumb over the back of the hand in her own. Reina bit her lower lip. The sight made Emmeline consider an action both brave and foolish and she stared at Reina's beleaguered lip, her tongue coming out to wet her own.

Her intention must have shown in her face because Reina's cheeks filled with ruddy color before she pushed her shoulders back under Emmeline's continued regard. "Miss Soule, I believe you and I have a responsibility awaiting us inside."

Emmeline's lips turned up in a pride-filled grin at the words. *Pride goeth before a fall*, she quoted to herself and managed to douse her expression, keeping Reina's hand in hers. She pulled Reina up the steps to join her and held the door for the other woman to enter first, removing her new hat with a quick pull.

Reina's hand slipped from hers in the action of passing through the door and her body tantalized Emmeline's with its close and inviting heat. Emmeline inhaled in surprise which filled her lungs with the woman's scent, a mixture of soap and apples. She exhaled slowly, trying to hold the scents close, and followed Reina inside the entry space.

They stopped before the double doors leading to the actual meeting room. Just as Emmeline reached for the door a deep voice rumbled through the tiny opening and made her stop mid-motion.

"... and He chastised them saying do not hold back the innocent. For all of my Father's kingdom shall belong to them who are pure of heart and loving all."

Emmeline glanced at Reina and saw the brunette's throat move in a girding swallow. All right, Emmeline thought, as she heard feet shuffling. If everyone was getting to their feet, the two of them could slip into the back unnoticed.

But they had obviously miscalculated how long these folk spent at their Sunday prayers. This was no intermediate hymn. Emmeline opened the door only to sweep Reina behind her with a broad hand across the woman's chest. Four wide, the entire population of Book's Pass seemed intent to run them down.

Social chatter filled the air, at first. Then someone recognized Emmeline standing against the door. "Gunslinger," she heard the whisper moving from one woman to the next. A few men snapped their gazes to her when they overheard the womenfolk. Emmeline said nothing and kept Reina behind her with a warning squeeze. She hoped the brunette remained silent as well.

Almost as abruptly as the foyer filled, it emptied into the yard, leaving Emmeline and Reina feeling as though they had been in the midst of a cattle stampede. Reina's chest, pressed against Emmeline's back, pounded a frantic rhythm. Emmeline hadn't seen Grace, though she had glimpsed several of the women from the brothel in the sea of humanity flowing from the church pews.

Reina pulled herself around Emmeline and charged into the sanctuary. Emmeline stayed right on her heel. They both let out a sigh of relief at the sight of Grace seated in a pew with Areliz's arm wrapped around her shoulders. Both had their heads bowed. The sudden sound of a sob drove both Emmeline and Reina forward in a rush. "Areliz," Reina demanded, coming alongside the two in their pew. "What happened?"

Areliz's head jerked up in surprise. "Oh, Miss Reina, 'tis a'right. Miss Grace havin' a bit o' 'motions seein' her padre."

Emmeline leaned forward. "You sure?"

"He scowled somethin' fierce, but he done nothing."

"We're here to see that continues," Reina said. "Now, come along. We'll go home for luncheon." She pulled Grace into her arms as she helped her out of the pew. With Emmeline and Areliz flanking the two, Reina walked the sniffling Grace out of the church. The girl pressed Reina's silk handkerchief to her eyes as the foursome emerged into the noon sun.

Emmeline slapped her hat back on her head, and Reina and Areliz tugged their bonnets over their hair. Reina's hand squeezed Grace's shoulder as all their eyes came up and they looked out on a sea of eyes staring back at them.

It's the scene from the brothel porch all over again, Emmeline thought. She spotted Jameson reacting to another man's pointing, no doubt informing him his daughter was present. The cattle rancher had one foot on the running board of his wagon and the other still on the ground. In a trice he turned around and stomped toward them.

"Good Sunday to you, Mr. Jameson," Emmeline tried for a civil intervention, stepping between his glower and Reina and his daughter. "Lord's rest be with you."

His jaw dropped when he turned from his daughter to face Emmeline instead. "Stay out of my way, Soule."

She nodded agreeably. "You turn 'round right now and walk back to your wagon and I won't cross your path." She reached out and nudged Reina's hip, indicating the woman should precede her with Grace down the steps.

Jameson stared at Grace; the girl hesitated and glanced up at him. Their expressions were both pained. Reina's hand lifted from the girl's shoulder. "Daddy," Grace began.

"Yes, baby girl?" His voice was so full of hope, Emmeline almost expected his face to redden and his eyes to gloss.

"Good Sunday to you," she said after another moment searching his eyes. Then she turned her back on him and walked away.

Jameson launched himself at Reina who turned to follow Grace. His hand caught the brunette's shoulder, near-strangling her with the bonnet ties as it tangled against her throat. Reina cried out, pulling at the bonnet ties and trying to gasp for breath at the same time. Emmeline wrenched Jameson away from Reina and the woman fell to the ground. Areliz and Grace bent immediately to help her. But Emmeline saw red. She kicked out a foot and threw her arm into Jameson's chest, knocking him over her leg. He landed on his back, dirt puffing up around his body on impact. She had her gun drawn and aimed at his chest before he could catch his breath or draw his own gun from where it sat on his hip; she saw his fingers inching toward it.

"Mr. Jameson, it's Sunday and I would have thought you a man to refrain from violence on a holy day. Perhaps you need to return inside and continue your prayers."

She twitched her thumb as if to cock her gun. His eyes widened and grimly she smiled at his fear. *That's right. I ain't no saint.* Flashing behind her mind's eye was Reina going down to her knees, choking under his grip; her cry of alarm ringing in Emmeline's ears. Emmeline waited a beat and then leaned back finger moving away from the hammer slowly, before returning the gun to her holster.

"Good day, Mr. Jameson." Emmeline turned her back on him and gathered the women before her, nudging Areliz ahead with Grace while she walked shoulder to shoulder with Reina behind them. The other women from the brothel gradually join them and the group, Emmeline as their rear guard, left the property without looking back.

Emmeline turned her gaze back briefly when she turned a corner and witnessed Jameson mangling his hat in his fists as the preacher talked with him.

Reina and Emmeline fell further and further behind the other women. Reina was silent. Emmeline could sense the brunette's anger because her steps grew firmer until she was stomping. The sight made Emmeline's lips twitch in amusement. Her gaze was so enthralled with Reina Suarez, she didn't realize they were completely alone in the shadow of a building until Reina threw her against the wall. Emmeline's reflexes reacted to the threat before her brain reminded her it was Reina and she jammed her forearm into a throat and made the other woman gag when she twisted and slammed the brunette into the wall.

"Reina!" Emmeline's voice filled with surprise. "What in God's name?" She threw her arms away and down, backing away from the brunette.

Rubbing her throat, Reina winced; Emmeline winced, too. She hadn't meant to hit the woman so hard, damn her instincts. Reina found her voice. "You must leave. Right now."

"I'm sorry I hurt you. But you can't attack someone like me without warning, Reina."

"Better me than Jameson in the dark of night!"

"Jameson will never get the drop on me," Emmeline assured. "Are you sure you're all right?" Reina was still rubbing her throat.

"Get away from me!" Reina pushed at Emmeline, but instead of falling back, Emmeline grasped her forearms and held them both in place.

"I'm not leaving, Reina, not until Jameson understands a woman's life is her own."

"He won't stop coming after Grace unless you leave."

"You can't know that."

"You have embarrassed him twice now in front of the entire town. He's going to kill you."

"No, he won't."

"He will!" Reina's outburst startled Emmeline enough that she stumbled from Reina's lunge. But Emmeline was still quicker and once again grabbed her hands and held the brunette in place before her. "Let me go!"

"No." The brunette struggled against Emmeline's hold and Emmeline finally pressed full length against her to calm her wrestling. Faces inches apart, Emmeline felt Reina's breath, harsh and shortened. The brown eyes were rapidly shifting from angry to scared.

