

Always the gentleman, he insisted on presenting himself in the best possible manner, so even though he only wanted to observe one of his best wranglers break in the new bronco they had bought the day before, he had put on his sturdy work boots, his blue denim work pants, a red and black checkered shirt and a short denim jacket.

Putting on his pale brown Boss Of The Plains hat, he made sure it was properly acocked - just like the old, genuine frontier cowboys had worn them when he had first arrived on the prairie in the mid-thirties - and set off towards the enclosures.

At the same time, three horse wranglers - dressed identically in dirty white Stetsons, pale brown cotton shirts, red bandanas, leather gloves, blue jeans with leather chaps and finally well-worn Justin work boots - were leaning against the planks surrounding the enclosure, looking at the shiny black stallion inside that tried its best to buck loose, and worrying which of them would be selected to tame the beast.

Vince MacCleary, in his late twenties and equipped with a mane of flaming red hair, happened to look over his shoulder and caught wind of 'Gentleman' George rolling towards them. "Darn... heads-up, fellas. The big bossman is a-comin'," he said and turned around.

The man on his right, thirty-something Guinn Haggerty cursed under his breath and turned around. He quickly stubbed out his cigarette on the fence and thumped the shoulder of the third of the wranglers.

Groaning, the twenty-four year old Karla Stuart turned around and flashed her best, broadest smile at her boss, showing him her partial set of pearly whites that went so well with her high cheekbones and sky blue eyes that most people she met thought she was somebody's trophy wife instead of a rough 'n ready bronc buster.

George Ballentine nodded his approval at the readiness of his best riders. Taking a deep puff on his cigar, he inspected the troops but soon came to a halt in front of one of the very few women who was as tall as he was. "Karla," he said in his characteristic booming voice. "You up for it?"

"Always, Sir," Karla said, but on the inside, she groaned long and hard, already seeing herself with her rear end submerged in a brass tub filled with ice cold water from the well.

"Hmmm," George said and knocked off some ash. "Y'know, if my dear Elizabeth had still been with us, she would have told me it was foolish to continue breaking in those broncos when the stud farm is going so well, but... dammit, this is what I got started doin'! There's nothing quite like watching an expert wrangler roll out his... or her... tricks and lure in that critter. Ain't that true, Karla?"

"Very true, Sir," Karla said, nodding. In reality, she wanted to say that if it amused 'Gentleman' George so much, perhaps he should get back in the saddle himself, but she needed the wages so she didn't speak her mind.

George Ballentine nodded back at his only female ranchhand. When she didn't move, he waved at her impatiently. "Well, get to it, Karla. Time's a-wastin'."

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and shuffled across the courtyard to the two low barracks at the other side to get her lasso, her saddle and the harness for the stallion. Coming back with the items over her shoulders, she looked up at the sun and appreciated that it was still fairly early in the morning - she knew that later on, the conditions would be murderous.

After putting down her saddle, she pushed her Stetson back from her forehead and turned towards her boss. "Does it have a name yet, Sir?"

"Naw. It's black and it's got a temper... maybe we should call it Diablo?" George Ballentine said, knocking off some ash.

"If it boils over, I'll call it somethin' else," Karla mumbled as she started preparing her lasso to rein in the wild beast.

Grunting, George Ballentine put his boot up on the lowest of the planks and rested his arms across the top railing. Puffing on his cigar, he studied how Karla was doing, watching her every move with a trained eye. "Vince," he said, speaking to the man next to him, "she's quite something, ain't she?"

"I thought it was a stallion, Sir?" Vince said, looking at his boss with a puzzled expression on his face.

George chuckled throatily and shot his ranch hand a curious look. "Karla."

"Oh... yeah, she's quite something, all right. She's better than any of the men here... even us." - Next to Vince, Guinn buried his face in his hands before he elbowed his buddy in the side.

"Yeah," George said, watching Karla's endless chap-covered legs as she walked around the enclosure to get the stallion to calm down. "Thirty years ago, it would have been unthinkable. Hell, even fifteen years ago... well, I s'pose many a woman earned her stripes in the war, so... The times they are a-changin'."

"Yes Sir," Guinn Haggerty said. "Well, I don't think it'll be long before she catches the eye of some strappin' young fella. Once that happens and they get married and have three-five-seven younglings, her bronc bustin' days will be long gone. Why, just changin' the diapers and cookin' supper will take most of her day. And then there's moppin' the floor and mendin' socks and washin' the clothes and all the other things a good wife does for her husband."

"Very true, Guinn," Vince said and nodded solemnly.

Turning towards Guinn, George Ballentine let out a chuckle which sent a cloud of pale gray cigar smoke out of his mouth and nose. "Prepared to say that to her face, are ya?"

"No, Sir. I like my teeth right where they are," Guinn deadpanned. When he noticed Karla looking at him, he stood up straight even though he knew she couldn't have heard him.

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After breaking in the bronco, Karla walked it around and around the enclosure with the saddle still on the horse's back to get it used to the feel and the weight of the accessory.

"Vince, get in there and take over," George Ballentine said and gave Vince MacCleary a little shove on the shoulder. "And send Karla out. I have something I need to discuss with her."

The swap went without problems, and soon, Karla stood in front of her boss, glistening all over from sweating like a pig after the hard work. "Vince said ya wanted to talk, Sir?" she said, taking off her hat and wiping her forehead with her sleeve.

"That's right. A couple o' things, actually. Come, walk with me," George said and put his arm around Karla's steaming hot shoulder while trying not to look at her bosom which stood out quite clearly through her soaked shirt.

The mismatched pair strolled across the courtyard until they stood in the shade of the red, two-story barn that had been erected on the outskirts of the enclosure.

"Karla, I'm gonna ask you a direct question and I expect a direct answer. You hear me?" George said, shooting Karla a hard, unwavering look.

"Yes, Sir."

"Did Mr. Moehring get back from Princetown last night?"

'Aw hell... when the boss says that he wants a direct answer, I'm wondering if he expects the kind of direct answer I'm gonna give him?' Karla thought, biting her dusty lips. "Yes, he did, Sir. He came in past midnight."

She had more to tell about the mean-spirited man, but looked down instead, too used to hearing from her foreman that *'squawkin' was bad for her health'*.

When Karla didn't want to continue, George stuck out his jaw and raised an eyebrow at his employee. "I know he's your foreman, but I'm your boss, and I think it would be best if you told me what's on your mind. I can see it in your eyes, ya know."

"Well... when he got back, he was drunk off his caboose, Sir," Karla said and took off her hat. "Prob'ly still is. When he came in last night, he had a bottle with him that was almost full. He was in his office when we left the barracks this mornin'."

"Mmmm. Karla," George said and put his arm back across Karla's shoulders, "you're the best damn wrangler I have though you ain't even a boy, but I just can't make you the new foreman. It would cause too much resentment from the other fellas. I hope you understand."

"I, uh... the new foreman, Sir?" Karla squeaked, wringing her hat in her hands.

"Yes. Once we've had this conversation, I'm gonna go over to the barracks and kick Mr. Moehring's drunkard ass outta here. I can't use a man like that. He knows full well I won't tolerate hard liquor on Circle Y."

"Uh, yes Sir. He won't like it."

George laughed dryly and thumped Karla's back. "Actually, I'm hopin' he'll struggle... would give me an excuse to pound the mean S.O.B."

"Yes, Sir," Karla said with a grin. "If I may be so bold, who's gonna be our next foreman?"

"Guinn Haggerty. I know he's a traditionalist but he knows what he's doing. And besides, he's got the respect of the other fellas. I'm sorry, Karla, but that's just how it is."

"I understand, Sir," Karla said, but inside, she didn't understand at all.

George nodded and began to shuffle down to the barn doors. Opening one of them, he peeked inside to check if their carriage was in good shape, which it invariably was since it was one of Karla's tasks. "Anyway, there's about to be some more change here at the Circle Y. I've wired my daughter at the Philadelphia boarding school and asked her to come out for a few months. She's old enough now, and I'm intending to teach her the ropes... so to speak. You remember Yvonne, don't you?" George said, knocking some ash off his cigar.

"Of course I do, Sir," Karla said, though she didn't think it sounded like her own voice at all. She let her mind drift back to the time where she and Yvonne Ballentine had grown up together in Princetown and on the ranch. Karla was the daughter of a hired cook, and when her mother had died of pneumonia, she had been brought out to work on the Circle Y because of her excellent horse sense. She had always suspected the close friendship she'd had with Yvonne was another reason for her continued employment.

The two girls were inseparable even though they were three years apart, but when Karla hit puberty, everything changed between them. Suddenly, Yvonne's green eyes, white-blond hair and cheerful nature took on a whole new meaning for Karla, and their innocent escapades of frolicking in the watering hole behind the mansion on the burning hot days in nothing but their underwear - and sometimes not even that - had turned into a particularly nasty kind of torture for her.

When 'Gentleman' George had sent Yvonne away to the boarding school on her fourteenth birthday, Karla had been relieved, though she had cried herself to sleep on many a night back then. *'I wonder how she looks now... she was already pretty as a young girl... she's probably turned into an angel,'* Karla thought, chewing on her cheeks.

George Ballentine let out a confused grunt as he threw the butt of his cigar onto the ground and crushed it with the heel of his boot. "What happened there, Karla? You were over in the next county somewhere."

"Oh... uh..." Karla stuttered, snapping back to the real world. "I was just thinkin' about your daughter, Sir. When will she be here?"

"Ah, that's impossible to say. Some time in the next few days, I'd imagine... though you never quite know with the Milligan Stage Company. Well, I better take care of Mr. Moehring," George Ballentine said and walked away from the shell-shocked Karla Stuart.

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That same evening, the lower half of one of the two sleeping barracks had been transformed into a low-key poker palace. While the rest of their colleagues were trying to get some sleep, four people were sitting around an upturned wooden crate and playing with a second-hand set of cards that had been sourced from the Bull Rider Saloon in Princetown.

The cigarette smoke hung thick over the table - so thick in fact that the kerosene lamp above it was partially obscured by the pale gray clouds.

Karla looked over the rim of her cards, grinding her jaw incessantly at the thought of losing yet another hand, and part of her meager wages, to one of her fellow players: Vince MacCleary, the newly appointed foreman Guinn Haggerty or even the new guy, one of the wranglers from the stud farm, Freddy Maynard.

A recent arrival at the Circle Y ranch, Freddy was a fancy dressed, honey-blond fellow with leading-man features who liked to consider himself God's gift to women - any woman.

"Are ya tryin' to set a world record there, Karla?" Freddy said, putting a paw on Karla's thigh even though she'd told him a hundred-and-one times that it was a great way of getting his fingers broken.

" 'Bout what, Freddy?" she said around her cigarette, jerking her leg to the side to get his hand off her.

"Your ash," Freddy said, copping yet another feel.

The object of Freddy's question was the inch-long stretch of ash at the tip of Karla's cigarette that she hadn't had time to knock off. Eyeing it, she puckered up her lips which made it drop off and fall onto the floor.

Immediately following that, she stamped her heel down on Freddy's toes to make it quite clear to him that he wouldn't get another shot at taking his paw off her thigh.

"Owwww!" he howled, jumping back and nearly knocking the playing table down on the floor next to the discarded ash.

'Will ya keep ya damn trap shut! Some people is tryin' ta sleep down here!' one of their colleagues said from his bunk further down the barracks, flinging an empty tin cup through the room that rattled and plonked across the wooden floor.

Karla sighed and looked at her fellow players. While Vince was concentrating hard on his cards, Guinn Haggerty was grumbling quite severely and his jaw was working overtime - and Freddy had a look of perfect indignation on his face, like he couldn't believe he wasn't allowed to explore the only woman in the room.

"Y'know," Vince said as he put down a royal flush that came out of nowhere. "I can't believe mean ol' Moehring got the boot today. Man, he's been so nasty to us. Karla, remember the time he ordered ya to empty the craphouse on your own for a month just because he didn't like that you was taller than him?" he said and started scooping up the pot,

"I remember," Karla said, staring in disbelief at the cards Vince had put down on the table. All of a sudden, her own collection of eights and jacks didn't look as good as she had thought. Sighing, she threw down the cards and looked at her hard-earned dollars disappear down into Vince's battered hat. "Or how 'bout the time when he made us clean the floor in here with a couple o' hoss scrubs when Mr. Ballentine had taken away his whisky?"

"Ugh," Vince and Freddy said in unison.

Guinn had been bled dry by the last hand so all he could do was to lean back in the chair and roll himself a cigarette. "Karla," he said as she struck the match on the corner of the playing table. "It's time to take the evening watch. Since I'm the new foreman, I'm giving you and Slick Freddy here that job. Any problems?"

Karla grinned and shook her head. "No, Sir, Mr. Haggerty, Sir... not as long as Mr. Maynard here knows that my legs ain't his property," she said, grinning at Freddy who huffed indignantly and moved away from the playing table to protect his boots and the feet inside them.

"All right," Freddy said with a curt nod. "But I would like to file a formal complaint with the Good Lord... he woulda made my plight a lot less if he had made ya as ugly as a mud fence!"

Karla's only answer was to roll her eyes repeatedly and to crush the butt of her cigarette with her boot - which made Freddy shy back from her.

Guinn Haggerty chuckled and pushed his chair back. "Freddy... my advice to you is quite simply to put it outta your mind. C'mon, let's go over to the armory and get the hardware before Mr. Ballentine decides to come and check up on us."

That reminder cleared the playing table in a hurry, and soon, Karla and Freddy were patrolling the outer perimeter of the Circle Y ranch on horseback, wielding Colts, Winchesters and even a scattergun.

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The next day just after noon, Karla drove the two-horse carriage up to the front door of the mansion and quickly jumped off the board to check the horses' tack and the condition of the carriage itself.

As she checked the yoke, she couldn't help but see the fresh scrapes from when she had run over the female deputy on Perry Street a few weeks earlier. When she closed her eyes, she could still hear the woman's screams and the hideous crunches that came from the hooves that trampled her despite Karla's best efforts at getting her horses to move away.

"I'm guessing you're still thinking about the fateful events that night, Karla," George Ballentine said right next to her, having stepped out of the mansion without her noticing a thing.

"Uh... yes, Sir," Karla said and helped her boss up into the carriage. When she had closed the small door behind him, he reached out and put a fatherly hand on her arm.

"Karla, don't let it fester. This is the kind of thing that can ruin a young soul such as yourself. The woman didn't die, that's the most important thing."

"Yes, Sir. She did become a cripple, though. I couldn't-"

"But she's still breathing. Sheriff Cutler even made her an Honorary Deputy. All right, let's get a move on," George Ballentine said and leaned back in the soft seat. "We have a couple o' railroaders to catch up with."

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and stepped up on the board. After releasing the brake, she let out a loud "Yah!" and slapped the reins.

Twenty minutes out from the ranch, the four-seater carriage rumbled through the loose sand that made up the Ballentine Trail. Groves of tall, four-armed cacti stretched out for miles and miles on either side of the trail, and here and there, the easily recognizable sound of rattlesnakes cut through the stale, burning hot air as a reminder that death was never far away.

A bump behind her made her look over her shoulder, but it had only been her boss changing positions, moving over to the other bench seat so he could speak to her without shouting.

Looking at the desolate landscape, 'Gentleman' George Ballentine made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "This is where it'll come in from the west, Karla. Blaise City, Dillonworth, Guthrie, Tolliver, then make a swing towards Princetown. After us, it'll carry on towards Snake Pass, Evansworth and finally head out of the Territory."

"What will, Sir?"

"Why, the railroad, of course. Don't tell me you haven't heard anything about the new project!"

"Only fleetin'ly, Sir."

"It's a multi-million dollar deal. Yessir, it's going to be a big day in Princetown when the first locomotive arrives. Yessir," George said, looking out at the monochrome terrain.

After a few minutes of dusty rumbling, Karla leaned her head to the left. "But what about the Milligan Stage Company, Sir? Won't they go out of business?"