Her instinct to comfort this woman driving her, Emmeline leaned in closer and Reina's eyes widened. She brushed her cheek against the brunette's and caught some of the silken dark hair against her lips. "Reina," she said, her voice barely a whisper. She wrapped her arms around Reina's back.

Fists trapped and fidgeting against Emmeline's chest between them, Reina whispered, "He'll kill you. He will." Fear trickled through Reina's words.

"He won't." Emmeline's lips brushed against Reina's ear and she felt the brunette shudder in her arms. "I'll protect Grace. I'll protect you." At the same time she said it, Emmeline acknowledged she would welcome killing Jameson, but not for Grace. It would be because he hurt Reina.

"Stop. Please. Stop. You need to stop defending me. I'm not worth it." Reina's words fell onto Emmeline's shoulder, where the brunette was pressing her mouth, trying to stem the fear-filled words.

Emmeline put her hands to either side of Reina's head, lifting her face between her palms. "What idiot told you that?"

"Why must you endanger yourself opposing that man?" Reina asked instead of answering.

"I asked you a question first, Reina Suarez. What idiot said you were not worth defending?"

"I know what I am, Miss Soule. I will not allow someone else to die defending me. If you will not leave alone, I will see that Grace is packed and can leave with you tonight."

Emmeline frowned. In her puzzlement, she backed away from Reina. Reina pulled at her dress in various places, resettling it into neat lines. Automatically mirroring the action, Emmeline tugged her vest into place. She paused with her hand on her belt.

"Someone else?"

Reina ignored her and walked away; Emmeline stared after her, drinking in the lines of the woman who seemed determined to push her away with every increasing stride. The silence seemed brittle; Emmeline knew she was guessing rightly even as she asked, "Reina, who died defending you?"

The brunette didn't answer, but her shoulders stiffened as if she'd been struck a blow. Knowing she would get no further with direct questioning, Emmeline strode quickly for the inn. One of the Cavanagh women had to know the story.

Chapter 7

Reina was still shaking when she finally entered the house. Her hands could barely keep the coat aligned with the hook inside the dressing closet where she was trying to put it away. Fretting and pacing, she fought to open the stays on her gown. A button snagging in the cloth was followed by a tiny plink as Reina's shaking hands were unable to calm long enough for rational thinking to prevail. With an immediacy that frightened her, Reina recalled Emmeline Soule's body pressed against hers, the heat, the physical presence of the woman so thoroughly overwhelming her every sense.

Green eyes had made Reina feel dizzy, almost drunk as her head spun. She had wanted to put her head on Emmeline Soule's broad shoulder and sink into the comfort so willingly being offered. But Reina understood one crucial thing it seems Emmeline Soule willingly overlooked: Reina Suarez is no lady. She had given that up long ago, the moment she provided company to a lonely broken Southern soldier who had come west after the War.

Daniel had loved her though he'd been a gentleman and not her lover. She would have accepted any name to be with him though he had said marriage was beyond his means. He had been determined to defend her honor against Jameson. Reina had tried to stop the duel only to arrive just in time to watch Daniel fall with the bloody hole in his chest. The palest orange light of a summer sunrise painted his crumpled body bleeding onto the packed dirt of the street.

Reina leaned hard on the bedroom wall, squeezing her eyes shut to blot out the memory as it assailed her. Ten years had passed since Daniel's death . The pain was fully refreshed, as piercing now as it had been that morning on her knees in the street, lifting his head onto her lap, tears flowing hotly down her cheeks.

Damn you, Emmeline Soule, Reina thought, wiping hard at the tears that fell once again, fearing history was about to repeat itself.

Emmeline strode into the livery barn where she found Caer Cavanagh brushing down the thick-legged cart horse she and her grandmother had used to ride to church that morning. The dappled gray horse was old with rheumy eyes, but quality, and looked to be in otherwise good health as it nosed Caer's back while the brunette girl brushed over gray speckled hindquarters.

"Hey, Caer," Emmeline called. The horse snorted, slapping Caer's back with its muzzle and Emmeline winced sympathetically as Caer turned around abruptly. "Sorry," Emmeline apologized.

"Emmeline!" Caer dropped the brush and stepped quickly away from the horse, exiting the stall and lowering the cross beam into place before she came to meet Emmeline in the middle of the barn. "Couldn't believe what you did today."

"You going to tell me I'm stupid for what I did, too?"

"No! Shoot. You ain't smart, but I think what you're doin' for Grace is brave. You oughta have a badge. You got that justice mind, y'know? Things just is right or wrong, and that's sore needed 'round here."

Emmeline frowned. She was nothing even close to a lawman. She'd known some good ones and there was no way she'd put herself in the same class. "Anyway, I have a question about something I learned. You got time to talk?"

Caer smiled and put down the brush in her hands before taking Emmeline's arm. "Whatcha need to know?"

Emmeline followed Caer toward the inn. She adjusted the brim of her hat and shaded her eyes from the sun and, truth told, from close scrutiny by Caer. She was certain her emotions would become apparent to the quick-witted girl if she was too visible.

"Jameson's a real cuss around here. Seems in charge though. How'd that happen?"

Caer easily replied. "I know he's got the largest property in the area. And he employs the most hands when it's time to take the cattle to the railhead in St Louis. So lots of people owe him for the food they put on their tables."

"What about Reina?"

They had stepped onto the front porch of the big house where Widow Cavanagh was sweeping the dirt and dust from the wood slats. It wasn't Emmeline's imagination, though, that Widow stopped sweeping when Emmeline finished her question.

Caer replied, oblivious to her grandmother's reaction. "Reina's been here as long as Jameson. But the real chill was some ten years ago. There were a lot of folks traveling through here after the war. Some lookin' to stay, some jus' passin' through. Reina's house," Caer added after a pause, "saw a lot of business."

Emmeline watched out of the corner of her eye as Widow Cavanagh appeared to "stumble" and rapped the broom on the wall nearby. Caer jumped. "Granny?" the girl asked. "You okay?"

"Yes, dear," Granny shook herself as if checking for damage. "Would you take this inside and get started on peeling the potatoes for supper?"

Emmeline straightened as Caer walked past her, taking the broom from her grandmother's hands and disappearing inside the inn. She unfolded her arms and started toward the stairs leading to the rented rooms. A wrinkled hand latched onto her arm. She turned to meet piercing brown eyes.

"You really don' wan' t'be meddlin' in things that ain't none o' yer affair, Miss Emmeline Soule."

"What happened between Jameson and Reina ten years ago, Widow?" Emmeline asked bluntly.

"What's the use of the past?" Widow replied. "It's the past."

"Those who know not history are doomed to repeat it," Emmeline quoted.

"Yer a strange mix of brains and stupid, Miss Emmeline," Widow summarized succinctly.

"So humor my stupidity. What happened between Jameson and Reina ten years ago?"

"Would you kill for someone you loved?" Widow asked instead.

"I have," Emmeline replied quietly.

Widow's lips pursed at the answer, but she asked her next question anyway. "Would you die for someone you loved?"

Emmeline frowned. "So, it's true. Reina said someone died protecting her. I can only presume Jameson killed that person. Who was it?"

"Daniel." Widow breathed the name with reverence and Emmeline instantly knew the measure of the man who had died for Reina Suarez. Only a paragon of human kindness would have elicited that sort of reaction from the bristly old woman. "He worked here in the stables. He'd been a soldier in the war. Wanted only peace after losing everything else."

Emmeline leaned back hard on her hands against the railing around the edge of the porch and stared at Widow. "Daniel?" she repeated the name.

"He was a young man. The war made him old though. He'd been part of Grant's troops in Virginia."

"A northerner then." Emmeline bit her lip. "You said he worked with the horses. Where was he from?"

"He never said. But he was good with the stock, had a real touch with them. So he weren't no city-bred."

Emmeline nodded. "Coulda picked it up in the army."