"No, Milligan is in on the deal. They'll shut down the stage lines, of course, but they'll buy a few railroad cars from back east to keep a presence here."

"Oh... somehow I can't see Mumblin' Jack Barnes as a train conductor..." Karla said quietly, thinking about the larger-than-life stagecoach driver who knew every living soul in Princetown - and probably one or two who were beyond living.

" 'Beg pardon?"

"Nothin', Sir."

"Which reminds me," George said and tapped Karla on her hip to make her look down at him.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Recently, I've heard a couple of rumors, from reliable sources, mind you, that you've been seen in the Cheap Thrills cathouse on Sullivan Street, spendin' a few of your hard-earned dollars on a Mexican whore called-"

"Libertad. Yeah," Karla said and nodded somberly, focusing on the trail ahead.

"Karla... Lord knows I had a few dalliances in my youth, but..." - Scrunching up his face, George turned away to seek out the right words for what he wanted to say. When he had found them, he turned back to her. "But you've gotta be a little more... a little more... aw, hell. A little more circumspect is what I'm tryin' to say. I'm your friend, I hope you know that, Karla, and I fully accept and respect who and what ya are, but others don't. You know that."

"I know, Sir."

"By being so open about it, you're only giving them ammunition to use against you."

Karla sighed deeply and stared out onto the desolate landscape they drove through. She eventually nodded which made George Ballentine sit back down on the bench seat. "I know that as well, Sir," she said after a little while. "I only wish the people who told you about me and Libertad had told you the whole story... and not just the parts that made me out to be a sinner."

'Gentleman' George chuckled darkly and put his arm across the backrest of the board. "I had a hunch there was more to it. Well... now's your chance, Karla. I'm all ears."

"It's true I met Libertad one evenin' when I was lookin' for companionship, but I ain't spendin' my dollars on whorin', Sir. I'm spendin' them on Libertad's baby girl, Lucinda. By givin' those two girls a few extra dollars now and then, perhaps Libertad will have to work less. The Cheap Thrills is an awful place... filthy and disgusting. If I had the money, I'd buy her free from Madam Corey in an instant... but I don't, so I can't."

"Mmmm," George Ballentine said with a nod. "I'm glad you told me the whole truth, Karla. I knew there was more to it than met the eye."

"You're welcome, Sir... may I ask who told ya so I can give the man a good ass-whoopin'?"

"Weeelll, you may ask, but I ain't sayin'," George said and wiggled his index finger at his driver.

Several miles later, the outskirts of Princetown came into sight as solid structures that rose above the constant, shimmering heat haze. The trail slowly became less and less sandy until it had turned into a hard-packed dirt road that made the large wheels rumble even more.

As the carriage rumbled past Boot Hill, the handful of fresh, pale brown crosses and tombstones were easy to spot, marking the final resting place for those who had been killed on payroll Friday, either by the Deputy Sheriffs who had been appointed by Quint Connors, or by the combined team of Sheriff Cutler, Jane 'Blackie' Durham and Victoria Lynn Cooper who had cleaned up the town.

Like always, 'Gentleman' George took off his hat and held it to his chest while they went past the graveyard. "Y'know, Karla, I'm almost sorry we weren't in town last Friday. It must have been awesome to see Orin Cutler and his band of fightin' women sweep up the trash."

"From what I heard, Sir, it was hell on earth," Karla said and steered around a large pile of horse droppings so it wouldn't get flung up by the wheels. "Vince and Freddy were in town and they both told me they were lucky to get out in one piece."

Chuckling, George Ballentine moved from the front to the back seat to make his entrance in Princetown more grand. As he sat down, he straightened down his white, full beard and made sure his pale brown Boss Of The Plains hat was on just right.

Turning onto Perry Street, George immediately noticed Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson Senior and his son, Henry Junior, standing in front of the Town Hall. The men were wearing identical dark overcoats over identical dark suits where the creases on the pants were so sharp they could be used to cut firewood, and both used a hardwood cane with a gold knob at the end.

The main differences came in their hats, their hair and their beards - where Senior was wearing a shiny top hat, Junior wore a derby. Senior's hair and full beard were white, but Junior's hair and stylish facial hair were black and held in the popular Van Dyke-style.

"Karla, pull over at the Town Hall. We might as well pick up the Wilkinsons," George said, leaning forward to tap Karla's hip.

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and steered the two-in-hand over to the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Once they had come to a stop, Karla quickly jumped off the board and opened the little door in the side of the carriage. She was used to the boundless arrogance of the Wilkinsons, so it didn't bother her that neither even glanced in her direction.

"Good day, Justice Wilkinson," 'Gentleman' George said and took off his hat while he shook hands with Wilkinson the Elder.

The Chief Justice Of The Peace looked coolly at the rancher with a pair of narrow, beady eyes. "Good day, Mr. Ballentine," he said, shaking the other man's hand with the strength of a wilted flower.

"And good day to you, too, Mr. Wilkinson," George said, turning to Junior whose handshake was stronger but his eyes shiftier than his father's.

"Mmmm," Wilkinson the Younger said, concentrating on the long, chap-covered legs of George Ballentine's driver.

Karla stepped back up onto the board and took the reins. After looking over her shoulder to see if the street was clear, she let out a loud "Yah!" which made the horses go into a steady rhythm.

The carriage had only driven a few yards before an easily recognizable, pot-bellied figure stepped out of an alleyway holding a scattergun over his arm.

"Oh, there's the Sheriff," George Ballentine said, once again taking off his hat. "Howdy, Sheriff Cutler!" he said loudly as they were going past the man of the law who was standing outside the second of the three saloons on Perry Street - the Bull Rider.

"Howdy, Mr. Ballentine," Orin Cutler said, waving his Confederate Cavalry hat in the air as the carriage drove past him.

Karla gulped when she noticed that Sheriff Cutler had been standing very close to the spot where she had mowed down the female Deputy. The Birrell Hotel was coming up fast so she didn't have much time to ponder those dark thoughts, but despite her efforts to shut it out, she simply couldn't get it out of her mind.

"Karla, go 'round the branch of the Tolliver Bank and come back up the alleyway between that and the Hotel. That way, it'll be easier for us when we're going home," George Ballentine said, leaning forward in his seat.

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and briefly steered the two-horse team north on Main Street before heading down the outside of the building that housed the bank.

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"Watch your step, Sirs," Karla said as she opened the small door to let the two Wilkinsons and her boss down from the carriage. Henry Wilkinson Senior just grumbled at her without even glancing in her direction on his way to the hotel, but Junior lingered on, undressing her with his eyes and doing his worst to stare a hole in her cotton shirt.

"Much obliged," he said, tipping his derby when he set foot on the ground. A smile creased his lips that Karla figured was meant to groom her for future endeavors, but all it did was to give her the creeps.

Up on the carriage, 'Gentleman' George snorted at the exchange between Karla and Junior, and he accidentally bumped his knee into Junior's elbow when he stepped down on the ground. "Oh, pardon ol' clumsy me," he said, trying to appear sincere.

"You're pardoned," Henry Junior said, rubbing his elbow as he walked towards the hotel.

Looking closer at Junior, Karla understood why he had a reputation as the Princetown Lothario - in his early thirties, he had dark, stylish hair, a well-groomed Van Dyke beard, a milky complexion and a pair of deep brown eyes that she could imagine were all the rage with the upper class Lady socialites at the town's events and functions.

And yet, she knew the man was a snake; a poisonous one at that. When she had visited Libertad, some of the dove's colleagues had often told her stories about Junior that involved whips, belts and plenty of pain, regardless of how well the women could take it.

"I know what you're thinkin'... but cheer up, Karla," George said and put a fatherly hand on her arm. "Think of the bright side. I have to spend most of the afternoon with them, but you can mill about town all you like. Wanna trade?"

Karla chuckled and shook her head at her boss' words. "No... no, Sir, I wouldn't trade for the biggest pot of gold in the whole wide world."

"Didn't think so. Here's a little somethin' I'll pull outta your wages next Friday," George said and flipped Karla a coin that she deftly caught in mid-air. "Once you've helped me up to the suite we've rented, go buy yourself a brew... but don't get too liquored up. Drunken women are so uncivilized," he continued, bumping shoulders with the tall woman.

"Thank you, Sir. I'll stick to one beer, Sir," Karla said, shoving the silver dollar into her breast pocket.

The lobby of the Birrell Hotel was as opulent as ever with its white walls, carved seraphs and red carpets, and the grand, curving staircase that went upstairs was so shiny it appeared to have been polished by hand.

The Wilkinsons had already moved on from the lobby - it was easy to follow their progress up the staircase; the rhythmic thump-thump-thump from their canes on the thick carpet gave them away.

Edward Royce, the hotel manager, stood behind a long, highly polished counter and waited for his esteemed guest with an expectant look on his face. Royce looked like he always did - a salt-and-pepper mustache, water-combed hair, a black suit and a military posture to go with it - but he was visibly excited at having such important guests staying at the hotel.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ballentine," the manager said and bowed deeply behind the counter. "Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson Senior and his son are already on their way up. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Ballentine? Would you like some refreshments? Fruit, food or beverages? Perhaps the latest edition of the Princetown Bugle?"

"No thanks, my good man," 'Gentleman' George said, grinding his jaw at the toady man behind the desk. "Have our potential business partners arrived yet?"

"They have, Mr. Ballentine. Mr. Fitzpatrick from the Milligan Stage Company awaits you in the suite, as do Mr. Plummer and Colonel Guthridge from the railroad company. Lieutenant Carruthers will join you later."

"Excellent. Karla?" George said and held out his arm. Knowing the drill, Karla hooked her arm inside her boss' and helped him over to the long, winding staircase.

Edward Royce smiled and stepped out from behind the counter. He was quickly standing at the foot of the staircase, gesturing with his hand and smiling so broadly that Karla felt she needed to shield her eyes.

"Mr. Ballentine, it would be my honor to help a man of your importance," Royce said and held out his arm.

"That's mighty kind of you, my good man, but this job requires a woman's touch. Ain't that right, Karla?" George said with a wink.

"Yes, Sir," Karla said. Although she tried to withstand the temptation, she was unable to suppress a wide smirk that she happened to flash the toady in the fancy outfit.

'Gentleman' George Ballentine put his left riding boot up on the lower step, but paused and turned back to Edward Royce who was still staring at them. "If you don't mind, my good man, I prefer not to have an audience. Havin' bum knees from fallin' off one hoss too many in my life is bad enough... I quite frankly can't stand people gawkin' at me."

Edward Royce only let his mask of superiority fall for a split second, but it had been enough for both Karla and George to see his real face.

Grunting, the manager bowed deeply. "As you wish, Mr. Ballentine. If you or your guests need anything, just ring the bell and-"

"You'll be right there. Noted," George Ballentine said and nodded at Karla who put her back into the task and helped the elderly rancher up the grand staircase.

The corridor on the third floor of the Birrell Hotel was decorated as exquisitely as the lobby. Held predominantly in gold and red, it was a picture of high class, as were the framed paintings that adorned the walls.

The corridor itself was mostly held in shiny, heavily lacquered natural wood, but the plush, red carpet with patterns from the great, distant orient added a touch of mystique to the setting. For every fifteen feet, a brass kerosene lamp with a glass dome was attached to the wall on both sides of the corridor which sent cones of golden light down onto the carpet.

The doors to the suites were all made of lacquered natural wood, and there were brass plates on each door identifying the number - or in some cases, the name - of the suite.

"It's down to the left, Karla," George said once they reached the landing. Breathing heavily from climbing the stairs, the old rancher dabbed his sweaty brow with a handkerchief before moving on. "Let me give you some free advice, my friend. Never grow as old as I am now. Or at least, find yourself a nice little gal somewhere who can run your homestead for you if you do get this old. Damn these old legs..." he said, rubbing his knees.

"I'll keep that in mind, Sir. Can you go on?"

"Yeah... the sooner we get there, the sooner I can leave the Wilkinsons behind. Once we're at the door, you're relieved, Karla. Go get that brew, eh?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir."

Forty feet down the hall, George Ballentine briefly knocked on the door to the suite labeled the Washington Room before going inside.

Karla stepped back, quickly eyeing the five men who were already present. She knew the two Wilkinsons, but the three others looked just as important. Two of them wore high quality, pale gray outfits with dark vests and white shirts, but the final, older, man was wearing a blue Union Cavalry uniform with plenty of brass on his shoulders.

Deciding that it would invariably lead to long-winded discussions, she quietly closed the door behind 'Gentleman' George and headed back to the staircase.

Karla stepped out onto the busy Main Street and looked around to decide which of the saloons she'd frequent while she waited for the high and mighty to finish talking. She quickly settled for Old No.4 as it was close enough for her to see the Birrell Hotel if she could get a seat at one of the windows.

On her way across the busy street, she spotted two women coming out of Madden Lane - an older woman in a dark dress with a matching bonnet, and a younger woman in a coarse, brown outfit and a gray, floppy Stetson. The younger was hobbling along with a cane in her left hand, and it didn't take long for Karla to realize that it was Victoria Lynn Cooper, the woman she had mowed down.

Suddenly blowing hot and cold as a strong sense of guilt washed over her, Karla stuffed her hands deep down her pockets and stared at the two women who hadn't spotted her yet. She thought about addressing them to apologize for the accident, but the rock hard knot of dread that had formed in her stomach forced her to abandon that idea and spin around.

Instead of going to one of the saloons, she went straight back to the carriage and climbed up on the board. Once she was seated, she pulled her hat down over her eyes so the two women wouldn't notice her.

Sighing deeply, she slowly shook her head from side to side while a single word kept repeating in her mind - *coward, coward, coward...*

*

*

CHAPTER 2

Two days later.

Grinning like a little sun, Vince MacCleary hurried back to the fence he and Freddy Maynard had been leaning against when they had noticed Karla walking into the bathing hut next to the barn at Circle Y. "Yep," he said, thumping Freddy's shoulder, "somethin's definitely up... she's even got soap an' everything. And she's singin'... she's only singin' when it's something really really speshul."

"Singing?" Freddy said and pushed his hat back from his honey-blond hair to let it rest down his back on the chinstrap. "Who cares about singing, Vince... ya did peek, didn't ya?"

"Well..."

"Aw hell, Vince... what's up with you people out here? The heat gettin' to you or something? You have one hell of a dame going into the bathing hut where she's latherin' up all over her fine, naked body and you don't even sneak a peek at her?"

"Freddy..."

"Vince," Freddy mocked, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Freddy, one," Vince said, counting off on his fingers, "she's my friend and I ain't jeopardizin' that just to sneak a peek at somethin' I seen a hundred times on other wimmen. Two, she's really close to the boss. Three, she's... she's just one of the guys. What can I tell ya... you don't get that 'cos you've only been here a couple of weeks, but I've been workin' with her for a good while now. I s'pose she's a dame technically speakin'... but... but she's just one of the guys."

"Vince?"

"Freddy?" Vince said, echoing Freddy's mocking tone from before.

"Dames are dames and it won't be long before I have her swoonin' in my arms. And you know what? I'm about to put my money where my mouth is," Freddy said and reached into his breast pocket to dig out a piece of paper and the stump of a pencil. Quickly writing down his pledge, he held the paper under Vince's nose. "Two weeks pay, twenty bucks, says that I'll have her able, ready and oh, so willin' within... huh... the same period. Friday next. Yep, payroll Friday will see me and her rollin' in the hay."

"I see you rollin' in the hay, all right... pickin' up your teeth!" Vince growled. He looked at the piece of paper for a little while, but eventually took it and borrowed Freddy's pencil to sign his name, Patrick Vincent MacCleary, next to Frederick Ezekiel Maynard. Dating it, he handed back the note to Freddy and leaned in towards the fancy fellow. "But if the boss hears about this, we're both out of a job... so keep ya trap shut!" he said sternly.

"Oh, my lips are sealed with wax, Vince," Freddy said while folding the note three times and putting it back in his pocket.

The two men turned back around and just caught a glimpse of Karla carrying three empty buckets and a pile of filthy work clothes out of the bathing hut. She was freshly scrubbed and in her Sunday best, and walked like she was on a mission.

"Somethin's definitely up, I'm tellin' ya," Vince said under his breath.

An hour later, Karla hoah'ed the horses and pulled the carriage over by the sidewalk in front of the Milligan Stage Company's office on Perry Street. She could see by the emptiness of the enclosure between the hospital and the Sheriff's Office that the stagecoach hadn't arrived yet, so she knew she wasn't in a rush.

After taking off her leather gloves, she stepped down onto the sidewalk and took full advantage of the break by polishing her dress boots with a cloth, flicking some dust off her practically new, dark brown denim pants, adjusting her brass belt buckle and straightening the sleeves and the collar of her only fancy shirt, a white cotton men's shirt in a Western cut.

Once her red-and-white bandana had been taken care of - off-center to her left, as the authentic wrangler-style demanded - her dirty white Stetson was next on her list, and she made sure the Carlsbad swoops were lined up just right, with the front of the hat leaning downwards in a way she knew made her look cooler.

"Yep, I'm ready... ready for Miss Yvonne," she said out loud in an effort to calm down the pack of butterflies that had begun to flap their wings in her belly - unfortunately, her words of reassurance had little to no effect because her old companion, the knot of worry, had already reared its ugly head and had assumed control over her innards.

Her palms were suddenly clammy, but she didn't want to wipe them on her shirt or her pants so she opened a small hatch on the carriage to find a rag that would take care of business.

Waiting for the stagecoach to arrive, she looked at the other people walking up and down Perry Street. Most were clearly there for work-related purposes, but there were a few who were out for a stroll, walking arm in arm or even hand in hand, which was risqué to say the least for unmarried couples.

Karla sighed and thought back to the halcyon days she had spent with Yvonne Ballentine when they were young girls - they truly had lived, laughed and cried together.

She had taught Yvonne how to ride and to take care of the horses, and they had spent endless days on horseback, exploring the Circle Y ranch and sleeping under the stars; in return, Yvonne had tried to teach Karla needlepoint, crochet work and quilting though no one in their right mind would even pretend that it had been a success.

Like the best friends they were, they had comforted each other when the world had turned upon them - she could vividly remember a situation where she had broken several fingers when a horse had thrown her, and Yvonne had been there the whole time, making sure the pain was bearable; similarly, Karla had been there for the young blonde when she had contracted the fever, sitting bedside for hours on end, dabbing Yvonne's burning hot forehead with a damp cloth.

On more than one occasion, they had gotten into trouble together but had worked as a team to make it up to Yvonne's authoritarian parents. They had bathed together, undressed together and slept together, though obviously never 'like that'. Once, they had shared a kiss, but that had merely been a result of a game of dare - though Karla had never been able to forget it.

A distant rumble snapped Karla out of her golden thoughts and brought her back to the real world. Soon, she could hear the characteristic singing of the large wheels, accompanied by the barking of the stray dogs that roamed the poorer areas on the outskirts of Princetown.

A few minutes later, the stagecoach driver brought the large vehicle to a halt in front of the Birrell Hotel. As usual, Edward Royce and several bellboys stepped out onto the sidewalk to see if they could tempt any of the passengers to stay at the hotel.

Karla cleared her throat and began to move towards the stagecoach. She could see by the large amount of luggage on the roof of the stage - five huge suitcases and several smaller bags - that someone important had to be onboard, and she knew just who that someone would be.

Main Street was as busy as always, but it only took her a handful of seconds to cross over to the west side of the street. There, she strode up the sidewalk to get to the stagecoach before Edward Royce could put his toady hands on Yvonne.

By the time she got there, the bellboys had already put a wooden box under the door of the stage that acted as a step for the lady passengers. The first one out was an elderly man who turned back around at once to give his wife a hand to get down. The next person out of the stagecoach was a very chic young lady wearing white lace gloves and an unwieldy mint green layered dress that had gained a somewhat dusty appearance after the strenuous journey.

When the fourth person was a po-faced woman of indeterminate age in a stark, gray uniform-like dress who had an air of a servant or a handmaiden about her, Karla furrowed her brow and moved forward to peek into the stagecoach. She was astounded to see the last two passengers being men, a young, barefaced fellow who looked like he worked in a bank, and an elderly gentleman with a white goatee.

"What the hell..." Karla mumbled, pushing her hat back to scratch her forehead. Earlier in the day, George Ballentine had told her that he had been informed by the people from the Milligan Stage Company that Yvonne would be on the stage - and they really ought to know, she thought.

Looking around, Karla noticed the chic young lady with the lace gloves and the mint green dress. Even while she was watching, the young lady turned around to open an umbrella to shield herself from the sun - but by doing so, the two women locked eyes.

When blue met green, Karla got confused. She knew in her heart that the young lady she was looking at was Yvonne Ballentine, but she had matured so much - and changed so much from the image of her that Karla had in her mind - that she might as well have been another woman altogether.

Gone were the freckles, the cheeky, toothy grin, the cute, little chipmunk cheeks and the short, boyish hair, replaced by a milky white complexion, boundless elegance, a regal - bordering on snooty - air about her, and long, white-blond corkscrew curls that swept down onto her shoulders even though they were held in place by two ivory barrettes.

'*Sweet Almighty... that's what I call a dame,*' Karla thought and stepped forward. She could see in Yvonne's eyes that she hadn't been recognized yet, but she knew she'd bowl her over in no time.

"Hello, Yvonne. It's so great to see you again. My, you look wonderful," Karla said and put out her hand, but she was met by a blank stare that turned into a slightly aloof, insulted look.

"I insist to be addressed Lady Yvonne," the blonde said coolly, looking up her nose at the black-haired stranger who was half a foot taller than she was.

"Uh... I, uh..."

"And you are?" Yvonne said, scoffing at the inarticulate woman who was clearly the town dimwit.

"Ka- Karla Stuart, Yvo- I mean, Lady Yvonne. Don't you remember me?"

A very brief glimpse of recognition flashed by in the emerald green eyes which gave them some warmth, but the aloofness soon returned. "Vaguely. Did my Pappy send you?"

Karla blinked several times, not quite believing what had happened to the young girl she'd had a mountain-sized crush on only eight years earlier. "Uh... yes. Yes, he did. He told me to say he deeply regrets that he couldn't be here, but he's very much looking forward to seein' you again."

"Well, I'm starved so I want to have a late lunch before I visit him. I'm sure we can find somewhere adequate," Yvonne said and began to walk down towards Harvey DuBois' Café with her handmaiden, the po-faced woman, in tow.

Reaching the white porch swing outside the café, Yvonne turned around and looked back up Main Street at Karla whose jaw was suspended halfway down her chest. "Elmira, tell the tall, slow woman to fetch my luggage and store it on the carriage in the meantime."

"Yes, Lady Yvonne," Elmira Hathaway said and bowed to her mistress.

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Forty minutes later, every last one of Karla's fond memories of the young Yvonne Ballentine had been shattered. As they were strolling down Main Street in search for something she had no clue what was, she could only sigh at Lady Yvonne's aloof behavior, at her dainty little steps and at the patronizing way she spoke to her handmaiden.

The trio of severely mismatched women attracted plenty of strange looks as they walked on Main Street, but Lady Yvonne didn't seem to mind, or even notice. "Oh dear, is this store still in business? I'm sure the owner must be a hundred years old by now," she said when they arrived at a drug store. "Elmira, my medicine is still in my suitcases... fetch me a new vial. Discreetly."

"Yes, Lady Yvonne," Elmira said and hurried into the drug store.

"A vial of what?" Karla said, grimacing at Yvonne's cool tone. "If you're in pain, I'm sure Doc Cosgrove can-"

"That is really none of your concern, Miss Stuart," Lady Yvonne said and began to fan her face with a lacy glove. "Oh, what's taking Elmira? The fool knows I can't bear this kind of heat for this long!"

Karla almost spoke her mind, but slammed her jaws shut to stop it from wrecking her career at the ranch. Instead, she scrunched up her face to the point of resembling a bullfrog in a particularly nasty swamp pit.

A few minutes later, Elmira came back out of the drug store holding a small, brown paper bag in her hand. "Lady Yvonne, I got your medicine," the handmaiden said and briefly held open the bag.

"Finally!" Lady Yvonne snorted and spun around. "Prepare it so it's ready for use. I am in a great deal of pain from these wretched conditions," she said over her shoulder as she continued strolling down Main Street.

Karla hadn't had time to see everything before the paper bag had been closed again, but she had been able to snoop out that the medicine was in fact a vial of opium which would, when mixed with Gin or another type of clear, white liquor, create laudanum, the most widely used all-purpose recreational drug west of the Mississippi.

"Yvonne- I mean, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and used her long legs to catch up with the aloof woman. "This is really not my business, but your father won't allow any kind of-"

"Miss Stuart," Lady Yvonne said coolly as she came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the sidewalk. "You are most right, this is none of your business. And for future reference, I am quite sure I know my Pappy better than you."

For the umpteenth time that day, Karla just stood there with her jaw suspended down near her chest. *'There's gotta be something not right here... she can't be Yvonne Ballentine! No way, no how, no Sir! How can she be so different after only eight years?'* Karla thought, trying to reach the warm, bubbly girl she knew was hiding somewhere behind the cold, green gaze.

"Have you stowed my luggage on the carriage, Miss Stuart?"

"Uh... yes."

"Then I suggest you wait for us there. Good day, Miss Stuart," Lady Yvonne said and resumed strolling down Main Street.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Karla was about to head back to the carriage when she heard Yvonne gasp loudly. Cursing, she spun around and went into action, ready to rescue her old, albeit vastly changed, friend from whatever hostile critter she had encountered.

"This is scandalous!" Lady Yvonne cried, holding a gloved hand to her mouth as she stared wide-eyed at the two women she had run into. "A lady carrying a revolver! And... and wearing male attire! I am shocked... shocked, I tell you!"

Karla came to a screeching halt next to the scandalized Yvonne who appeared to be on the brink of fainting. Sighing deeply, she shot the two women in question - Jane 'Blackie' Durham in her regular outfit and Mathilda Brown in her green Gingham dress with a matching bonnet - an apologetic look that didn't quite describe how she felt inside. "Blackie... Miss Brown, this is Yvon-"

"That's Lady Yvonne, like I told you, dimwit!" Yvonne barked, having regained her equilibrium long enough to smack Karla over the arm with her umbrella.

Karla scrunched up her face all over again, but eventually released the grimace to return to Jane and Mathilda. "This is Lady Yvonne Ballentine. Recently returned from... somewhere back east."

"Philadelphia!"

"Philadelphia," Karla echoed. "Lady Yvonne, this is Mathilda Brown and Jane 'Blackie' Durham," she continued, gesturing between the three women.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Brown," Lady Yvonne said, put out her gloved hand and held it at a funny angle.

Mathilda shot a puzzled look at the gloved hand and the young woman who had the artificial look of a porcelain doll. She looked from Yvonne to Karla and back again before taking Yvonne's hand, though she didn't really know what to do with it. "How do you do, Lady Yvonne," Mathilda said, curtsying out of sheer politeness while she held onto the dainty hand.

"How do you do, Miss Brown," Lady Yvonne said, nodding her satisfaction at the fact that someone had finally shown her the proper respect. Then she turned towards the tall woman with the low-crowned hat, the red shield-front shirt, the gray men's pants and the imposing revolver strapped on her hip.

Crinkling her nose, Lady Yvonne put out her hand.

Jane grunted and did what came natural to her - she grabbed Yvonne's hand and gave it a couple of thorough pumps. "Howdy," she drawled, eventually resting her hand on the holster of her Peacemaker.

Lady Yvonne was too shocked to speak. Instead, she gasped loudly and held a gloved hand to her lips. "Elmira," she croaked. "I need my medicine now... and I do mean now... I'm going to faint..."

"Aw, I got plenty of experience with them faintin' wimmen," Jane Durham said and bumped shoulders with Mathilda. "Why, just the other day, I had my Mathilda here in such a state of rapture she almost kicked the bucket. If she had'n already been on her back, she woulda-"

"Ah, that's probably more than enough information right there, Jane," Mathilda said and patted the outlaw's hand while blushing like crazy.

"Huh? Oh... okay," Blackie said with a grin.

Lady Yvonne's already pale face had turned white as a sheet, and if it hadn't been for Elmira supporting her, she would have keeled over right then and there.

"I have your medicine right here, Lady Yvonne," Elmira said, holding up the vial that she had prepared in an almighty hurry.

For once, Lady Yvonne looked thankful as she chugged down half the contents in one gulp. When the soothing liquid hit her stomach, a goofy smile spread out over her features and she regained some of her color.

Through all this, Karla had been biding her time, hoping against hope that it wouldn't get any worse. When she saw the transformation on Yvonne's face, she knew that it had. "Well, Lady Yvonne, I think this is a good time to get back to the carriage," she said and took the lady by the arm.

"Oh, hang on," Mathilda said and stepped forward. "Lady Yvonne, before you go, I would like to invite you to the quilting bee organized by the Princetown Young Women's Society and the Association of Housewives. It's held at Annie Mikkelsen's shop further down Main Street on Thursday evening at eight."

Lady Yvonne was fast on her way to becoming foggy, but she had time for a nod and even a small smile that surprised the other women, especially Karla who saw a glimpse of the old Yvonne, even if it had only lasted for a split second.

"And fer us wimmen who do'n fit into neither cat'gory," Jane said with a grin, "there's gonn' be a big wild west hoedown on Friday next over by the enclosure on Perry Street. There's gonn' be a marquee and free beer and a cookout and a jug band and ev'rythin'. Y'all gotta be there, Karla. It's gonn' be great. I'm gonn' swing mah lassie here round an' round all night... an' then some... ain't that right, Mathilda?"

"That's what you've promised, Jane," Mathilda said and hooked her arm inside the outlaw's. "And I'm holdin' you to it," she continued, leaning into Jane's broad shoulder.

Karla chuckled at the affections that swam back and forth between the two seemingly mismatched women. "I'll try to be there, Blackie. I don't know yet if I'll be pullin' guard duty, tho. We've had a change in the roster out at Circle Y. The boss got rid of Eugene Moehring for drinkin' so we've got ourselves a new foreman, Guinn Haggerty."

"Oh. Well, I'll be holdin' a seat for ya, Karla," Jane said with a grin.

"No she won't, because she'll be dancing with me all night!" Mathilda said strongly, poking Jane in the side and earning herself a husky grin in the process.

By now, Lady Yvonne was quite foggy, but she could see that something was going on between the short redhead and the tall pistolera. Just as she was about to open her mouth to inquire about it, Elmira took her arm.

"My lady, you're swaying and your eyes are crossed... we better get back to the carriage while you can still walk," the handmaiden whispered into Yvonne's ear.

"Uh-huh," the slightly foggy lady said, turning around without saying goodbye to her new acquaintances.

Karla sighed deeply and watched the lady stagger away. "And I better help her," she said dejectedly. "It was a pleasure seein' you again. Miss Brown, Blackie, have a nice day," she continued, tipping her hat.

"Have a nice day, Karla," Mathilda said with a smile, but Blackie stepped forward with a deeply furrowed brow.

"Karla, there's somethin' I need to say to ya. 'Bout her old man," the outlaw said quietly.

"All right... can you walk with me?"

"Sure," Jane said and turned around to face Mathilda. "Hon, I wo'n be long. Meet ya later... okay?"

Mathilda smiled and gave Jane's hands a little squeeze. "No problem. I'll do my business at the drug store and then I'll wait for you down at the Friendly Folks Eatery. Apple pie's on me."

"Sounds mi'ty fine ta me, darlin'," Jane said with a grin.