"Not this'un," Widow replied. "He was some kind of whisperer. That's how he and Miss Reina first met. Her horse had thrown a shoe, hobbling something awful. She'd been trying to get close enough to him to fix things, but it was kicking out in pain. She'd taken a hoof to the head when Daniel found her."

"He came when she screamed?"

"Nah, you gotta know by now Miss Reina ain't no screamer, at least that I never heard."

Emmeline nodded. As many times as she had seen Reina Suarez threatened with harm, the woman had not once called out for help. "Stubborn," she muttered.

"Just a tad." Widow chuckled. "No, he stopped her from charging forward again, and instead, grabbed the reins and calmed that beast in about three seconds, looking into its eyes and stroking its neck. He pulled the broken shoe and bent nails."

"Definitely sounds like a gift," Emmeline said.

"He was a gift to this whole town in so many ways," Widow said. "He took a special liking to Miss Reina, however."

"So why didn't she marry him?" Emmeline wondered.

"I think she would have, but he didn't offer, least as far as I know."

"He didn't? How could he call himself a man? He just slept with her."

"Never touched her," Widow said. "Least as far as..."

"He never?" Emmeline blinked. "Not once?"

"Well, it's not like I spent any real time with Miss Reina. She don't let many people close 'nuf. But, yeah, most of us is pretty sure."

"So I still don't get it. What's Jameson's beef with Reina?"

"Daniel dueled him for her honor."

"And Jameson killed Daniel."

"Yes. No one has ever forgiven him for that."

"Jameson hates Reina because everyone hates him?" Emmeline shook her head in disbelief. "That's fucked up."

"A man's pride ain' always a rational thing."

Emmeline fretted. *And neither is a woman's.* She thought of Reina's pained expression but stubborn silence at Emmeline's question. She obviously believed she had gotten Daniel killed. But a man's choices were always his own, Emmeline knew firsthand.

"What's goin' on in that head o' yours?" Widow asked.

"I have no idea how to fix this," Emmeline said. "She just takes it and takes it."

Widow nodded. "Been ten years."

"But it's not her fault!" Emmeline blurted. "Why doesn't she see that?"

"Blinded by love," Widow ventured. "I don't ascribe many girlish traits to Miss Reina. Maybe I'm readin' it all wrong and she didn't love Daniel." Widow shook her head. "But if she did, it would explain a lot."

Emmeline's heart squeezed tightly in her chest. Pain filled her voice as she said, "Yeah, yeah, it does."

Grace looked up from the sink where she was up to her elbows in suds. Miss Reina had been silent for several minutes standing beside her and looking out to the yard through the curtained window. "Miss Reina?"

The brunette shook herself. "Yes, Grace?"

"You don't have to stay with me. I'll finish this."

"You tire of my company already?" Reina said.

"No, no. I...I just can do this. You should relax. It's Sunday."

"Watching you wash dishes isn't work."

Grace chuckled, pleased the older woman smiled as she said that.

"What if I asked you to dry?"

Miss Reina's smile widened and she grabbed the towel, taking a dish, patting it dry, and placing it in the cabinet. They worked together for several minutes in companionable silence except for the sounds of dishes clinking.

"Why did you come here?" Grace was surprised by the question.

"You know what happens here."

Grace nodded. "I knew you'd help me."

"Your father and I don't get along."

"Exactly," Grace replied. "I -"

She was interrupted by a strong knocking on a door. She looked around. And then realized that Reina's gaze was riveted to the window. A shadowed figure - the porch lanterns had long ago been blown out for the night - stood by the kitchen door only a few feet away. Her breath hitched.

"Miss Reina?"

"Go," the older woman said firmly, putting a hand on Grace's shoulder as she pressed the towel into her hands. The woman's brown eyes darted toward a cabinet before returning to the door, and Grace wondered what Reina thought was there.

The figure moved, and Grace heard Reina's gasp over her own. Now framed in the light from the kitchen lanterns was Emmeline Soule. Standing at Miss Reina's back door like a thief in the night.

Glancing at Miss Reina's face, Grace saw the surprise quickly replaced by fear, then anger tightened the woman's features.

Grace was excited to see her savior, however, and rushed to the door, flinging it wide. "Emmeline!"

"Grace!" Miss Reina said loudly behind her.

Emmeline Soule then stepped through the doorway, an imposing figure in the same well-worn but clean denims and plaid shirt she'd been wearing at the church that morning. The hat on her head immediately came down in her hand.

"Grace," Emmeline said with a nod toward her. "How are you?"

Miss Reina stepped to Grace's shoulder, laying a hand over it. "Miss Soule, it is far too late for callers."

"I came to see how y...you are doing," Emmeline said quickly averting her gaze from Miss Reina's face to Grace's. "So, how are you?"

Grace felt Miss Reina's fingers tighten on her shoulder. But her eyes were only for Emmeline. The blond woman stood like a fairytale knight, hat in hand, green gaze meeting Grace's intently. "I'm good. I was just doing the dishes for Miss Reina."

Emmeline nodded in clear approval. "Good." Grace straightened under the smile and swept at the fabric of her dress then her hair. "Can you finish that up, while I discuss something with Miss Reina?"

Grace nodded emphatically and backed away from the door. Emmeline's gaze turned to Reina. The brunette woman's lips were pursed.

"I suppose you'd better come inside. I'd rather not have more flies than you've already let in for the last five minutes."

Emmeline turned and took another step inside, closing the kitchen door behind her. "Alright then."

Reina's gaze drifted to the back of Emmeline's right shoulder. There was a small tear in the seam. She felt her hand begin to lift,

and firmly stiffened it against the urge to reach out. "Miss Soule," she said, fighting to keep her voice from shaking, "what do you want?"

Emmeline turned around; green eyes now captured hers. "You," she said.

Reina inhaled.

"I need you to tell me you're OK," Emmeline added.

"I'm fine," Reina said, trying for a biting tone. But Emmeline's gaze was disturbingly intimate and Reina swallowed when she finished her words.

Emmeline grimaced, glanced at Grace and then back at Reina. "I need your services," she said firmly.

Reina blinked. "You what?!"

"I want you. Alone. Now." Emmeline grasped Reina's hand, sending a tremor through her body.

Reina looked at Grace. "I think it's time you went up to bed, dear." Inside she was shaking. Emmeline wanted her... services? Grace's brow furrowed. "Go on, now," Reina added quietly. "Miss Soule and I have some... business."

Grace blinked. "Business?" Then a light seemed to dawn on the young face and Reina felt her heart trip a beat. "Oh. Uh. Oh!" The girl scurried away, lifting her skirt to move more quickly.

"Thank god," Emmeline said. Reina's gaze snapped to Emmeline's from having followed Grace's flight from the room.

"What on earth?" Reina fumed. "Miss Soule, you had better explain yourself."

"I needed to see you alone. Only thing I could think of which would drive away young ears."

Reina was surprised for the second time in as many minutes. "What? You don't want me?"

Emmeline twisted her hat in her hands and then threw it aside, capturing Reina's head behind the neck with one hand and pulling her in.

"You know I do," she breathed into the kiss she settled upon Reina's lips. Reina's gasp opened her mouth and Emmeline's tongue touched her own. It seemed to be an accident, though. Reina felt Emmeline shudder as hard as she herself did at the intimacy.

She whimpered; Emmeline groaned. Emmeline's other hand came up, cupped Reina's cheek, and the kiss deepened. Their curves fit together softly and seamlessly.

Chapter 8

When Emmeline felt Reina go boneless and mold lush curves to her body, Emmeline reluctantly ended the kiss. Reina's look of consternation brought Emmeline's hand back to cup her cheek as she spoke. "I didn't come here for more," Emmeline murmured.

"Why would you suggest we have business then?" Reina asked.

"I didn't want Grace to hear what I wanted to discuss with you."

"So reminding her I run a whorehouse was your first thought?"

"Why are you upset? You do run a whorehouse."

"It's not the only thing I do. We do. Here." Reina huffed.