After Karla and Elmira had helped Lady Yvonne up into the carriage and put her next to the luggage, Karla closed the little door and pushed her hat back from her forehead. "Lady Yvonne, I'll be a couple a' minutes. There's somethin' I need to discuss with Blackie Durham first."

Lady Yvonne raised her head and looked down at the driver with bleary eyes, clearly not understanding a word of what she had been told.

"Uh-huh," Karla said and pushed herself off the carriage.

"Miss Stuart, I'll take care of Lady Yvonne," Elmira said and opened the lady's umbrella so she wouldn't get sunstroke.

Grunting a thanks, Karla stepped into the shadows outside the offices of the Milligan Stage Company where Jane was already waiting. "So...?" she said, putting her hands in her pockets.

"Karla, have ya heard that Henry Junior has already released Quint Connors from the Sheriff's custody?" Jane said quietly.

"No I haven't... really? Jesus, that didn't take him long."

"No. C'mon, this is for your ears only," Jane said and led Karla down the alleyway between the Milligan offices and Sofus Mikkelsen's gunshop to get out of earshot of the passers-by.

Once the two tall, black-haired women were standing at the back of the stores overlooking a grassy field that stretched over to LaRue Lane, Jane pushed her black, low-crowned hat back from her forehead and began to grind

her jaw. "Since the mayhem last Friday where we dispatched Enrico Gomez and the rest of the cutthroats, I've been gettin' word now and then from Sheriff Cutler and his Deputies."

"Hmmm?" Karla said, having heard all kinds of exaggerated stories about the turncoat outlaw from the boys who had been in town that evening.

"Quint Connors still thinks I'm wit'him, but he's been keepin' a very low profile since gettin' out o' the slammer," Jane said while she dug into her pocket to find her tobacco pouch. "He's been cooped up in his shack over on Sullivan Street," she continued, distributing a few pinches of tobacco down onto the paper.

"Never been there."

"No, and ya should stay the hell away from it 'cos it ain't no place for a righteous young woman like yerself," Jane said strongly while she finished rolling the cigarette.

"I can take care of myself just fine, Blackie!"

"Sure ya can, Karla, but these fellas are somethin' else, ya gotta understand that," the outlaw said before putting the unlit cigarette in her mouth and digging into her pocket for her matches. When she had found them, she struck one against the side of the Milligan office and lit the cigarette. Soon, pale gray smoke rose from the tip and swirled around her low-crowned hat.

"Anyhow," she continued, taking a deep whiff and letting out the smoke while she spoke, "the other day, three mean hombres came ridin' in, an' they ain't here ta smell the flowers, ya catch my drift? Clay McCaffrey, Moss Lang and Joe Burroughs is their names. I recall McCaffrey from way back an' he's no good. I'm talkin' a serious snake. Them other fellas are new to me, but y'all only need to look at their faces to know they're bad news."

Karla sighed and walked around the grassy field. After thinking about it for a while, she put her hands on her hips and turned back to the outlaw. "I'll tell Mr. Ballentine, obviously, but I know for a fact he ain't gonna listen. He's too proud and too stubborn... hell, he may actually listen, but I'll guarantee ya he'll just turn around and do what he's always done, and do it in the same way, too! And now that Yvonne... pardon me, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and rolled her eyes, "is back from Philadelphia, it's only gonna get worse. First of all, he's gonna get a heart attack simply from the way she's behavin' now, and second-"

"She was'n always like this?" Jane said and knocked some ash off her cigarette.

"No. No, she wasn't," Karla said with a despondent shake of the head.

Jane read the signals and chuckled dryly. "Gotcha."

"Aw, hell... Blackie, what do you think they're actually gonna do? McCaffrey, Lang and whatshisname..."

"Burroughs."

"Yeah. Hell, 'Gentleman' George Ballentine is the most powerful man in Princetown... they can't just gun him down in an alley somewhere like a two-bit cowpoke on a bender..." Karla said and threw her arms in the air out of sheer frustration.

"Y'know, I would'n put it past 'em. They're snakes, Karla. And snakes are best kept under strict scrut'ny," Jane said and tapped her fingers against her Peacemaker.

Once again, Karla sighed deeply, thinking that she had somehow fallen into a mescaline-induced slumber where everything around her was a vividly colored nightmare that just wouldn't quit. Grunting, she began to walk back to the mouth of the alley. "I better get her ladyship out to Circle Y before she takes another shot of her medicine. Man, that's gonna be one joyous reunion, lemme tell ya..."

"Best o' luck wi' ev'rythin'," Jane said and thumped Karla's shoulder as the experienced wrangler walked past.

"Thanks. I'm gonna need it..."

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The trip back to the Circle Y ranch proved to be a long, tiring slog for all involved. Because of the delay getting out of Princetown, the sun had reached its zenith and the heat that bore down on the stretch of desert between the town and the ranch was almost unbearable.

Up front, Karla cursed the fact that she had wasted most of a bar of soap on the aloof, spoiled, snooty woman who was whining incessantly behind her. If it wasn't the heat, it was the dust, or the rocks on the trail, or the luggage bumping into her delicate elbow - and once she was done, she started over, complaining about the heat.

'Hell, it ain't even the bar of soap,' Karla thought as she steered around a few rocks, 'it's the simple fact that she has turned into such an insufferable... Godawful... horrible... whining... brat! Who unfortunately has been bestowed a gorgeous face and a pair of even prettier eyes. Ain't that just typical? That's God thumbing his nose at us wimmen right there... Tarnation.'

Try as she might, Karla couldn't avoid every obstacle they came across on the ratty, dusty trail. Inevitably, the carriage bumped over a pair of rocks that had been obscured by the horses, and the response from the high-strung passenger was immediate: "Ohhhh! This is intolerable! Miss Stuart, you must be blind... I declare, if I'd had my tongue between my teeth, I would have bitten it in half. And then you would have been in very serious trouble!"

"Maybe it woulda stopped ya from yappin' all the damn time," Karla mumbled under her breath. Falling deeper and deeper into a pit of despair, she zoned out and thought back to some of the fun things she and Yvonne had participated in when they were young, but no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn't match the images she had in her mind of the spirited, warm, cheeky wildcat to the - admittedly beautiful - woman sitting on the bench seat behind her.

'Man... she's a completely different person. I haven't changed a bit since I was seventeen. Hell, maybe that's the problem,' Karla thought and did her best to steer clear of another deep rut so she wouldn't have to suffer yet another earful from her ladyship.

Lady Yvonne didn't stop complaining until the Circle Y ranch came into sight through the heat haze. The white, three-story mansion suddenly loomed large, and Yvonne fell quiet, looking at her home with eyes that grew wider by the second.

By the time Karla drove the two-in-hand in through the gate and up the hard-packed driveway, the wranglers and the ranchhands had been summoned to line up in the courtyard like they were being visited by the President; Vince MacCleary, Freddy Maynard and the foreman Guinn Haggerty among them.

"I told ya somethin' was up," Vince whispered to Guinn, "Goddamn, the boss' daughter has turned into a gorgeous dame. Little Yvonne ain't little no mo'."

A sharp elbow in the side by his foreman made Vince pipe down and snap to attention.

When Karla pulled the horses to a halt close to the door of the mansion, 'Gentleman' George Ballentine came out in his Sunday finest: a white Western suit with black dress boots and a huge, white ten-gallon hat that he took off almost at once.

He wasted no time walking over to the carriage, and didn't even wait for Karla to open the door; he - most unusually - did it himself. "Welcome home to Circle Y, my darling daughter," he said, putting out his arms.

"Oh, Pappy! I've missed you so!" Yvonne howled and threw herself into her father's waiting arms. After a strong crush, she pulled back and looked at him with wide, misty eyes. "The journey here was so horrible... I declare, the dimwit driver you sent to fetch me hit every rock and rut between here and Princetown. I have a sore back now, and I bumped my elbow... it'll be black and blue tomorrow..."

"Awww," 'Gentleman' George said, caressing his daughter's porcelain white cheek. "I'm sure it won't be as bad as that. Come... come on down from there, I have something special planned for you inside," he said and put out his hand.

Lady Yvonne took it and stepped off the carriage, leaving Elmira and Karla to deal with the luggage.

George noticed and reached up to pat Karla's thigh. When she looked down, he furrowed his brow and shot her a puzzled look that she responded to with a shrug. "Hum. Karla, I'd like to see you inside, too. Let's say in twenty minutes," he said with a grin before he led Yvonne over to the mansion door.

As soon as Yvonne and George had gone inside, Karla sighed and stepped down from the board. "D'you need a hand to get down, Elmira?" she said as she stood on the ground with her hands on her hips.

"No, thank you," the stern-looking handmaiden said and jumped down by herself.

"All right. Hey, Vince! Freddy! Ya ain't got nothin' to do right now... come help me with this heavy shi- uh, luggage."

Vince MacCleary and Freddy Maynard briefly looked at each other like they didn't know if they wanted to help Karla or not, but eventually shrugged and moved over to assist with the suitcases.

Slightly more than fifteen minutes later, Karla came back down the servants' staircase at the back of the mansion after depositing the heavy suitcases in Lady Yvonne's bedroom on the third floor. As she went out onto the crunching courtyard, she spotted Vince and Freddy whispering to each other.

Sighing, she made a ninety-degree turn and strode towards her colleagues. "What's up now, Vince?" she said once she was close enough.

"Oh nothin', Karla," Vince said, poking his elbow into Freddy's gut. "Freddy here was just mightily impressed by your ability to carry as many suitcases as us guys."

"Uh-huh?" Karla said and shot Freddy a cool glare.

The honey-blond charmer smiled broadly and pushed his Stetson back from his forehead. "That's right. Like I said to Vince, strong arms and shapely legs ain't usually attached to the same doll."

"Uh-huh." - This time, Karla's comment was so cold it could have been used as an ice cube. "Well, if you will excuse me. The boss man requested that I went and saw him in the mansion. It's probably about my promotion," she said and wiped her sweaty brow.

Before her two colleagues could counter her claim, she spun around and went back to her quarters in the barracks to wipe down her sweaty limbs, comb her messy hair and knock off some of the cakes of dust that were clinging to her formerly fancy clothes.

Five minutes later, Karla entered the mansion by the front door and walked along the main corridor until she stood at the sliding double doors to 'Gentleman' George's study.

As always, the opulence of the mansion did its best to bowl her over, and even though she was already running a little late, she took the time to glance around the corridor, eyeing the dark green carpet, the quality paintings on the walls - with Western motifs - and the impressive dark brown, straight staircase behind her that led to the upper floors.

She knew that every single piece of the hundreds, if not thousands, of wooden boards that made up the mansion had been hand-picked, hand-carved and assembled by the finest craftsmen in the entire Territory, and it was clear to see that no expense had been spared.

After clearing her throat - and buffing her boots on the calves of her brown denim pants - she raised her hand and knocked on the sliding doors.

'Enter!' 'Gentleman' George said, prompting Karla to open one of the sliding doors and step into the study.

She had often been in there on official business, but this time, she could feel in her gut that it was a different kind of visit; it was a social call. On her left, she could see Lady Yvonne resting in a wing chair by the dormant fireplace at the other end of the room, leaning her head against one of the wings with her eyes closed and her chest rising and falling rhythmically.

George Ballentine's highly polished, three-part mahogany desk - shipped all the way from San Francisco on a four-in-hand covered wagon with special suspension necessitated by the immense weight - stood at the center of the room, acting almost as a throne.

The rancher wasn't sitting at the desk. Instead, he was standing at the large windows that overlooked the courtyard, with a glass of brandy and an unlit cigar in his hand. "Come here, Karla," he said when he noticed he and Yvonne weren't alone.

Karla walked up to stand in front of the desk and wondered what she should do with her hands. In the end, she folded them behind her back. "Sir?" she said quietly so they wouldn't disturb Yvonne.

"Oh, you needn't speak softly for my daughter's sake," George said, followed by something akin to a sigh. "I doubt she'd hear an eighty-strong Mustang drive moving past her right now. Tell me, Karla..."

"Yes, Sir?"

The rancher scrunched up his face and put down the unlit cigar that his housekeeper had flat out forbidden him to smoke in the study. "Ah, before we start, would you like a brandy? I opened the bottle for this momentous occasion, but I'm afear'd my darling Yvonne could only take but a few sips before she fell asleep."

"It was a very hot drive back, Sir," Karla said, nodding somberly.

"So I heard. Repeatedly. A brandy?"

"Thank you, Sir. I could use a drink."

George Ballentine chuckled and moved over to his drinks cupboard. With an expert's touch, he quickly poured a healthy amount of brandy into a fresh glass before topping up his own. "Here you go. Your health," he said and handed the glass to Karla.

"Thank you, Sir."

Holding the glass, Karla shuffled back and forth on the expensive carpet. George Ballentine still hadn't said what he wanted, but by the way he sighed when he looked at Yvonne, she had a hunch that it had something to do with her.

The rancher sighed again and took a large swig from his brandy. "Tell me, Karla, when you spoke to my daughter today, did you sense a change in her...?"

Before Karla could even open her mouth to reply, George Ballentine waved at her in a disgusted fashion. "Aw hell, what kinda crap question is that... Goddammit, of course you did. You probably knew her better than I did back then. Hell, the two of you were inseparable... but now... I look at Yvonne and I see the spitting image of her mother. But I don't see Yvonne any longer... not my sweet little, spirited girl, anyhow."

"Sir..."

"Karla Stuart, you're my best bronc buster, my best driver... hell, you're my best wrangler all 'round, but... now I'm gonna ask you to do something that's closer to your feminine side," George said and gulped down some more brandy.

'Closer to my feminine side? If he asks me to wear a dress and attend Sunday school, I'm gonna quit and run off to Texas,' Karla thought, scrunching up her face. To prepare herself for whatever horrors George Ballentine had in store for her, she took a fair-sized swig of her drink and looked up at her boss.

"I would like you to take Yvonne under your wings. My reasoning for asking her to come home was to groom her for taking over the Circle Y one day, but..." - George interrupted himself to wave at Yvonne's slumbering form - "but that ain't gonna happen with her looking and behaving like that. I thought she was still the old Yvonne... I simply don't have time for it."

"Sir, I-"

"Damnation, Karla," he said and thumped his fist into the mahogany desk, "I want you to strip off all that glorified horse dung you see there and find my beautiful wildcat of a daughter! She's in there somewhere. If you do that, I'll be forever indebted to you. And I always pay my dues, you know that."

Groaning like the weight of the world was on his old shoulders, 'Gentleman' George sat down with a bump on his chair and put his elbows on the desktop.

Karla was chewing on her lips. Glancing to her left, she could see Yvonne's peacefully sleeping form, and she could also see that in the intervening eight years, the wild child had turned into a proper lady, with proper lady bits here, there and in between. "Sir," she said quietly, "Mr. Ballentine, I'll try, but-"

"Oh, God! Thank you!" George said and slapped his open palm down onto the desktop.

"Yes, but... Sir, I need to tell you that... well, the way she spoke to me in Princetown and on the way back gave me a hint that she probably wouldn't be interested in my company. Naw, scratch that... it wasn't a hint, it was quite clear, actually," Karla said and stuffed her free hand down her rear pockets.

"But you were inseparable... you were best friends," 'Gentleman' George said with a look of complete shock on his face.

Karla nodded and turned back to take another look at Yvonne. "That was then, Sir. She's different now. She hardly even recognized me."

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch," George said and drained the last drops of his brandy. "Karla, you're dismissed. I want to see you again, however, at the big dinner we'll be having tonight. Quarter past eight in the grand dining hall. Mrs. Kavanagh will skin me alive if I'm the only one eating the venison she's spent the entire day preparing."

"Yes, Sir," Karla said, grimacing at the thought of eating in the dining hall in the presence of Lady Yvonne. 'Well, that's gonna be a heap o' fun,' she thought, sighing quietly.

George Ballentine chuckled darkly at the look on his employee's face. Getting up from his chair, he held up the empty glass. "Oh cheer up, Karla... it ain't the end of the world. Possibly. Anyway, another drink before then?"

"I better not, Sir," Karla said and emptied her brandy. "I need a clear head for all the insults Lady Yvonne is bound to hurl my way."

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CHAPTER 3

Three days later, Thursday evening.

"But Pappy, I need my beauty sleep!" Lady Yvonne said as Karla helped her up into the carriage next to her father. "At the boarding school, lights were out at nine sharp. I'm used to being in bed at nine!"

'Gentleman' George had advised Yvonne to wear something less extravagant on their weekly pleasure trip to Princetown, so she had put on a simpler dress, a dark green one that was buttoned up to below her chin, and with a layered, pleated skirt - he hadn't been able to talk her out of wearing a hat, so she had put on a large, dark green one with a black feather sticking out at an oblique angle.

"And you adhered to that every evening, did you?" George said with a smirk, pulling down his leather vest that had ridden up when he had taken his seat. Yvonne was fidgeting quite severely, so the rancher reached over and put a fatherly hand on her arms to calm her down.

"But of course!" Lady Yvonne said, putting her hands in her lap.

"Hmmm."

While Yvonne and George were talking, Karla went around the carriage and lit the two kerosene lanterns she had attached to the front of the vehicle. The sun was still hovering above the horizon, but she knew it would be quite dark by the time they reached the town, and even the tiniest amount of light would help her stay on the trail.

"Sir, we're ready to leave," she said, taking off her Stetson and wiping her damp forehead on the sleeve of the pale brown she used for work - her fancy Sunday shirt hadn't been washed yet.

"Excellent, Karla. Let's get started," 'Gentleman' George said, nodding at his favorite driver.

While Karla climbed up on the board and took the reins, Lady Yvonne shuffled around in her seat to look at her father. "If we didn't go to bed at nine, Mother Superior would give us a black note in her book," she said, putting a white hand on George's red-and-green checkered flannel shirt.

"Ohhh, a black note."

Up on the board, Karla slapped the reins with a loud "Yah! Yah!" At once, the team of two got started on the journey to Princetown.

"But Pappy, it was really important to keep a clean sheet," Yvonne continued as the carriage began to rumble down the hard-packed driveway, making the feather in her hat bob up and down. "If we didn't, we couldn't get selected to sit at the senior table at dinner."

"And you never got into trouble? In eight years, my fiery, spirited, devil-may-care little wildcat never once got herself into trouble?" George said, leaning in to bump shoulders with his daughter.

Yvonne blushed and looked down at her hands. A few seconds went by where the squeaking, rumbling sounds of the carriage dominated the soundscape, but she eventually let out an embarrassed little squeak. "Weeelll, maybe at first, but I soon learned the importance of class and discipline."

"I knew it was a mistake to ship you off to that school..." George mumbled under his breath.

"But Pappy..."

"Hush now, sweet Yvonne," 'Gentleman' George said and patted his daughter's hands. "Tonight, it's time to let our hair down and have some fun. I'll drink whisky, smoke cigars and play poker with an assorted bunch of cardsharps and patsies just like the good old days... and lose a ton of money, no doubt... and I hope you'll gain a few new friends at the Young Women's Society. It was a quilting bee, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but-"

"You were quite excited when you told me about that. The only time you've been excited about anything since your return, as a matter of fact."

Wringing her hands, Yvonne threw herself head-first into a last gasp attempt at convincing 'Gentleman' George that she didn't really need to come along: "Oh, but Pappy, if I'm not in bed at nine, my skin turns sickly gray and I get these terrible bags under my eyes and-"

"Ha! So you weren't always in bed at nine, dear daughter of mine?"

"Uh..."

"Don't worry, I won't wire Mother Superior and tell her of your surprising disclosure," George said with a broad grin on his face.

"Well, maybe we stayed up a little longer... once or twice... but I swear, Pappy, it was only on very, very special occasions. On birthdays, or when we got mail from home," Yvonne said, wringing her hands to the point of nearly taking off her skin.

"Mmmm? Now I do believe we were talking about the quilting bee and the new friends you'll meet...?"

"Oh... I'm afeared the women I'll meet will be beneath me. I'm sure none of them have the same class and elegance as I. And I'm quite positive that none have been to the Immaculate Sisters Of Mercy Boarding School... what could we possibly have in common, Pappy?"

"Look, Yvonne-

"Oh, Pappy, this infernal rumbling has given me a dreadful headache," Lady Yvonne said and touched her forehead to underline her words. "Oh, why couldn't Elmira come along? I just remembered I've forgotten to tell her something really important. Driver! Would you please swing back-"

'Gentleman' George mumbled a few inaudible words and sat up straight on the bench seat. "Keep goin', Karla! Yvonne Ballentine, we're going to Princetown tonight, and we're going to have fun. Right?"

"I-

"Right?"

"Yes, Pappy," Lady Yvonne said and folded her hands in her lap.

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Half an hour later, Karla pulled the carriage to a stop outside Roscoe's Watering Hole and jumped off the board. After a quick howdy to some of the people who were standing in front of the saloon, she opened the little door and helped 'Gentleman' George down onto the sidewalk.

"Thank you, Karla. If I'm still playing by midnight, I want you to come in and drag me out by the scruff of my neck and the seat of my pants. All right?" George said with a grin, flipping Karla a silver dollar.

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and deftly caught the coin in mid-air. "I'll find a rolling pin to make it look more real," she deadpanned.

Snorting loudly, 'Gentleman' George leaned his head back and let out a braying laugh. "You do that, Karla. For that pun alone, you deserve another coin. Here," he said and handed Karla another silver dollar.

"Thank you, Sir. Much obliged," she said and put it into her breast pocket with the other one.

Behind them, a mustachioed man wearing a black penguin suit and the kind of vest favored by gamblers tipped his derby and bowed at 'Gentleman' George. "Good evening, Mr. Ballentine. Do you have time for a hand?"

"But of course, Mr. Gregg. That's why I'm here," George said and raised his Boss Of The Plains as he turned toward the gambler. "I sincerely hope you'll let me win at least one hand tonight."

"You always win at least one hand, Mr. Ballentine," Herbert Gregg said, putting his derby back on.

"Only because you let me, Mr. Gregg," George said with a grin, mirroring the gambler's gesture by donning his hat and setting it acocked.

Herbert Gregg smiled broadly and smoothed down his pencil-thin mustache with a slender finger. "Well, we can stand here discussing it all night or we can let the cards speak... oh, my..." he said, interrupting himself when he suddenly noticed Lady Yvonne in the carriage.

Acting like the old smoothie he was, he climbed up on the narrow iron step below the door and took off his derby with a flamboyant gesture. "Good evening, Miss Ballentine. My name is Herbert Gregg and I must say it's an honor and a privilege to meet you... it's rare we see such extraordinary beauties here in Princetown."

"Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Gregg," Yvonne said and put out her hand. When Herbert Gregg kissed it in a prim and proper manner, she held it to her bosom and practically swooned at the man's attention.

Down on the sidewalk, 'Gentleman' George grunted and tapped Herbert Gregg on the shoulder. When the gambler stepped down from the carriage and turned around, George leaned in and said: "She's barely twenty-two, you know. And an inexperienced one at that."

"But of course, Mr. Ballentine. Of course."

"Enough yappin'. It's time for poker, whisky and cigars. Karla, midnight," George Ballentine said and strode into Roscoe's Watering Hole.

"Yes, Sir," Karla said and climbed up on the board. Taking the reins, she looked over her shoulder and waited for a gap in the four-legged traffic. Deep in the shadows on the other side of the street, she noticed four men watching her keenly. Three of them wore long, tan dusters and wide-rimmed, gray Confederate Cavalry hats that obscured their faces, and the last - a ruddy, slightly overweight fellow - wore a dark gray Western suit and a white Stetson.

Just as Karla was looking, one of the men wearing a wide-brimmed Cavalry hat took a puff from a cigarette or cheroot which shone a fiery red cone of light onto his swarthy face, giving him the look of a hellhound on the loose.

The next rider on Perry Street was gracious enough to halt his horse to let the carriage out, and Karla wasn't slow in reacting. Slapping the reins, she said a loud "Yah!" and drove out onto the busy street.

A few minutes later, Karla brought the carriage to a halt outside Anne-Mette 'Annie' Mikkelsens store, Dresses For The Modern Woman at the south end of Main Street. The night watchmen had already lit the torches, and there were shielded kerosene lamps burning inside the store and in the upstairs windows.

Looking through the storefront window, Karla and Yvonne could see that the shop was well-visited by women of all ages who were studying the color samples and the many rolls of fabric.

Lady Yvonne sighed and fluffed her dress. She had a look on her face that spelled out quite clearly that she wasn't in the least interested in a quilting bee, or any other kind of bee for that matter.

When Karla jumped off the board and opened the door, Lady Yvonne kept sitting. The two old friends stared at each other for a little while before Yvonne sighed and rose from her seat. "Don't look at me like that, driver," she said as she stepped down on the sidewalk, using Karla for support. "You make me uncomfortable. I'll tell my Pappy if you do it again."

Karla scrunched up her face and wondered how in the world eight years at a boarding school could change someone so much - even so, Yvonne's voice had held just a tiny bit more warmth compared to some of the other cold insults she had poured over her in the previous days. "Yes, Miss Ballentine," she said and closed the door behind Yvonne.

"Stay here, driver. I doubt I'll get much satisfaction from this chit-chat."

"Your father said that-"

"I heard what my father said, but I'm telling you to stay here!" Lady Yvonne said sharply, spinning around to face the tall driver. "How Pappy can find use for a dimwit like you, I'll never know!"

Karla's jaw worked overtime and her mind was filled with lightning flashes of anger and images of what she would like to do to the insufferable Lady Yvonne, but she settled for nodding instead of speaking her mind. "Yes, Miss Ballentine," she said hoarsely through a near-perfect set of clenched teeth.

Lady Yvonne's only reply was an insulted huff before she went over to the store and let herself in.

Growling from somewhere deep in her throat, Karla stomped around the carriage, swung herself up onto the board and dug into her pocket to find her tobacco.

The conversations that were buzzing in the small store stopped dead when Yvonne entered, and she almost spun around and left in a hurry.

"Good evening, Lady Yvonne," Mathilda said and stepped forward. "We've already met. I'm Mathilda Brown," she continued and took the Lady's hand. After giving it a very dainty squeeze, she went down in a deep curtsy.

Lady Yvonne's face lit up at the attention and she leaned her head back to look down her nose at the woman who was addressing her. Mathilda bore a passing resemblance to herself, but Lady Yvonne wouldn't even use the plain, gray dress the young redhead was wearing to polish the silverware. "Good evening, Mathilda. I decided to grace you with my presence after all. It's been a while since I've had the inclination to visit one of these quaint functions so you should feel honored."

"Oh, but we do, Lady Yvonne... very much so, in fact," Mathilda said, but the brief look of fire in her eyes told another story.

Lady Yvonne didn't notice and walked into the store where she briefly waved a hello to the other ladies present. "Tell me, Mathilda. The tall, abominable woman who was armed to the teeth... I dearly hope she isn't here?"

"No, Lady Yvonne. My dear friend Jane is up at the saloons. Quilting and other forms of domestic work aren't exactly her favorite subjects," Mathilda said, stepping around the large, flat table at the center of the store that was used to cut and baste the fabric.

"Mmmm. Now that you mention it." Lady Yvonne picked up a color sample but put it down almost at once. "She did look like someone who would take greater enjoyment from drowning a kitten," she said coolly, dusting off her gloved hands.

"I beg your pardon!" Mathilda barked - which made everybody else in the store turn around and stare at the two young women. "Jane Durham is a wonderful woman! Don't judge a book by its cover," she continued, putting her hands on her hips.

Taken aback by the harsh tone, Lady Yvonne gasped loudly and held her lacy gloves to her bosom. "How rude! How dare you talk to me like that? Don't you know who I am... or who my Pappy is?"

Mathilda's eyebrows went up, then down, then up again. Suddenly gaining several red blotches on her cheeks, she zipped around the central table and cornered the dainty Lady, pressing her up against the color samples and leaving her no room for escape. "How dare I? How dare you, Lady Yvonne? How dare you speak so poorly of a woman you have hardly met? Yes, Jane Durham carries a revolver, but she does so to protect herself and me. Yes, Jane Durham has killed, but she did so to protect a lot of people, including your father!"

"I- I- I-" Lady Yvonne stuttered, feeling a color sample poke her in the rear and another push her fancy hat down into her eyes. Looking around in a shock, she could see that everybody in the store was staring daggers at her, silently accusing her of being so far out of line that she was practically in the next county. "I- I'm Lady Yvonne Ballentine and... I... demand... an... apology..." she said, but her voice trailed off into nothing when she realized the other women didn't care who she was or what she wanted.

"You demand an apology?" Mathilda said, stepping even closer. "Tell you what, Lady Yvonne... you owe Jane an apology. But since she isn't here to accept it, I do believe you owe **me** an apology."

With a chin that was quivering quite badly, Yvonne broke free of the color samples, pushed her fancy hat away from her eyes and hurriedly escaped to the door. As she reached it, she turned around and looked at the assembled guests from the Young Women's Society and the Association of Housewives. "I..." she croaked, but the words wouldn't come.

She tried to lock eyes with Mathilda, but the green fire that burned merrily in the young redhead's eyes was too strong for her, so she gave up. "I'm sorry," she said quietly and left the store.

Outside, Karla shot to her feet when she spotted Lady Yvonne come out looking like she was on the brink of crying. "What the hell...?" she mumbled, making her half-smoked cigarette bob up and down in her mouth.

When the tearful Yvonne couldn't work the latch on the carriage door, she gave it a fair-sized whack that added injury to the insult by breaking one of her fingernails. "Oh!" she whined, looking at her finger. "Driver! C- come down here at once and let me in!"

"Yes, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and jumped down from the board. As she went past the storefront window on her way around the carriage, she happened to look inside and saw Mathilda standing with her hands on her hips and a face that held every attribute of a thundercloud on a hot summer afternoon. *'What the hell did Miss Boarding School do in there? I've never seen Miss Brown look so angry... and who's gonna get the blame? Hell, Blackie's gonna have my backside for lunch...'*

When she helped Lady Yvonne up into the bench seat, Karla thought the young blonde looked so miserable that she felt a surprising sting of sympathy. For the briefest of moments, she could see the young Yvonne through the porcelain white skin, the white-blond corkscrew curls and the obnoxious attitude.

"Miss Stuart, I think I may have made a mistake in there..." Yvonne said in a tiny voice.

"Pardon, Lady Yvonne?"

"I think I- uh... would you mind going in there to apologize to Miss Brown?"

"For your mistake?" Karla said flatly, knocking the last ash off her cigarette.

"Y- Yes."

Karla sighed and turned around - Mathilda was still standing with her hands on her hips, and now, it appeared she was mouthing off quite severely against something, or quite possibly someone. "Hmmm... I'll do it tomorrow, Lady

Yvonne," Karla said and threw the butt of her cigarette down on the hard-packed street before climbing up on the board.

"Thank you. I want to be with my Pappy. Will you take me there?"

"At once, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and grabbed the reins.

It didn't take long for Karla to drive the carriage back to Perry Street where she parked across from Roscoe Corbin's saloon, outside one of Princetown's many banks.

After checking up on Lady Yvonne who was staring blankly into space in a near-comatose state, Karla crossed the busy street to get to the saloon.

Peeking over the swinging doors, she could see that Roscoe's Watering Hole looked like it always had and was as busy as ever. The twenty poker tables on the left of the room were all in full swing, with players, onlookers and several painted ladies and card-birds crowding the tables.

The bar counter on the right was crowded, too, with a long line of well-dressed men waiting for their drinks, showing varying degrees of patience - or impatience. At the back of the room, a man was playing the upright piano that stood on a raised dais, but the constant buzz from the card players was too strong for Karla to hear which song was played.