"God damn, woman. I know that. What the hell? I didn't come here - Shit." Emmeline pulled back, pulling her hand through her own hair. "I was worried. About you."

"You have already expressed yourself on that matter. Several times. I do not need to hear it again. You could always leave. I can take care of myself."

"I can't," Emmeline replied.

"Can't take care of yourself?"

"Can't leave," Emmeline corrected.

Reina opened her mouth. Emmeline didn't want to hear more protest. No more words. She stepped forward, reached out and snagged Reina Suarez around the waist, pulling the woman's to her, and melded their lips together.

This time she was discontent with chaste. With her tongue, she plundered Reina's mouth, extracting a moan that vibrated within the chest pressed against her own. Reina tasted of cider and cinnamon, sweet and spicy, and it caused wetness to pool between

Emmeline's thighs. She groaned into the heat of Reina's mouth, and ground her hips into Reina's.

The motion started to set Reina off-balance and she stepped back. Emmeline followed and swallowed an "oof" when the brunette's back crashed into a larder door. Reina's hands tangled in Emmeline's hair, holding their faces together while Emmeline sucked and pecked at patches of skin, hungry for every taste of the flawless flesh. She palmed a breast, abrading the nipple through the bodice until the motion moved it down and she had a sweet, bountiful mound cupped in her palm. Her thumb teased the stiffening nipple.

Emmeline lowered her arm from Reina's waist, cupping and lifting the woman's rear and backing her onto the counter. Mouths still locked together, Emmeline felt Reina's thighs encircle her hips, the skirt of her dress bunching above her knees.

Emmeline lowered her mouth from Reina's to nip and teethe at the soft underside of the brunette's throat, the loose dark silken hairs of the woman's nape tickling her lips. A soft thud signaled Reina had thrown her head back into a wood cabinet. Emmeline's hand slipped from breast to thigh, pushing underneath the gown to the warmth of Reina's center. She felt the warmth against her own belly.

Her heart stampeded like a herd of wild horses echoing in her ears. Then it stuttered. A delicate hand had found its way to Emmeline's clavicle, brushing against the skin, parting the buttons of her flannel shirt.

"Reina," she breathed.

The woman's lips pressed to revealed skin. Then Emmeline was snared, utterly and completely, by her name in a voice smooth as 30-year-old whiskey.

"Emmeline."

Emmeline breathed into the dark hair, soothing her fingers over Reina's neck while the woman's lips continued to press against her own heated flesh. "Your room?"

She heard Reina's breath catch. Then the woman nodded against Emmeline's belly, taking Emmeline's hand from her neck as she straightened upright.

Dazed, Emmeline followed as Reina slid from the counter and led her by the hand to a set of narrow stairs. It was barely wide enough for her, and Emmeline knew instinctively no man had ever traversed these steps.

Reina's hand grew slightly damp in Emmeline's palm, conveying her nervousness. Emmeline squeezed it gently. In the darkness she heard Reina's small inhale.

At the top of the landing, Reina turned to the right and a small doorway opened. Moonlight spilling through a window was the only navigable lighting. Furnishings in silhouette gave shape to a simple room. Within the private space Emmeline identified the outlines of a dresser, a plain mirror reflecting the moon's beams atop, and a small table beside a box framed bed.

Emmeline pulled Reina against her before the woman could step further inside. Front to back, she stroked her hands up and down the woman's waist, then upward to part buttons. Emmeline kissed Reina's throat when the woman's head lolled back against her shoulder. The gown parted and Emmeline slid it from soft shoulders, palming breasts with both hands. Reina's moan vibrated the skin beneath Emmeline's lips.

The gown held to hips until Emmeline pushed the fabric down and it pooled on the floor over their feet. Reina stepped out and turned in Emmeline's arms, melding their lips together once more.

Then Reina was disrobing Emmeline. It was all sensation: warmth on her breasts, feather light touches on her hips, hands grasping her legs, and finally strokes between her thighs.

Skin to skin at last, the women fell to the bed, wood frame creaking ominously, barely separating save to assure the other was unhurt.

Fingers caressed skin, chased by soft lips. The moonlight touched them, creating more paths on their bodies to explore. Emmeline writhed under Reina's attention, only to grasp the woman and turn them over to worship Reina with the fervor of an acolyte to a goddess.

Reina awakened at the sound of feet passing outside her door. She started upward only to be caught by arms squeezing gently. The moon had set. From the shadows depths around the room, Reina knew the sun was about to rise. Reaching out from beneath the warm covers and warmer arm, she lifted her father's pocket watch from the small table beside the bed. She blinked until her eyes adjusted and she could read the hands. The time was just before five. She exhaled, glancing over her shoulder in a quandary.

"I can sneak out." Emmeline's breath was warm against Reina's neck, and she shivered. In that same moment, she changed her mind. She grasped the hand that had fallen back to her hip, and cupped it to her belly. Emmeline's tiny strokes there made Reina's eyes close, absorbing the tenderness.

"Don't go," she whispered, afraid and hopeful at the same time. There was something about Emmeline Soule that made Reina want to hold her close, and want to be held close.

Emmeline lifted up, her golden hair, the bright spot in the dim room, fell all around Reina's shoulders as she lowered down. Green eyes became Reina's whole world. Her name was breathed against her lips just before Emmeline's nose slid alongside her own, and her mouth was teased open with dancing little nips, extracting a helpless moan.

She arched her back, lifting herself into Emmeline's body. Emmeline's hands were hot against her, addictive, safe, protective. Emmeline cupped under her head, pulling her up, before caressing her back as she moved with hot kisses down Reina's torso. Emmeline spread her thighs with her own body first, then with hands and, finally, claimed her with a caressing tongue.

Reina stroked her hands through Emmeline's hair, whispering her name over and over again, feeling lighter than air, and yet so secure it felt like she was a baby being rocked to sleep. Then she was releasing with every muscle, her throat opening, and she cried out.

Emmeline held her, but the sound was still echoing in Reina's ears when rapping sounded against the door. Reina hid her face in Emmeline's breasts, with Emmeline's fingers tangling and untangling in her hair.

"Reina!" It was Vivian. The door was opening before either could move.

Light from the hall spilled in a small circle. Reina knew both she and Emmeline were clearly seen.

Reina shook her head then spoke calmly, but distinctly enough to carry to the door. "Vivian, I'm fine. Please see to everyone's breakfast. I will be down in a few minutes."

"Will you need another place set?" Vivian spoke calm as you please and Reina felt her cheeks heat.

Reina covered Emmeline's mouth when the blonde chuckled. "Yes, please."

"Right nice of you to stay, Miss Emmeline. Caroline makes the best flapjacks."

Emmeline cleared her throat. "I'll be sure to take note."

"You do that. See you downstairs, Miss Reina."

The door snicked quietly back into place, leaving Reina in the darkness with Emmeline once more.

Emmeline pulled away from Reina and she closed her hand rather than resort to the reflex grasp she wanted to do. The small lamp on the other bedside suddenly cast the woman in its light, Emmeline's hand falling away from the pull string.

Back muscles rippled, magnetically pulling Reina's fingers toward them as Emmeline bent forward to the floor. She trailed down the edge of Emmeline's shoulder blade, hesitating at a rough patch. A closer look showed it to be a jagged scar. Reina bent forward and kissed it. Emmeline shifted away under her lips.

"What is your life, Emmeline Soule?" Reina breathed against the woman's hand when she turned to grasp Reina's hand and caught her face instead.

"When you look at me like that, I feel like I have one," Emmeline replied. A shadow of pain called to Reina from within green eyes. "You are such a fine woman." Reina leaned into the palm and gratifyingly saw the shadows fall away.

She rested her head on Emmeline's shoulder, stroking the top of Emmeline's breast. The moment, which Reina hesitantly was calling romantic in her head, was broken by a rumbling sound. She glanced down and smiled. She glanced up and caught Emmeline's sheepish smile. "Sounds like Caroline's flapjacks are calling your name."

Emmeline chuckled. "I'd rather you were calling my name... again." Emmeline kissed her. "But I guess we'd better step out before someone else comes looking for you."

Following Reina down the back staircase, Emmeline rolled her lower lip through her teeth nervously. She had been able to chuckle off Vivian finding her with Reina, but there would be the girl,

Grace, and Areliz, and the other women of Reina's house. She didn't want to care what they thought of her.

But she did. Deeply. They thought so much of Reina, who was beginning to hold a really big piece of Emmeline's heart. Emmeline found herself wanting them to like her, too.

When she turned the corner, those seated around the kitchen table gave Reina a wide smile. One by one their gazes stumbled over Emmeline. Not one registered surprise, though a few - Grace among them - registered dismay. Vivian dipped her head when Emmeline caught her eye. Cautious intensity radiated from the gray eyes. Emmeline nodded back, accepting the unspoken demand.

All the girls and women got to their feet, circling around Reina and offering morning greetings. Emmeline stood back, watching Reina with each of them, asking about this or the other small thing in each one's life.

"Miss Emmeline."

She turned to see Grace had come to her shoulder. The girl's gaze was wary. "Yes?"

Emmeline sensed all eyes turning to her and the girl. "Miss Emmeline, would you take my seat to break your fast?" The girl blushed and sketched a clumsy curtsy.

Out of the corner of her eye, Emmeline saw Reina turn. Emmeline nodded and put her hand on Grace's shoulder. "Only so long as you have finished breaking yours, young lady."

Reina pulled Grace back to the table. Emmeline followed. The three of them settled, with a woman Emmeline did not know giving up her seat so that Emmeline could take it.

A dirtied plate was taken aside and a fresh stack of flapjacks was placed in front of Emmeline, along with a fresh mug of milk. Reina hugged Grace and smiled over the girl's head to Emmeline.

Chapter 9

Reina pulled aside the kitchen window curtain once again, searching the yard behind the house. She frowned when she did not immediately see a blond head out by the chicken coop as had been there during the last hour. The sun had pleasantly warmed the glass she realized as she brought her face closer to it to see further around the edges of the window's view.

"She moved herself over to the barn about ten minutes ago." Reina turned to see Vivian entering the kitchen with a tray full of empty mugs. In the room beyond, Reina heard the sounds of movement and knew the morning's lessons had ended. After the early morning chores were done, the women who wanted it, sat together learning to cipher, read, and write, from Vivian who had intended to be a schoolteacher when she first came out west from Tupelo, Mississippi.

Now the gray eyes which had seen so much that morning saw right through Reina. She shook her head and stepped back from the window. They had been friends for too long. "She is an unusual woman," Reina said.

"So what does that make you or I?" Vivian set the tray down beside the chairs then set herself down. Not everything around the house had to be done this minute and the break would allow Reina to settle Vivian's well-meaning questions. "She rides alone, and she runs her own life. We do the same."

"After a fashion," Reina said. "She comes and goes anywhere she pleases."

"So do you."

Reina shook her head, lifting her tea and taking a sip to gather her thoughts. "She's noble, good and kind..."

"Where's this self-doubt coming from, Reina Suarez? You are the noblest creature that ever walked the streets of Book's Pass, bringing in the girls, seeing to their education."

"But it won't ever take them anywhere. Unless they get away from here."

"So you been thinking about what to do with young Grace."

Reina nodded. "Her father will never stop trying to get her back. We can't live our lives with that hanging over our heads."

"So put her on the night coach that comes through with the mail. Twenty dollars is a lot more'n most get to have a new start. I'm sure we have that in the egg jar just this morning."

"But she's so young."

Vivian shook her head. "No. I ran away from home back east and traveled two thousand miles when I was two years younger than Grace. Tell her the options. She's old enough to make her own choices."

Reina sighed. It was why she had taken in the girl after all, to give her choices. Not have them taken away from her as they had been from Reina, from so many of the other women here.

"We shouldn't tell anyone. Let them think she ran away on her own. That'll keep the trouble off us," Vivian added.

"But we'd know."

"I been living with myself for a lotta hard choices for a fair number of years," Vivian snorted. "What's one more?"

Though she said nothing, gathering up the tea cups and returning to the kitchen, Reina feared this would be the choice that broke her.

Dropping the hand saw to the dirt, Emmeline kicked her foot off the hunk of wood she'd been trying to shape into something half useful. She pulled off her plaid cotton outer shirt and tied it around her waist, swiping sweat from her brow with the back of an equally sweaty arm. She looked at the hole in the side of the barn about three feet off the ground and a good two feet wide. Currently patched with a piece of cowhide, the hole had been pecked away in parts by chickens wanting to get at the feed they knew was stored inside. Emmeline was determined to replace that leather with a wood plank.

Always used to scrounging and making other things suit a purpose with only sweat-money, she was fashioning a hunk of fallen tree into slats. She'd spent the morning retying all the chicken wire on the coop to keep the damn birds outta her hair. She'd found a machete and used its broad blade shave-style to carve off the bark from one side. She looked at the slice she had just finished hacking off. It was near five-foot lengthwise and three-foot wide. Now all that remained was smoothing the sides to create her wood patch.

Then her task would finish when she found nails that weren't rusted through to secure it to the barn wall.

It was back-breaking labor, but Emmeline had known worse. And life on the trail wasn't no picnic. Putting her hands on her hips, she looked up at the hole in the barn wall, imagining looking up there in satisfaction tomorrow to see her work's results.

"Water?"

Emmeline turned to see Reina holding out a tray with a pitcher and two mugs. The brunette smiled at her. Taking a mug, Emmeline smiled back before putting her head back and speedily drinking the contents in one go. The last few ounces of it poured over her face and she sighed happily. "More in the pitcher?" Emmeline asked.

"Tea." Reina said. "It's iced."

Reina put down the tray atop the fence post separating the chicken's area from the barn's yard and poured out from the pitcher

into both mugs. Emmeline leaned against the post after Reina handed her mug back. In silence they gazed at one another over the rims of the mugs while sipping. Reina's eyes held a light they hadn't previously, and Emmeline hoped she was responsible for that, for giving Reina a small moment of happiness, a bit of peace.

"What are you doing here?" Reina asked when she finally let down the cup and looked away to the arrayed materials on the ground.

"Making a wood patch for the hole in the barn wall."

"Why didn't you just use another piece of hide?"

"It isn't keeping the chickens out," Emmeline pointed out. "I wanted to make sure you didn't have the problem again. How did the hole happen in the first place?"

"Tornado tossed a fence post through it," Reina said. "About three years ago. Killed the cow inside."

"Hence the hide."

"It was an awful stench until we could get that carcass completely cleared."

"I can imagine."

"Cured some of the meat, sold the rest. Amelia tanned the hide and sewed some nice saddlebags which local cowhands bought for the trail. She taught some of us how to make other leather bits and geegaws. We sold them for cash to use at the mercantile and stocked up goods for that winter."

"Well, this patch'll hold against the storms, keeping you safe unless it takes the whole barn."

Reina nodded. Emmeline absorbed the woman's profile as she stared at the hole. "Where's your safe place in a storm, Emmeline Soule?"

Emmeline swallowed as Reina's gaze swung back around to her. "Here and there. Gullies is good, and I've been in some box

canyons that have provided real good protection." Reina rolled her eyes. She stopped. "But that's not what you're really asking."

Reina shook her head.

"When being alone on the road gets to be too much..." Emmeline paused and leaned on the fence post on her crossed arms, looking out at the horizon. "I find a home-cooked meal, maybe ask to sleep in a barn loft for the night." She pointed up toward the one in the building before them. "I'll do a little work to repay the kindness. And in the morning I'll move on."

"Where've you traveled?" Reina asked. "Have you been down to Mexico, or out to the California Territory?"

"Went into Mexico after the floods last year, but haven't made it all the way west yet."