Between the dais and the bar counter, away from the other tables, Roscoe Corbin had created a cordoned-off area reserved for the most important guests, and it was there, through the massive clouds of cigarette, cheroot and cigar smoke that hung heavily over the entire room, that Karla spotted 'Gentleman' George playing with Herbert Gregg and Henry Wilkinson Junior.

Grunting, she stepped in through the swinging doors and began to thread her way towards the VIP section.

Roscoe's wasn't one of her favorite haunts. Not only was it a bit too fancy for her preferences, she didn't particularly enjoy the presence of the soiled doves from the Velvet Garter next door - and predictably, it didn't take more than ten seconds for one of them to grab hold of her arm and pull her towards the bar counter.

"Hi there, bad boy. Wanna buy me a drink?" the slightly tipsy dove said, trying to keep Karla in focus with eyes that were red from lack of sleep and from imbibing too heavily in various potent substances.

The mixed-race prostitute with fair-brown skin was wearing long, sheer stockings with a black garter, a small, red pillbox hat that seemed out of place, and a red dress that was so revealing she almost needn't have bothered putting it on.

"One, I ain't no boy, and two, I think you've had enough already," Karla said and tried to pull herself free from the dove's grip, but she proved to have surprisingly strong fingers.

"Awww... how's about a kiss, then? Only gonna cost ya a quarter."

A familiar black, low-crowned hat appeared behind the tipsy prostitute, quickly followed by the rest of Jane 'Blackie' Durham's easily recognizable frame. "Lé, ya' better off chasin' some other fella. This one ain't int'rested."

Turning around, Lé shot Jane a dark glare before moving away from the bar counter and disappearing into the crowd.

"Thanks, Blackie," Karla said with a sigh.

"You're welcome. Can I get ya anythin'?"

"No, I have my own money," Karla said and patted her breast pocket which made the two silver dollars jingle. "Besides, I'm not here to enjoy myself. I need to speak with Mr. Ballentine."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. And, uh... I reckon I need to speak to you, too, Blackie."

One of the busy bartenders put down a small glass with an amber colored liquid in front of Jane, and she took it at once and sniffed it. "How's that?" she said, gulping the whisky down in one.

"I, uh... aw hell, you're gonna hear about it, anyhow," Karla said and took off her hat. "Lady Yvonne and Mathilda got into an argument down at the store."

"An argument? 'Bout what... quiltin'?" Jane said with a chuckle.

Karla shook her head slowly and began to toy with the idea of buying herself a drink - or two - even though she really didn't have the time. "I don't know what caused it. All I know is that Lady Yvonne was in there for... hell, less than five minutes, and then she burst out of there, all a-blubberin' and teared up."

"Huh."

"Yeah... and Mathilda was standin' in the window, lookin' like she had swallowed a bee... if ya catch my drift."

"Hmmm. Well, I guess it's up to me ta kiss 'er an' make it better," Jane said with a cheesy grin.

"Right now, Lady Yvonne's waiting out in the carriage, looking like she doesn't know which way is up. That's why I came here... I figured I better tell Mr. Ballentine. He's asked me to straighten her out... but... man, it's just impossible. *She's* just impossible," Karla said and leaned against the bar counter.

A triumphant roar from somewhere behind the two women made them turn around and look at what had caused it - at the VIP table, 'Gentleman' George Ballentine held a stack of bills high in the air and waved them in the faces of his fellow players.

"Looks like the old man is in a good mood right now. Just the perfect moment for me to ruin it. I better tell him right away before I turn into even more of a chickenshit," Karla said and put her hat back on. "Talk to ya later, Blackie."

"Later, Karla," Jane said and turned around to order herself another drink.

By the time Karla made it to the VIP table, she felt she had inhaled so much smoke that she didn't need to light one of her own cigarettes for a week. Waving a hand in front of her face, she got up on the dais to head behind the rail that separated the important people from the commoners.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of one of the men in the long, tan dusters she had seen earlier entering the saloon through the back door. Another of the men held the door open, but Karla didn't think anything of it.

"Mr. Ballentine... Mr. Ballentine, Sir?" she said, trying to attract 'Gentleman' George's attention, but she soon discovered that the rancher was too involved in the current hand to notice.

Walking around the table, she happened to glance at Henry Junior who, she noted with some puzzlement, wasn't looking at his cards at all, but rather at the back door. Karla briefly looked over there, but the two men were gone.

"Mr. Ballentine, I need to speak-" she said, but was interrupted by a gunshot fired into the air by a cowboy down by the bar counter. The gunshot made everyone duck and holler words of outrage when they realized it was only a drunken fool in a filthy denim jacket. Karla and 'Gentleman' George recognized him at once - it was Eugene Moehring, the former foreman George had fired for boozing.

Even though Jane Durham was striding towards him with a fierce scowl on her face, Moehring let out a resounding rebel yell and fired two quick shots at the ceiling which sent a small storm of sawdust down upon him from the beams.

A split second later, Karla felt a sting in her side and the shockwave of a bullet zinging past her, but she knew instinctively it couldn't be true - after all, the cowboy had fired his gun away from her.

Another split second later, 'Gentleman' George let out a pained groan and leaned forward, dropping his cards and grabbing hold of the edge of the poker table. A hideous red rose blossomed on the side of his belly, rapidly growing in size until it reached his belt. Soon, the checkered shirt was soaked, revealing the rose to be dark red blood that seeped out of the rancher's gut.

Yet another split second later, Karla saw her boss trying to get up from the chair, but failing. Only when he fell from the chair and onto the floor did it register with her that he had been shot.

She and the others at the poker table stared wide-eyed at the horrible sight - then she opened her mouth and let out the loudest, most terrified and uninhibited shriek she had ever produced.

The shriek was loud enough to stop the saloon dead, and everybody turned their heads to see what was going on at the VIP table.

In but a single heartbeat, Jane Durham drew her revolver and sprinted up to where George Ballentine had fallen. "Jesus Christ!" she said shocked, staring at the blood that had already begun to pool underneath the rancher. "Jesus... Christ... Karla... Karla!"

Karla turned around and looked at the outlaw with incomprehension written all over her wide-open face. A debilitating numbness washed over her, and her body was assaulted by wave after wave of shock; the sensations alternating between freezing cold and burning hot.

"Karla, what happened?!" Jane barked, thumping the driver's shoulder to get her to snap out of it.

"Uh, I... I don't know... I'm..." Karla stuttered, looking around in a daze. A persistent sting that shot up from the left side of her stomach made her look down - out of nowhere, a small tear had developed in her pale brown cotton shirt, and underneath, she could feel the skin had become very tender, like she had been scratched by a thorn.

"Hell, ain't got no time for that now... somebody get Doc Cosgrove an' the Sheriff! In a Goddamned hurry!" Jane roared and holstered her revolver. She quickly knelt down next to George Ballentine and tried to turn him over.

'I'll get 'em!' somebody shouted from the crowd.

The rancher's face was ashen, but he was still alive. There was no need to ask where he had been shot since the entire right side of his shirt was soaked with dark, red blood.

"Hell," Jane said and shook her head. She quickly pulled George's bolo tie to the side and tore open his shirt to ease his breathing. When it didn't seem to have much effect, she growled out loud and thumped the floor.

Looking behind her, she eyed the back door and began to connect the dots. "The cowpoke in the filthy jacket... it was a flippin' diversion. Karla, d'ya see him anywhere? Karla?" - the driver was still standing like a marble statue - "Karla, fer Christ's sakes, yer boss needs ya! Snap out of it!"

At the other side of the table, 'Gentleman' George's two fellow players couldn't have acted more differently. Where Herbert Gregg was shocked and staring wide-eyed at the rancher's prone body, Henry Wilkinson Junior calmly put down his cards, scooped up his share of the pot and stepped away from the table.

"An' whe'da hell d'ya think yer goin'?" Jane barked when she noticed.

"Come now," Henry Junior said and dusted off his black suit. "Do you really expect me to get blood on my clothes? I think not. And besides, Mr. Ballentine needs some space. Good evening, Sir. Ma'am," Junior said and tipped his derby at Herbert and Karla respectively before leaving the VIP table and stepping down into the worried crowd.

"That son of a bitch..." Jane mumbled, but a sudden commotion at the back door made her snap around and draw her revolver.

Karla spun around as well, suddenly remembering the two men in the tan dusters she had seen there when she had arrived at the table. Then everything fell into place in her mind - the men she had seen on the street had been standing with a ruddy man in a dark suit. "Quint Connors," she said out loud, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Where?" Jane growled, but Karla was still too numb to notice.

The commotion at the back door proved to be Victoria Lynn Cooper who hobbled into the saloon with a Peacemaker in her hand and a pained look on her face from hurrying along Madden Lane. "What the hell is going on here? I heard shots fired... and then two fellas came tearin' past me up at the Garter. I came as fast as I could..." she said, panting from the exertion - a quick glance at Jane, Karla and George Ballentine's body on the floor told her everything she needed to know. "Aw hell... they got Ballentine..."

"Yeah, they got Ballentine," Jane said darkly, holstering her revolver and staring at the sea of red that flowed freely out of 'Gentleman' George's gut.

Wiping her bloody hands on her denim pants, she jumped to her feet and looked above the heads of the crowd of people who were gawking at them. "An' where the hell is Doc Cosgrove? ...Naw, this is bullshit," she said and grabbed hold of Karla's shirt. "Now ya gonn' tell me exactly what happened here... an' when I say now, I mean now!"

"I d- don't know what happened, Blackie," Karla stuttered, feeling a wave of nausea come over her as she looked down at her boss. "I see... I see... I saw two men at the back door when I got to the table... wearin' tan dusters... and... wide-brimmed Cavalry hats... but they left again... and I thought... and then Eugene Moehring started shootin' and... and... this," she said, waving at the prone body at their feet.

"Who the hell's Eugene Moehring? Hell, it do'n matter... it's gotta be McCaffrey, Lang and Burroughs," Jane said and smacked her fist into her open palm. "Goddammit, even after all we did, they just waltzed in here an' blew him away... an' you saw 'em with Quint Connors earlier? Karla?!"

"Uh... y- yeah. At the other side of the street... oh... oh, God, somebody's gotta tell Yvonne..." Karla said, shaking her head.

Victoria Lynn quickly took off her hat to wipe her forehead. "The two men tearin' past me were wearin' dusters. Confederate Cavalry hats, too. Dammit, I had 'em, but I just couldn't... Jane, we can't wait for the Doc... look at him," she said, pointing at George's face that grew more ashen by the second.

"Yeah. C'mon," Jane said and cleared the poker table by sweeping her hand across it, sending the chips, the cards, the ashtrays and the glasses the three men had used down on the floor. "Les' get 'im up on the table... we'll carry 'im over to the hospital. Herbert, ya with us?"

Herbert Gregg nodded, looking almost as pale as 'Gentleman' George. "Y- yes. I'll help," he said, reaching down at once.

"Good. Karla... Karla, will ya snap out of it! Your boss needs ya!"

Karla finally realized that she still had a chance at redeeming herself and quickly bent down to put her hands in under George's body. With a heave-ho, the three people lifted the heavy rancher onto the table that creaked and groaned under his weight, but held - at least for the time being.

"All right, clear the path!" Victoria Lynn shouted, waving her arm in the air to make the crowd aware they should disperse.

As Jane, Herbert Gregg and Karla carried the table with the precious cargo down from the dais, the Honorary Deputy tried to follow, but her stiff knee meant that she couldn't keep up with the three able-bodied people. "Jane!" she said loudly to catch the outlaw's attention before it was too late, "I think maybe the Doc's alone over there... I don't think Nurse Monahan is workin' tonight, and Emily is over at the quilting bee... I'll get someone to run down there and get her!"

"You do that... and Mathilda, too," Jane said over her shoulder on her way out of Roscoe's Watering Hole.

Outside on Perry Street, the gunfire and the resulting racket had made Lady Yvonne snap out of her near-comatose state and sit up straight in the carriage.

She watched with a puzzled look on her face how the sidewalk in front of Roscoe's Watering Hole seemed to come alive with men who were all gawking into the saloon through the windows and the swinging doors. Everyone was yapping excitedly with the man next to him, and one word was repeated more than others - '*Ballentine*'.

Yvonne furrowed her brow and was about to step down from the carriage when the crowd spread like the Red Sea for Moses to reveal three people carrying a large man on a makeshift stretcher. When she realized the prone man was her father, she fumbled down from the carriage and hurried across the street as fast as her tight dress would allow.

"Pappy! Oh God, no... Pappy!" she cried, shoving herself in front of Jane and nearly causing the tall outlaw to lose her grip on the table. She quickly reached in and put her hands on her father's unresponsive face, but her efforts at shaking him awake didn't work. Looking down at his belly, she gasped loudly at the sight of the red blood soaking through the checkered shirt.

"Hey!" Jane growled, hurriedly adjusting her grip on the table so she wouldn't drop it in the middle of the street. "Oh, fer Pete's sakes... Lady, get outta the way... ya holdin' us up!"

On the other side of the table, Karla - who was as pale as a sheet - swayed back and forth from the exertion, but just managed to stay erect. "Lady Yvonne," she groaned in a pleading voice, "we need to get to the hospital... please..."

Yvonne looked at the others with tears streaming down her face. After a brief delay, she seemed to understand what she had been told and stepped aside to let the people through with the stretcher. "Oh God, Pappy..." she croaked, wringing her gloved hands.

Jane, Karla and Herbert struggled to get to the other side of Perry Street with their heavy load. The small curb stone proved difficult for all three, and Blackie knew their strength would be gone before they'd reach the hospital which was another hundred and fifty yards down the street. Growling, she looked at the crowd of interested onlookers and shot them all deadly glares for not helping.

The silent accusation worked, and three cowboys from the Bar J ranch came up to help them carry the blood-soaked poker table, easing the load for all of them.

By the time they reached the Sheriff's Office, Orin Cutler came galloping up the street on his chestnut mare, hollering loudly to have the street cleared. Outside the office, he hurriedly dismounted and ran up the sidewalk to meet the motley group of people who were carrying 'Gentleman' George Ballentine. "God almighty," he croaked when he saw the identity of the victim.

"They got 'im, Sheriff," Jane said, not bothered in the least that she was stating the obvious. "The three men I told ya 'bout... they got 'im... those motherf-"

Orin Cutler shook his head and pulled off his hat to wipe his suddenly clammy brow. "Did any of ya see 'em?" he said loudly.

"I saw them, Sheriff," Karla said in a trembling voice. "Three men in dusters and with hats just like yours."

"Confederate Cavalry hats?"

"That's right, Sir," Karla said, groaning through her teeth from the weight she had to carry. "And... and Eugene Moehring. He was there, too."

"Eugene Moehring? Your foreman? Tarnation... he was fired recently, right?" the Sheriff said, clearing the path on their way down to the hospital.

"Yeah. He was there."

Jane let out a grunt and shifted her grip on the poker table. Looking up, she could see they only had a short distance to go to reach the hospital, but it couldn't come fast enough. "One thing's fer sure, Sheriff. This was'n no drunken foreman out fer revenge. This was well-planned and well-executed. If I was you, I'd string Quint Connors up by the balls and get 'im ta sing."

Just as the group carrying George Ballentine reached the hospital, they were met by Mathilda and Emily Mason who had hurried all the way up Main Street with their skirts held high so they wouldn't trip over them.

Huffing and puffing, Emily leaned down and examined the patient's condition. "No exit wound that I can see... the slug's still in there. Was it a .45 or a smaller gun? Anybody?"

"We don't know, Nurse," Karla said, shaking her head. "I- it was probably a regular Colt."

"All right... come... here, I'll get the door," Emily said and grabbed hold of the door to the hospital.

Mathilda hurried over to the other side and helped push it open. When Jane and the others came past her, she sent a brief look of support to her lover that was replied to with a wistful smile.