"So it's just you, and Bug, on the trail."

"Yep."

"You ever run cattle?"

"Nah, trailhead running is a commitment. Most ranchers prefer working with men. That knocks me out on a two fronts. But they don't want unknowns skimming their herds."

"But it happens, yes?"

"Yes, I've known a few boys who'd skim herds playing a long game that way."

"What'd you do?"

Emmeline sighed. "I only went after those with bounties. I made a livin', not a run for sainthood."

Reina nodded. Whatever unspoken question she'd had were answered by Emmeline's words. "I'll leave the last of the pitcher here. You'll bring it up to the house when you're finished?"

It was the small things, Emmeline thought. Leaving her the pitcher and asking her to bring it up to the house. Reina wanted her to stay. She wasn't sure she could; she still had a life debt to repay, but the thought she might stay made her glance toward the barn hole, imagining not tomorrow, but looking up at it next year: *I did that*, she would say.

And she could be proud.

Unlikely, she snorted at herself. Dreams after all were for innocent children, not people like her. Not orphans with no family and no home. And only a man to chase down to see to justice for all of them.

Chapter 10

Emmeline started to search around for a lantern when she realized the reason she wanted one was the sunset blazing in the western sky. The long shadows were finally making it too difficult to see her work. She wiped her hands on her pants and pulled off her wide brim hat, running her fingers through her sweat-soaked locks. Best be getting up to the house, return Reina's pitcher, she thought, staring at it sitting on the barn floor a few feet away. She still wasn't sure if she could take the 'message' from the pitcher and be who Reina wanted her to be, but there was no more light to work, so... time to face the music.

Walking to the house, Emmeline noticed that most of the lights were off. She wondered if any of the men of Book's Pass had come by the house looking for services. She decided it would be better if she came to the back door with the pitcher.

Standing and waiting after the knock, Emmeline wiped her feet, set down the pitcher and snatched off her hat once more to wipe the sweat from her brow. "Manners," she muttered to herself. She rapped again at the door, heard footsteps inside and pulled her fingers quickly through the tangles of her hair to make herself more presentable.

Her face blossomed into a smile as the door swung open. When she identified the woman before her, however, her expression fell off the happy heights she had been walking since lunchtime iced tea. "Uh."

"She's gone on business."

"Oh." Emmeline chastised herself for her disappointment no doubt plain on her face. Why had she thought Reina would see her anytime; she had no reason to make herself available simply because Emmeline was. "I, uh, finished fixing the barn, and, uh." She stopped her stuttering and gestured to the step. "I brought back

the pitcher." She hurriedly retrieved it as the woman studied her from beneath lowered brows. "I...can wash it, if you want?"

The woman - Vivian, Emmeline recalled her name - took a step back. "You may," she said.

"All right." Emmeline hesitated just inside the door, waiting for Vivian to close it and lead her further inside.

"You know where it is," Vivian said, pointing.

"I...yes." Emmeline shook herself. "I'll be quick. I won't get in the way."

"You already have," Vivian said, though it was muttered and maybe Emmeline wasn't supposed to hear.

She had anyway. "Is everything all right?"

"I told you Reina's in town on business."

"What is she doing?"

"None of your business."

Just then Grace came down the stairs carrying a worn satchel.

"Miss Emmeline?"

"Hey, Grace."

"You come to take me?"

"What?"

"To the station. Miss Reina, she's sending me to San Francisco."

"She's doing what?" Emmeline looked from Grace to Vivian. "Is she serious?"

"She can't stay here. We're not a wayward home and we're not equipped to keep Jameson away forever."

"Who'll care for her?" Emmeline's hands fisted. "She can't be put out on her own."

"I was younger than her when I set out west on my own."

"But that's you. Look at her, she's no more than a kid."

"So you think she can stay in a whorehouse?"

"She's a cattleman's daughter. Let her tend to the farm stuff. Maybe you can make a better go of that!"

"Some of us don't want to roll in sheep shit for the rest of our lives."

"You think whoring is going to change that?" Emmeline shook her head. "Did you convince her to do this? I thought you and Reina were friends."

"We are." But Vivian dropped her gaze slightly when Emmeline set her jaw.

Emmeline grabbed Grace's hand. "You go on upstairs and unpack. I'm gonna get Reina back here."

"I should go. I don't want to put the other women in danger any more," Grace said.

"So you got to her too?" Emmeline groused at Vivian.

"With sense," Vivian insisted. "You're just like him, y'know. All nobility and no sense. You can't fight everything the world is."

"I've been on my own since..." Emmeline shook her head. "No. You don't deserve to know me."

Vivian was caught by the arm. "What?"

"When does the coach come through?"

"About an hour."

Emmeline stalked out of the front door.

Grace followed.

"Nother cup, Reina?"

Reina Suarez looked up from the bottom of her empty coffee mug to see Widow Cavanagh leaning on the frame between the kitchen and the dining area holding a tin pot.

"Are you trying to keep me awake?" Reina asked. She nevertheless held the cup up and watched Widow pour and then sit at the table across from her.

"Ain't that what you doin'?" Widow asked. "You been sittin' here since I cleared out everybody else, jus' sippin'. Don' ya gotta be gettin' on to yer place?"

"What? You need the table for other customers?"

"Don' be foolish. So, tell me, what business is keepin' you up so late?"

"Night time is my time," Reina replied. "As you well know."

"Can't blame me for guessin'. Things have been all topsy turvy with that lady gunslinger moseyin' in and making waves in this parched desert town. Leads one to thinkin' things might not always stay the same."

"Emmeline certainly did upend things around here."

"Wee bit." Widow demonstrated with her thumb and forefinger parted slightly in the air between them. "T'be honest, though, she didn't start nothing. She jus' carryin' on."

"Is that so?"

"There's more agree with you than Jameson. This ain't the East. We ought to run ourselves by different rules."

"You make me sound positively subversive, Widow. I just sheltered a girl who asked for my help like any good christian would."

"Our Lord Savior was a subversive then, too," Widow stated, trying out the word. "In His day they been all y'ain't s'posed t'cotton to them folk." Widow smiled. "But He done it anyways."

Reina dipped her head to hide her heated cheeks, the praise a shock.

"So, what're you plannin'?" Widow's question brought Reina's head back up.

"Who says I'm planning anything?"

"Yer never in town on a workin' night."

Reina shook her head. "You old wolf," she laughed a little and sighed. In a low voice she let out her secret. "I bought Grace a ticket on the night coach. Vivian is bringing her when it's full dark."

"Jameson ain't gonna like that."

"He isn't going to know about it 'til she's too far away to catch."

Widow patted her arm following the undertone of threat. "He won't hear none from me or mine. My Caer she's taken a shine to Miss Emmeline, and this is probably her idea."

Reina balked at the idea that Caer might be interested in Emmeline. But she was firm, with her mind on the task when she informed Widow, "Emmeline doesn't know."

"She don't?"

Reina shook her head. "I don't want her to catch Jameson's wrath any more than she already has."

"That woman seems mighty capable of takin' care of herself. And what about how angry Jameson'll be when he finds out you done it?"

"He won't do anything to me."

"What's to stop him?"

Reina toyed with her mug's handle, the solidity soothing her. So when she lifted her eyes to Widow's once more, they held the glint of steel he'd taught her to have. "I have information that Daniel found. Vivian has instructions to deliver it to the circuit judge if anything happens to me."

Widow's jaw dropped a moment, then snapped shut and a smirk curved her lips. "You call me the wolf but, I'll be damned, you got some wily fox in you, Miss Reina."

Reina dipped her head, this time accepting the accolade with a tiny smile.

Emmeline crouched outside in the shadows of the inn, watching through the window as Reina and Widow talked. Unable to hear what they were saying, nonetheless she saw Widow laugh, Reina smile, and then slowly get to her feet.