Once the makeshift stretcher was fully into the hospital's central corridor, Emily pulled Mathilda and Lady Yvonne inside and shut the front door to keep the spectators away from the hospital.

Doctor Cosgrove stepped out into the corridor and was nearly bowled over by the massive group of people - eleven in total, including 'Gentleman' George - who had invaded his hospital. Putting his hands up in a shocked, defensive gesture, he stared wide-eyed at the crowd. "Sheriff Cutler, I heard about the incident but I had another patient I couldn't leave. Nurse Mason, the operating room is ready... first of all, we need to get everybody who isn't related to the victim out of here... please!"

The Doctor's voice wasn't strong enough to break through the deafening wall of noise from the large group of people, but a shrill, two-fingered whistle from Sheriff Cutler was. "Lady Yvonne can stay, everybody else... back out! We gotta give the Doc room to work his magic," he said strongly, pointing back down the corridor. "Blackie, we need to talk."

"I know, Sheriff," the bloodied, exhausted outlaw said, groaning out loud as she and the others who were carrying the poker table transferred George Ballentine to the tall bunk on wheels the Doctor used as the operating table.

Once the rancher was resting safely on the bunk, Jane stepped back and wiped her bloody hands on her pants.

The massive group of people slowly filtered back down the corridor, a shell-shocked Karla among them, but Lady Yvonne grabbed hold of her shirt and pulled her to the side. "No, Karla... I n- I need you here... with me," the pale-faced lady said in a tiny voice, looking like a lost, little child.

Karla nodded wearily and stepped into a niche in the corridor to let the others come past. Sheriff Cutler soon closed the door from the outside which allowed a modicum of peace to fall over the hospital.

Yvonne and Karla hurried back to the operating room where Doctor Cosgrove had already cut off the red-and-green checkered shirt to look at the wound.

The bullet hole in the side of the stomach presented itself as an angry red circle with a black center against the stark white skin. For each heartbeat, more blood was squeezed out of the wound, coating the skin around and below it with the glistening red liquid. Eventually, the blood dripped off the high table and onto the floor where it was absorbed by the sawdust.

With her nurse's uniform back in her home on Madden Lane, Emily Mason was working at the operating table in her regular clothes that had already been bloodied. She briefly looked up and sent Lady Yvonne a look of pure sympathy before she resumed her duties.

"Nurse Mason," Doctor Cosgrove said and pulled back from George Ballentine's stomach, "you were right, there's no exit wound. The slug is still in there. The patient needs a double dose of morphine... I'll prepare the bit and the chloroform."

"Yes, Doctor," Emily said and turned around to fetch the syringe and the vial of medicine from a cabinet behind her.

"Miss Ballentine, do you know if your father has been drinking tonight?" the Doctor said, taking a bottle of chloroform.

"No..." Lady Yvonne said, shaking her head, but Karla stepped in and nodded affirmatively.

"He has, Doctor. Whisky. I don't know how much."

"All right, that complicates things," Doctor Cosgrove said and scrunched up his face. "Oh, we can't wait. Nurse Mason, the morphine, please," he said and poured a healthy amount of chloroform out into a cloth.

"Yes, Doctor," Emily said and searched for a good vein in George's arm. Once she had found one, she emptied the entire syringe into it.

Making sure every last drop of the morphine had been injected, Doctor Cosgrove held the cloth with the chloroform tightly against George Ballentine's mouth and waited for ten inhalations before he removed it.

Yvonne's already pale face grew even paler when she saw the Doctor forcing open her father's jaw and inserting a leather bit with a breathing hole between his teeth. Instinctively, she reached around Karla's waist and held her old friend tight.

As soon as Doctor Cosgrove judged the patient to be sufficiently sedated, he took a oblong metal tool with a head shaped like a pair of small cutting nippers, and gently pushed it into the hole in the side of the stomach.

The horrible sight proved too much for Lady Yvonne, and she passed out on the spot, groaning throatily as she bumped against Karla on her way down onto the floor.

Some time later, Yvonne slowly came to, aided by the small vial of smelling salt Emily Mason held under her nose. "Ugh," she croaked, waving her hand in front of her to make the stench go away.

"Let me help you up into a sitting position, Miss Ballentine," Emily said and put her strong hands under Yvonne's arms.

Lady Yvonne had been placed on a bunk on the other side of the operating room so she wouldn't disturb the surgery, but when she turned around and swung her legs over the edge, it gave her a clear view of the operating table - and at the body that was lying on it covered by a blood-soaked shroud.

"Oh, no... oh, God, no... oh, no... Pappy," she croaked, jumping off the table and hurrying over to the body.

She tore off the shroud and stared at her father's peaceful face in wide-eyed shock. Tears began to stream down her porcelain white cheeks, but she did nothing to stop them. Letting out a trembling sigh, she reached up to caress the rancher's weather-beaten face, feeling the bristling beard and the coarse texture of his skin one final time.

"Miss Ballentine, I'm truly sorry for your loss," Doctor Cosgrove said quietly after entering the operating room.

"Thank you, Doctor..."

"Your father fought valiantly. We managed to extract the slug, but his heart gave out soon after. He had lost too much blood. I'm sorry," the Doctor said, putting a comforting hand on Yvonne's shoulder.

"D- did he speak?"

"Oh no, Miss Ballentine. Your father was under heavy sedation."

"Of c- course... silly me," Yvonne said quietly, holding her hands to her bosom. Sighing from the bottom of her heart, she leaned down and placed a small kiss on her father's forehead before she lifted the shroud and put it over his head.

Behind Yvonne, Karla wiped her misty eyes on her sleeve and pushed herself off the wall where she had watched the tragic scene unfold. With a heavy heart, she walked down the corridor to inform Sheriff Cutler and the others that they had lost 'Gentleman' George Ballentine.

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CHAPTER 4

The night had been fitful for Karla. Not only had the empty seat in the carriage on the way home been a stark reminder of George Ballentine's death, Yvonne had broken down in wailing sobs at least three times every single hour since returning to the Circle Y ranch, despite her handmaiden Elmira's best efforts at mixing her mistress several extra strong doses of her special, soothing medicine.

When the sun rose at dawn, Karla stretched her weary legs and staggered over to the windows of the study. The opulent room seemed oddly empty without its larger-than-life owner, and Yvonne's frail figure - who almost disappeared in the wing chair she was sitting in - couldn't offset the loss.

Sighing, Karla rubbed her ashen face, thinking for the umpteenth time if she could have done anything to prevent the tragedy - the answer was always the same; no, there wasn't anything she could have done.

A soft knocking on the sliding double doors made Karla stride across the room. Opening one of the wings of the door, she accepted a tray with four slices of toast and two mugs of steaming hot coffee from Mrs. Kavanagh, the housekeeper. "Thank you, Mrs. Kavanagh," Karla said quietly before sliding the door shut.

After putting down the tray on a small, round table by Yvonne's wing chair, Karla pulled a leather footstool over to the table, sat down on it and began to eat one of the slices of toast. She only had time to get a few bites into it before Yvonne woke up.

Lady Yvonne's eyelids fluttered open and she yawned widely. Sitting up straight, she stared down onto the carpet, seemingly without seeing anything at all. After a few seconds, her chin started quivering, and it wasn't long before she broke down in another strong surge of the wailing sobs that had left her eyes red and her throat raw.

Sighing, Karla got up and quickly moved over to Yvonne where she leaned down and pulled the crying woman into a warm embrace. "Hush, sweet Yvonne. You need to be strong today. We'll be going to the Town Hall in an hour for the funeral... and you need to freshen up and change into your mourning dress before then."

"Karla... why? Why did Pappy have to die?" Yvonne said in a trembling voice.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know... but I promise we'll find the guilty party and hang him."

Karla's uncharacteristically unrepentant statement made Yvonne pull back and look at her old friend with wide, shocked eyes. After a brief while, she nodded and fell back into Karla's arms as another surge of crying came over her.

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The lobby in the Town Hall had been cleared to make room for George Ballentine's oakwood casket, the finest the Princetown undertaker had had in stock. The casket had been placed on the hardwood floor on four brass feet shaped like lions, and the old man's pale brown Boss Of The Plains hat had been placed on top of it.

A long line of mourners snaked its way from the front door to the casket; all taking off their hats and speaking in hushed tones when they caught a glimpse of the imposing oakwood centerpiece.

Yvonne was standing next to the casket in the mourning dress she had used for her mother's funeral a short decade earlier - black gloves, a heavy black coat, a black shawl and a black bonnet with a veil - looking so frail that Karla was afraid she'd keel over in the middle of the procession.

The deeply depressed bronc buster was standing behind her old friend in her hastily washed Sunday finest, looking and feeling out of place in her relatively plain clothes among the line of black-clad dignitaries who all took Yvonne's hands and gave them a little squeeze as they went past.

Chief Justice of the Peace, Henry Wilkinson Senior, and his son arrived late and pushed themselves between two mourners to get to the head of the line. They wore their regular clothes and looked like they were simply out for a relaxing stroll - though they did at least take off their top hats when they got into the line.

"Miss Ballentine," Henry Senior said, taking Yvonne's hands, "allow me to offer my sincerest condolences. Your father was a great man. This is such a tragic loss for Princetown and indeed for the entire Territory."

"Thank you, Justice Wilkinson," Yvonne said in a tiny voice as Henry Senior moved on to put his hand on the casket.

When Henry Junior came up to the front of the line, he bowed deeply and took Yvonne's hand to kiss it. "My condolences, Miss Ballentine. This is so tragic. So terribly tragic."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilkinson," Yvonne said, nodding under the veil.

Karla tracked the Wilkinsons with her eyes as they filed past the casket. She couldn't stop a short, deep growl from escaping her lips, but she disguised it by pretending to cough.

After the upper echelon of Princetown had filed past came the people whom Karla and Yvonne knew personally - Orin Cutler, Victoria Lynn and Emily, and Mathilda and Jane Durham.

For once, the outlaw behaved herself and didn't pump Yvonne's arm like the first time they had met. Before moving on, she locked eyes with Karla and asked the driver silently if she'd help catch the bandits - the answer was an affirmative nod.

When it was her turn, Mathilda took Yvonne's hands and pulled her into a small hug. "I'm so, so sorry for your loss, Lady Yvonne. If you need anything, just let us know and we'll help," she said as she pulled back.

Yvonne stared wide-eyed at the young redhead through the black veil, looking like she couldn't understand why Mathilda would want to help her after her embarrassing display of arrogance in Annie Mikkelsen's store the night before. "Why, thank you, Miss Brown."

"Oh, please call me Mathilda," the young redhead said with a wistful smile before she moved on.

The Circle Y employees came last, all dressed up in their Sunday finest to pay their respects to their old - and new - boss. Guinn Haggerty, Vince MacCleary and Freddy Maynard came at the end of the long line of ranchhands and horse wranglers and bowed deeply to Lady Yvonne before moving on to stand next to the oakwood casket.

When the first part of the event was over, Lady Yvonne let out a long, trembling sigh and staggered over to the casket, supported by Karla who held her arm. Stopping, Yvonne folded up the veil and looked at Karla with moist, burning red eyes. "Karla, I- I need a moment alone with Pappy."

"I understand," Karla said and gave Yvonne's shoulder a little squeeze. "I'll be outside with the guys."

"Thank you."

Once Yvonne was alone in the lobby, she sighed deeply and put a gloved hand on the lid of the oakwood casket. "Pappy... I know I let you down," she said quietly, worried that her voice would carry out of the room. "I know I'm not the little girl I once was, and I know it hurt you. All those years ago, you wanted a boy but got a girl... and yet the girl turned out to be every bit the little firebrand you wanted. Pappy, there are so many things I didn't... I couldn't tell you about me. Like-

Yvonne looked up to make sure she was alone. Establishing that she was, she leaned down towards the casket and continued in a whisper: "That Karla is the only person who has ever truly touched my heart. Back then, when she and I were playing, there was more to it than the simple, careless innocence of youth. It was profound, Pappy. I was so young, merely a child, but she wasn't. She was maturing, and I didn't understand the look of longing she had in her eyes. When you sent me away, it took me several years to underst-

The creaking of a floorboard nearby made Yvonne stop whispering and jerk upright. It turned out to be Philbin Zebediah, the undertaker - a tall, elderly man with haggard cheeks and a high brow. "Miss Ballentine, if we wait for much longer, it'll be unbearably hot out at the graveyard," he said in a surprisingly rich voice, holding his top hat across his chest.

"All right, Mr. Zebediah. I'll... I'll be right there. Please give me another minute."

"As you wish, Miss Ballentine," the undertaker said, bowing to his client.

Once she was alone, Yvonne turned back to the casket but she had lost her train of thoughts and felt too empty and wrung out to find it again. "It doesn't matter anyway," she whispered, touching the pale brown hat. "I love you, Pappy. I miss you so much... I know you've found Mammy up there in Heaven to keep you company... I hope Karla will be my company here on Earth. Goodbye."

Outside on a grassy field at the back of the Town Hall, Karla was talking to Jane, Mathilda and the men from the ranch, but when Yvonne came out of the building with the black veil covering her face, Karla and seven other Circle Y employees went back inside the Town Hall to carry 'Gentleman' George Ballentine's casket to the hearse.

After the pallbearers had secured the load with sturdy ropes, they jumped off the black, roofed wagon and hurried back to stand behind Lady Yvonne - except Karla who put on her dirty white Stetson with the Carlsbad swoops and began to climb up on the board.

"Ma'am! Ma'am, this is highly irregular," Philbin Zebediah said from the other side of the hearse where he was about to climb up as well.

"Nobody drives the boss but me, Mister," Karla growled. "Ya can walk with the others or sit on the left... I don't care watcha do as long as ya shut up."

"Well, I never!"

"Now ya have," Karla said and climbed up on the board where she took the reins. Looking over her shoulder, she wanted to make sense of the hearse, the oakwood casket and the procession that was waiting in a disorderly group behind the wagon, but she gave up trying to understand any of it. Sighing, she shook her head and got ready to drive off.

The undertaker decided to walk with the bereaved instead of chancing it with the angry woman, so he hurriedly moved back to Yvonne and the others.

Turning back around, Karla slapped the reins and let out a "Yah!" at the four-in-hand of sturdy, midnight black mares that were all wearing black leather harnesses with black feather plumes on top of their heads. The mares started without a hitch, having been trained to walk slowly and without too many jerks.

With the hearse setting off at a gentle pace, Yvonne started crying under her veil as she led the procession away from the Town Hall.

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The next morning saw a large group of ranchhands standing outside the barracks at Circle Y, constantly mumbling to each other about the developments of the past few days and the future of their jobs - and even the ranch as a whole.

Standing passively in the middle of it all, Karla was leaning against the doorjamb to the first barrack and rolling herself a cigarette. As she lit it with a match she struck from the wooden planks behind her, she shook her head at the nonsense around her which made the smoke waft upwards in a zigzag pattern.

Vince and Freddy had their heads together, whispering something that Karla couldn't quite hear over the din of the crowd, but she could tell by the way they glanced in her direction that it involved her.

Grunting, she pushed herself off the wall and walked over to her two colleagues. "Fellas, whatever it is you're brewin' on, it's best if you spill it now. The last thing we need here is half-assed rumors flyin' around."

Freddy hurriedly took a step back which left the stage for Vince. After grimacing at the unexpected place in the spotlight, MacCleary pushed his hat back from his forehead and tried to smile at Karla. "Uh... we know this is really inappropriate, uh... but Freddy and me... and several of the other guys as well, actually... anyway, we were wonderin' what was gonna happen to our wages. Uh, like if we'll actually get paid or not."

"Why wouldn't you get paid, Vince?" Karla said, knocking some ash off her cigarette.

"Well, with the boss in the grave, we-"

"The boss ain't in the grave, Vince. The old one, yes... but the new one is right up there," Karla said and pointed her thumb over her shoulder at the study of the mansion, "and she might be countin' your money right now. Who knows?"