Looking around as Reina emerged onto the inn's porch and pushed back deeper into the shadows, Emmeline was glad she had managed to turn Grace back before they reached the livery. She was going to fetch Reina, have her give back the ticket, and take the woman home, where she hoped to be able to snuggle up with her - after enduring the spitfire's anger for interfering. But Emmeline was certain she was better in the know about how this would all end if Reina was successful in getting Grace on that night coach.

Reina walked toward the station, moving in and out of the lamp lights. Emmeline kept to the shadows behind her, boots barely making a sound on the dirt since she avoided the wood planks forming the main walkway in front of the businesses.

The door chime at the station jangled as Reina pushed open the office door. Emmeline hugged the side of the building out of sight when Reina turned to enter. Creeping toward the corner to see if

the way was clear, Emmeline caught movement in shadows across the street.

She growled, recognizing Grace with a kerchief tied around her hair crouched behind a hitching post. Her satchel lay on the ground beside her.

Voices sounded in the stagecoach office and Emmeline watched the porch light flame to life, a signal to the incoming coach that there was a passenger pickup to be made. Beneath the lamp light, Reina handed the man the ticket and settled to the bench.

What? Was Reina planning to leave instead? Emmeline crouched by the building watching the station manager lock up. The keys jangled in his pocket as he sauntered on to his home.

Emmeline watched Reina for a moment more. The woman continued to sit, appearing quiet and relaxed.

After a few minutes, Reina looked up, and fumbling through her bag, she seemed to drop a white kerchief to the ground.

Grace crept forward. Emmeline's eyes narrowed. No, Reina had been watching the street for activity, and signaled now to Grace that the area was clear.

Emmeline scanned the area herself, eyes more used to the darkness. As Grace started to move so, did a shadowy bulk over at the general store. Emmeline didn't recognize the shape, suspecting it wasn't Jameson, but a hired hand. Emmeline crept into position and slipped her gun from its holster.

Emmeline crept toward the shadow and cold-cocked him behind the ear with the heavy iron of her gun's barrel. He went down with barely a sound. Emmeline paused as his face was caught in the moonlight. She sighed. He looked young but she put him from her mind as she crept past his unconscious body.

She looked around but did not see any other unwanted onlookers.

She heard the rumbling of the stagecoach wheels and the pounding of the horses' hooves approaching from the east and stepped out from her shadows.

"Reina! Stop!" The brunette rose from her seat, eyes landing on Emmeline, expression anxious. Emmeline wanted to reassure her. She started forward.

"Emmeline?" Grace turned. "No!"

Emmeline heard the click of a hammer and spun, already raising her gun's barrel. Reina's cry sounded close. Emmeline fired her weapon toward the click over by the general store. A body slammed into hers, followed by a scream.

She felt the dirt and wood under her face as she hit the deck. Her head hit the side of the building where she'd leaped and gray fogged her senses.

"You shot him!"

Emmeline winced and opened her eyes, looking up at the young man she thought she had knocked out. He stared down at her along the shaking barrel of a gun he held between both fists. He might not hit her, but she didn't react well to a gun in her face in any case. Emmeline jerked her hand even before the idea fully formed and grasped her fallen gun.

"Stop! Jason, stop!"

The young man above her responded to Grace's voice and looked away from Emmeline. Though not lowering her gun, Emmeline kicked at his hands; his weapon clattered into the street. The young man's shoulders sagged as he stared at her almost dumbly.

"What'd you do that for?" he grouched at Grace who came stomping onto the decking; Emmeline really wished the girl wouldn't rattle the boards like that, because her back ached something fierce.

"Stop," Grace said. "Daddy's dead."

"You cain't tell me what to do," Jason said.

"Pa is dead. I'm his only heir. You work for me now," Grace said confidently.

Emmeline's pain-fogged brain registered that Jameson, somehow miraculously, was dead. Must've been her shot into the dark what killed him. She rolled over only to find a dark-haired form on the ground beside her. Immediately she recognized, reached, and yelled, "Reina!"

"I think my pa shot her," Grace said, leaning over both of them, looking at Reina. Emmeline sat up, gripping Reina's body and sorting out the source of the blood she felt warmly coating her hands. She gripped reflexively tighter when she realized it was Reina's left upper arm. The squeeze woke Reina, who had likely passed out from the pain, back awake to experience the full pain of her injury.

She cried out. Emmeline rocked her. The stagecoach clattered to a stop in the street. "Somebody need a ride?"

No one answered him. The coach driver hopped down, and several owners from the surrounding businesses converged on the tiny porch where Emmeline Soule rocked Reina Suarez, who had once again fallen unconscious, and 14-year old Grace Jameson stood guard over a shame-faced looking Jason Gantry, cowhand at the Jameson Ranch.

Chapter 11

Persistent pain throbbed and woke Reina Suarez from her sleep. Having experienced it before, she knew the laudanum was wearing off. Even as she tried to gauge the time, the silence of the room was broken by the turning of the door's knob. She jerked toward the sound, letting out a cry as she twisted her injured arm into new sharp pain.

"Reina?" Vivian moved quickly into the room, not bothering to latch it shut. "Don't try to move," she said.

"You..." Reina inhaled and exhaled, somewhat calming the pain. "You startled me."

"I apologize. I was bringing up water," she held up the pitcher in her hands. "Do you want more laudanum?"

Reina managed to make most of the pain subside through sheer force of will as she resettled herself against the pillows. She lifted her good arm and dropped it. "No. No, I think I would like to remain clear-headed for a while."

Vivian smiled at that. "Would you like a little soup, or tea?"

"How long has it been since I last ate?" Reina lifted her hand again, this time in entreaty. Vivian instantly settled to the edge of the bed, linking her hand with her friend's.

"If you had something to eat at Granny's while waiting for Grace to arrive, that was two days ago."

Reina closed her eyes. *Two days?* Emmeline had to be gone by now, if she wasn't killed by the same gunshots that still rang in Reina's ears. Two shots. She knew, from the pain in her arm, that she had taken one. The other... She looked up at Vivian, not sure how to ask.

"What is it? What do you need?"

"Emmeline?" Reina pushed the word past the lump in her throat.

"I'm here."

Reina winced when Vivian jumped up. "Learn to knock!" Reina strained to see around Vivian's body, which the woman had placed defiantly between Reina and the door.

"Door was open," Emmeline said, and the matter-of-fact tone was music to Reina's ears. "So?"

"Reina needs her rest." Vivian put her hands on her hips.

"Vivian, it's...I want to see Emmeline."

"But-"

Reina interrupted, "I'd like some tea. If you're still offering?"

Vivian's face contorted in conflict, but she finally nodded and withdrew. Reina's eyes tracked her exit only until they fell upon Emmeline Soule, who turned and quietly closed the door.

The familiar sight of Emmeline in her denims and the plaid shirt untucked, revealing the woman was healthy and whole brought tears of relief to Reina's eyes. Emmeline turned at the sob Reina didn't know she had uttered and bolted across the room. "Reina!"

Gingerly reaching out and taking Reina's hands, Emmeline searched her face, as Reina did the same, though the sight was blurred.

"Eva...Emmeline?" A palm cupped her cheek, thumb brushing away loose tears.

The pale pink bottom lip rolled between fretting teeth. The fingers holding her own squeezed. Emmeline opened her mouth twice, apparently trying to speak. Reina was about to ask what was wrong when Emmeline leaned forward and pressed her lips to Reina's. The contact was tender and chaste.

Reina never wanted it to stop. When Emmeline started to pull away, Reina tried to lift her hands to pull her close, but her

damaged left arm screamed in pain and she whimpered just as Emmeline fully separated their mouths.

"Damn it, fool woman, you could have been killed!"

That got Reina's back up. "I could have been killed?" she stressed. "Jameson was gunning for *you*!"

"Then you let me take the shot! I can handle it! You...you're...you..."

Lifting her good right arm, Reina slapped Emmeline's face, making the woman's hand leave her to cup her burning cheek. "Idiot! I snuck out so you wouldn't follow me."

"You thought I would just let you put Grace on some coach to go to California territory on her own? That girl is *my* responsibility."

"Vivian reminded me that *girl* was old enough to be married off, and thus old enough to make her own decisions."

"So you just went ahead?"

"I gave Grace the choices she had. She was willing to leave."

"She ain't leavin' now."

That made Reina stop. "Grace didn't get on the coach?"

"No." Emmeline sounded angry.

"Why are you angry? That's what you wanted, right?" Then Reina had a thought. "Jameson's not dead, is he?"

"My shot was true," Emmeline said. "He's being buried out at his ranch on Saturday."

"Then what the hell is wrong?" Reina put her hand to her head, staving off the throbbing headache returning to her temples.

"Some of Jameson's men want justice."

"So this *is* goodbye," Reina said with resignation.

"Reina, you..you almost...died. I... on that sidewalk, hold...holding your...you." Emmeline exhaled. "I realized that I...you... You're important to me."

"But when the circuit judge comes through, he'll..."

"I'll stand trial," Emmeline said. "Grace says she'll testify that her father was going to shoot me in the back."

"The word of a *girl*? What about the men?"

"Only one other was there. And Grace insists she can handle him."

"Whether she can or not, why put yourself through that?" Reina asked. "You usually run."

"I should. I still have someone I need to find," Emmeline said.

"But you're here. And I find I can't leave you." As Emmeline pushed her hands through her hair, Reina noted how unruly it was, lank and unwashed; how drawn Emmeline's face was, patches of deep color under her eyes. She had to take care of herself.

Reina closed her eyes and rubbed at her temple ineffectually with one hand. "I'd rather know you were alive, out there, somewhere, than dead, either from a bullet in the back or the hanging the circuit judge will decree."

"You don't know that will happen."

"You don't know it *won't* happen," Reina snapped.

Emmeline put her hands in her own lap and looked away. "Do you want me to go?"

Reina's pain was manifold in that moment. The physical pain of her arm however was somehow less than the pain in her chest from the idea that Emmeline Soule would be departing her life. She bit her lip, but finally she whispered, "No."

Emmeline's gaze held hers. She nodded. "All right then." The broad work-calloused hand slipped over Reina's belly. Silence reigned as they stared at each other, rejoicing in reunion, and a

tentative beginning. Then a knock at the door made Emmeline jump. She stood, fingers lingering on Reina's until they were too far apart to continue touching. "Get some sleep."

"I'll miss you," Reina said.

"I'll miss you more," Emmeline replied, her lips quirking up at the corners as she bent over again, claiming a soft kiss.

A throat cleared. Reina saw Vivian stood in the doorway as Emmeline straightened from their kiss. She kept hold of the fingers trying to slip free of her grasp. "Vivian, would you make sure Emmeline has what she needs?"

Vivian's eyes narrowed at Emmeline. "You leavin'?"

"No," Emmeline said.

Vivian came to the side of the bed, leveled her gaze at Emmeline and narrowed her eyes further. After several beats where Emmeline could feel herself beginning to squirm, Vivian huffed only one word, "Good." Then she looked away from Emmeline, as though dismissing her from her mind. She held the mug for Reina to sip. With her good hand steadying the other side, Reina drank slowly. The bedridden woman sighed and seemed to relax.

Vivian said, "I'll tell the others downstairs that you've gone back to sleep."

"Who's downstairs?"

"Caer and her gran are with the other girls. Grace came over. A few of the men."

"I'd like to see Grace," Reina said.

Vivian's lips pursed but she smoothed them quickly. "Fine."

Emmeline withstood another glare as Vivian took the now empty mug and withdrew. "What are you going to talk to Grace about?" she asked.

"Her future as a rancher."

Epilogue

eight months later...

"We're gonna be a state! We're gonna be a state!" People whooped and hollered; youngsters danced and some not so young tossed their hats high in jubilation. They all converged on a home where the boards wore a fresh coat of white paint, baby blue trimmed the doors and blue gingham curtains hung in the windows.

Dressed in dungarees and a plaid green shirt not quite buttoned to the top, Emmeline Soule emerged from the home's front door, shielding her green eyes from the midday sun. "What's going on?" she asked, tying back her long unruly blonde curls.

Caer leaped onto the porch and swung around the beam. "State man coming. We're gonna be a state!"

Emmeline reentered the house, emerging a moment later leading Reina Suarez wearing a simple shirtwaist blue dress. Normally perfectly coiffed hair was askew in its pins. Fisting her right hand on her hip, she spoke sharply to another face in the crowd, "And this couldn't wait for the town meeting after school Monday?"

"We need a government," Widow said, "a real one, elected by the people."

"It'll be cattlemen against the farmers," someone else shouted.

Widow turned her dark eyes on him fisting her hands on her ample frame. "So we get a mayor who ain't neither. Businessman, looking to grow this town for all of us."

"You?" He snorted.

"Not me," Widow said. "I nominate Reina Suarez as the first mayor of Book's Pass."

Reina leaned on the roof beam. "Me?"

"You are always looking out for our best interest. Getting your girls to teach a local school...Running your business fair and equitable. You even doing negotiating with the train companies to get a trailhead here, to turn this place into a market so's we don't have to go all the way to Abilene..."

Emmeline whispered in Reina's ear, "Go you," and Reina blushed.

"But it would be just like Jameson running us if we don't have an actual election. Let the majority decide. Who else will run for mayor?"

There was a commotion. In the end a cattleman announced he would also run.

"We need to elect a sheriff, too," Caer shouted. "Gotta have good law 'round here. Someone fair. Impartial." She looked up at Emmeline and pointed. "You can run for Sheriff, Emmeline!"

There's less consternation about Emmeline's nomination going unopposed. Everyone had been present at the trial over Jameson's death and heard his own ranch hand tell the circuit judge how Jameson was aimin' to shoot Soule in the back when Miss Reina jumped out and Emmeline turned, firing her weapon at Jameson's position. Miss Reina had been hit by the bullet meant for Soule, and Jameson, the Lord's justice served up, died from Emmeline's dead-on shot to his chest.

Over the last eight months, Emmeline had become a fixture in the town. Literally. She could be found most mornings, fixing up this, that, and other things for farmer or merchant alike. She needed money, she said, and she was honest enough to work for it.

About two months later, while Reina was still facing the loss of use of her left arm, Emmeline turned over the money to Reina and told her to open a school. Everyone heard about it at church that Sunday. Vivian was going to be the primary teacher, with several of the other girls working with smaller groups of the townspeople's children, educating them without having to send them to the next county for schooling.

When Arizona became a state years later, the celebration at Book's Pass was opened with a speech from Mayor Reina Suarez, and the safety of everyone in attendance was assured by Sheriff Emmeline Soule.

Thank You

I sincerely thank you for joining me on this journey with Emmeline and Reina and all the happy residents of Book's Pass, Arizona. More is coming in their story, so I hope you will join me then.

Authors really only get traction if readers support them, so thank you for supporting me with the purchase of this novella.

If you enjoyed this book, please consider posting a review in your social media and include link to my website: <http://larazbooks.com>

Again, thank you!

About the Author

Lara Zielinsky loves few things more than a day spent writing with a pot of hot tea, or a carafe of iced tea, close at hand. Those few more things include her family and reading books while enjoying the beach or a backyard barbecue in her home state of Florida.

She's been writing stories about women loving women for more than two decades. What started out as writing for fandoms finally gave way to original fiction since 2001. She enjoys connecting with other readers and writers of lesfic and bific on social media. She's not as prolific as she would like, but has always believed in the moral of the story *The Tortoise and the Hare*: slow and steady is best. So she keeps writing until each story, long or short, is complete to her satisfaction.

She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and is currently working on her masters in professional writing. After working as a teacher, a techie, and a host of other things in a variety of industries, she has finally come back to her first passion.

She's always available to edit for other authors, with 15+ years experience editing for small press publishers and indie LGBTQ and romance authors.

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