Vince grimaced and shoved his hands down his pockets. "Yeah, but..."

When the experienced bronc buster didn't seem to want to carry on, Karla squinted at him and stuck out her jaw. "Go on, Vince."

"But Miss Ballentine is a girl. A girl can't run a wrangler ranch!"

"Says who, Mister?"

"Uh... what?" Vince said and scratched his cheek. "Well... everybody. That's just how it is, Karla. You know that."

Karla snorted and let out a puff of smoke that swirled up past her dirty white Stetson. "You sayin' I'm doin' a poor job?"

"Uh... no...?"

"I'm a girl, Vince."

The news made Freddy grin and nod his approval of Karla's statement, but Vince elbowed the ladies' man in the side before he'd make everything worse. "Hell... you're just one of the boys, Karla. Miss Ballentine... Miss Ballentine is a *girl* girl."

"Uh-huh?"

"And she's not married!" Vince said, nodding hard.

"True... maybe I should ask for her hand... y'know, to put down my marker," Karla said as a provocation. The results weren't slow in coming - both Vince and Freddy stared at her like she had sprouted a second head.

Before the conversation could get any crazier, Guinn Haggerty stepped out of the mansion and came over to the group of wranglers.

"What the hell is going on here?" the foreman barked, throwing his arms in the air. "What the hell are you people doing? It's broad daylight and you think you're at the end of your shifts already? Get to work! Now!"

Karla and the men all grunted and dispersed to get started with their respective tasks, but Guinn grabbed hold of Karla's sleeve before she could go too far. "Wait a minute, Karla. Miss Ballentine has asked for you. Put out the cigarette before you go inside."

"Yes, Mr. Haggerty," Karla said and crouched down to stub it out on the rocky courtyard. Once the cigarette had been extinguished, she put the stump in her pocket and walked over to the main entrance.

'Enter,' Yvonne said in a frail voice from inside the study.

Opening the sliding doors, Karla saw Yvonne sitting listlessly in one of the wing chairs, staring into the dormant fireplace without actually seeing anything. A tray with a sandwich and a glass of water had been placed on the small table between the chairs, but neither item had been touched.

Karla furrowed her brow at the sight of the deathly pale Yvonne who seemed so small she almost disappeared into the mourning dress that tradition dictated she needed to wear for two weeks. Her white-blond corkscrew curls hadn't seen a brush since the terrible events at the hospital, and her face was streaked with tears, both new and old.

"Lady Yvonne, you asked for me?" Karla said quietly so she wouldn't spook the frail woman.

Yvonne took a deep breath and let it out slowly. As she turned around, she wiped her eyes that were redder than a rooster's comb. "I did. Thank you for coming, Karla. I have a few things to say to you."

"I really do think you should eat your sandwich," Karla said and sat down in the other wing chair so she was face to face with the woman who was now her employer.

"I can't. You can have it if you want."

"No thank you."

Yvonne sighed again and seemed to lose track of her thoughts, but she suddenly looked up and locked eyes with Karla. "I'm the owner of the ranch that carries my name, Karla. I'm the owner of all this..." - she made a sweeping gesture at the interior of the study - "Pappy's mahogany desk, his library, his mansion as a whole... his kitchen staff and the maids. Everything is mine."

"And the stud farm, the mares, the broncos, the ranchhands and us wranglers," Karla continued when Yvonne's voice trailed off. "People who depend on getting their wages." - She looked at Yvonne, thinking that she may have overstepped the line, but there was no reaction on Yvonne's pale face.

"I know, Karla," Yvonne said after a long pause. "I found a few documents in the desk that Pappy had our attorney make... they explain what to do in case he... in c- case he..."

"His last will and testament?"

Karla took several deep breaths to get over the latest surge of crying that threatened to bubble to the surface. After a while, she shook her head. "No, not as such... I think that's at the attorney's office in Princetown... maybe he meant this document to be a guideline f- for Mrs. Kavanagh. I guess I need to follow it now..."

"All right."

"B- but I promise the wages will be paid on time. You can tell that to the men," Yvonne said, wiping her eyes yet again. "They're in the bank. D- did you drive them here the last time?"

"Yes. With a couple of shotgun riders at my side."

"Oh... I see."

Yvonne fell quiet again and began to stare into space, but after a few seconds, she snapped out of it and sat up straight. "Karla... I asked you to come because we need to go into town at some point, and I need you to be my eyes and ears. Yesterday after Pappy's funeral, I spoke to Mr. Fitzpatrick and Mr. Plummer. They were holding talks with Pappy on the railroad project..."

"Uh-huh? I was wondering who those fancy fellas were..."

"Yes, and they told me they're worried the deal might collapse... I... I forgot all about it until now..." Yvonne said in a surprised voice, rubbing her pale brow.

"Do you know what time they're expecting you?"

"I... I've forgotten... t- today? Or tomorrow?" Yvonne said in a tiny voice. She looked at Karla with an apologetic look on her face, one that the driver couldn't help but react to.

Karla rose from her chair and went over to her weakened friend. "Lady Yvonne," she said quietly, kneeling on the plush carpet and taking Yvonne's hands in her own. "I promise I'll help you the best I can, but... but you need to square it with Mr. Haggerty first. When your father threw Eugene Moehring off the ranch, he chose Guinn Haggerty as our new foreman because he felt the men would resent a woman ordering them around... I didn't like it, but I know he was right."

"I- I've just spoken to Mr. Haggerty..."

"Yes, but-"

"Oh God, I'm so confused... please help me, Karla... I can't hold talks with the railroad people! I declare, I have no clue what I'm doing!" Yvonne buried her face in her hands, and moments later, another surge of tears came to the surface and racked her petite body.

"Oh, Yvonne... I'll help you..." Karla said and stood up, "but if you don't get some rest soon, you'll fall to pieces. Come on... let's go upstairs."

When Yvonne was unresponsive, Karla simply reached in under the petite woman and scooped her up into her strong arms. At first, Yvonne tried to resist, but all she could do was to let out a cute hiccup from the tears and the surprise.

"Mmmm," Karla said and walked over to the sliding doors.

A few minutes later, she reached down behind Yvonne's body to grab hold of the door handle to the bedroom on the third floor. Once the door opened, a wall of stuffy, stale air hit her in the face - the windows hadn't been opened for days - but she fought it bravely and walked in with her precious cargo.

The peacefully slumbering Yvonne didn't even notice that she was put down on the bed, but she mumbled something inaudible in her sleep when Karla's hand accidentally stroked her rear end on its way out from underneath her.

Yvonne's bedroom was large, as was her bed: she was sleeping in a white four-post bed with a canopy of very fine, white lace. On the left of the bed, she had a two-drawer nightstand with a kerosene lamp that was standing on a square piece of needlework she had quite clearly made herself, next to her small vial of laudanum, and on the right, she had a three-drawer dresser with a few personal items on the flat top: two finger rings and a gold necklace in a porcelain saucer, and a black, well-used Bible that was opened somewhere just after half way. Below the bed to the right stood a porcelain chamber pot which had been decorated very nicely with paintings of lilacs.

She had a writing bureau standing up against the wall at the foot-end of the bed, but the roll front was closed and didn't appear to have been opened in the brief time she had been home from the boarding school.

Sighing, Karla crossed the carpeted floor to get to the two windows. The frame was sticking, but after applying some brute force to it, she was able to get it to open a few inches to allow a soothing, if warm, breeze to enter.

As she looked around the bedroom that was enhanced by an elegant wallpaper and a few high-quality drawings, she shook her head slowly and took off her hat to wipe her sweaty brow on her sleeve. "Hell..." she mumbled under her breath. "How... how can I explain to her than I'm such a half-brained dimwit that I can't even read or write? There must be scores of papers to read through and sign, and... oh, Hell. No, I gotta go into Princetown and get some help... if... if I take Diablo, I can be there in less than thirty minutes. Damnation..."

On the bed, Yvonne let out a little sigh and turned onto her left side but kept slumbering, something Karla felt was a good sign.

When Karla realized she had a chance to make up for her perceived betrayal of 'Gentleman' George - by not being there for him when he truly needed her - a look of steely determination fell over her face. "Yeah. It's about time I did somethin' right."

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An hour and a half later, a motley selection of riders came back up the hard-packed driveway - Karla on Diablo that was still quite headstrong and short-tempered, Sheriff Cutler on his sedate chestnut mare, Jane Durham on her bay

gelding and finally Mathilda on top of a short palomino, hopping and dancing in the saddle like she was putting in a little early practice for the coming wild west hoedown.

Vince MacCleary and Freddy Maynard stepped away from the enclosures where they were tending to a rampant bronco to help the visitors get their horses tied up along a fence post. When Freddy caught a glimpse of Jane and Mathilda, he slicked back his hair and rubbed his teeth to get them clean, but Vince hurriedly put his hands on the ladies' man's shoulders and steered him back to the stallion.

"I'll get Diablo wiped down and settled in the barn," Karla said atop her shining black horse. "You go ahead. The housekeeper, Mrs. Kavanagh, doesn't know we're coming, but she'll only be angry for a couple of hours."

"Uh-huh?" Jane said as she walked over to Mathilda to help her down. The outlaw broke out in a grin when she saw the look on her lover's face that expressed relief and gratitude that the bouncy trip was over - for the time being at least; they had to get back, after all.

"Yep," Karla said and nudged Diablo's sides.

By the time Karla walked into the mansion, she could hear Mrs. Kavanagh mumble and grumble in her characteristic Irish accent from somewhere further into the house, and she made a mental note to ask for forgiveness later.

The sliding doors to the study had both been opened and the house guests had helped themselves to seating arrangements around the opulent room, though Mathilda was still standing.

The young redhead was wearing a plain red dress that matched the hue of her face perfectly - it was a mask of discomfort mirrored by a slightly awkward stance, hinting that a certain, tender part of her anatomy was in a great deal of pain.

Karla stifled a snicker - she could definitely sympathize with Mathilda's rear end over the way it had been dancing about in the saddle the entire way there. "Would you like a cushion, Mathilda?"

"Yes, please!" the redhead groaned. "I've only had Sandy for a couple of days. It's the first time I've taken her this far... I wanted to go for a shorter ride about town before I attempted something like this... but..." she said while her host walked over to a chaise longue in the far corner of the room to take a plush, cobalt blue cushion.

"Oh, I'm sorry that I forced you into it. Here you go," Karla said and handed Mathilda the pillow.

"You needn't worry, Karla. Any practice is... ooooooh," she said as she sat down in one of the wing chairs with the blue cushion under her rear, "oooohhh... good practice. Ouch..."

Orin Cutler and Jane were exchanging knowing looks and grinning at Mathilda's plight, but they were soon on their feet when a frail-looking Lady Yvonne suddenly appeared in the doorway with a look of pure confusion on her pale face.

"Oh... what's all this? Did... did I invite you all and forgot about it? Wouldn't be out of the realms of possibility..." she said on her way over to her favorite spot, one of the wing chairs.

Jane quickly moved away from the chair she had been sitting in to make room for the Lady of the house. "Here you go, Lady Yvonne," she said, trying very hard to be on her best behavior as she gestured at the chair.

"Thank you... I'm dreadfully sorry, but I never learned your name...?" Yvonne said, looking up at the outlaw who was wearing her regular dark gray shield-front shirt and faded denim pants.

"Jane Durham, Lady Yvonne."

"Jane... I think I knew that... or maybe I didn't. These past few days have been a blur for me, I'm afraid. How do you do," Yvonne said and fell back into the wing chair where she let out a long, slow sigh.

"Howdy," Jane said and moved over to stand behind Mathilda.

Sheriff Cutler cleared his throat and was about to explain why they were all at the mansion when a series of mumbled Irish curses from the doorway heralded the arrival of Mrs. Kavanagh with a huge silver tray heavily laden with tea cups, two large thermos of warm water and a huge pile of butter cookies.

The matronly housekeeper wearing a starched white-and-black dress was an impressive sight - in her late forties, Eileen Kavanagh had flaming red hair that had gone gray in places, emerald green eyes and a ruddy complexion to go with her fiery disposition.

After putting the tray down on the mahogany desk, she spun around, put her hands on her ample hips and shot fire with her green eyes. "Lady Yvonne," she said in an Irish accent that - as always - grew stronger when she was upset. "Will you please eat something this time? I swear, the sandwich I made you earlier was excellent and made with plenty of heart... and yet you left it to go soggy and stale... I had to eat it myself to see if it was bad... and it wasn't!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Kavanagh," Yvonne said from the wing chair. "I just didn't have any appetite."

"Well, my late husband Seamus had the same problem... but don't forget he died of undernourishment! Oh, and one more thing," Eileen said and shot everyone in the study a dark glare, "there's to be no smoking in the house. And that's final."

"Yes, Mrs. Kavanagh," Yvonne said, stifling a snicker for the first time since the terrible events.

Karla noticed at once, and it warmed her heart to see just the tiniest amount of warmth return to Yvonne's dull, lifeless eyes. Even after the humorous moment had passed, the green eyes kept an afterglow that promised much for the future.

Eileen Kavanagh grunted and arranged the various plates, cups and saucers on the desk before taking the silver tray and striding out of the study.

"Well," Sheriff Cutler said once the housekeeper had closed the double doors. "Perhaps we should explain to Lady Yvonne why we're here, but first..." he said and shuffled over to the desk where she snatched two butter cookies, one for each hand.

Jane chuckled and scratched her eyebrow. "Karla, d'ya think it's outta the question to get a cuppa coffee...? I ain't much of no tea drinkin' woman, ya know..."

"Weeelll," Karla said, deliberately extending the drawl. "You'll have to ask Mrs. Kavanagh yourself."

"Oh. I guess a li'l tea wo'n kill me," Jane said and rose to get herself a cup, much to Mathilda's amusement.

After the tea had been sipped and the butter cookies had been savored, Jane Durham leaned back on the chaise longue she had chosen to sit on and crossed her long legs at the knee. "Well, Lady Yvonne, we're here 'cos Karla came to us and asked for our help. Seems y'all be havin' a li'l problem but do'n know where to start fixin' it, is that right?"

Yvonne sighed and put down a saucer with a half-eaten butter cookie. "That's right, Miss Durham. Sheepishly, I must admit that I have no clue of my Pappy's businesses here at the ranch, nor of the recent developments with the gentlemen from the railroad company. I'd like to hear some of the background to it all, if I may."

"The background... hmmm. Well, it's one of them mi'ty convoluted affairs," Blackie said and scratched her neck. "But the beginnin' is always a great place ta start, so les' do just that. When your father founded this town with a couple-a other fellas, Prince, Perry, Sullivan and old man Wilkinson, they split the land between 'em. Made deeds on the whole thing. Now, over the years when them old fellas croa- uh, passed on, the deeds sorta filtered over to the Wilkinsons. Lately, your father was the only other one who owned deeds apart from Junior and Senior."

"So?" Yvonne said and scrunched up her face. "Miss Durham, surely you're not suggesting my Pappy was murdered over a few deeds?"

Orin Cutler gave up trying to get his index finger out of the tiny ear on the tea cup he had been drinking from and settled for holding it in his lap. "Lady Yvonne, you need to know it's not just a few deeds. Your father owned more than half the town. And now, I suppose you do, depending on what it says in his last will and testament."

"Yeah," Jane interjected, "and with them fellas from the railroad showin' an interest in addin' Princetown to the main line or some such, the value of the ground is gonn' go through the roof."

"I don't understand any of this," Yvonne said and pushed the saucer with the cookie away from her, having lost her appetite all over again.

Mathilda - after having helped Orin Cutler get his finger out of the tea cup - rose from her seat to move closer to the Lady of the house. "Lady Yvonne, it's all about money, but that's not all. We believe the Wilkinsons, or at least Henry Junior, is behind your father's murder. He's working with a criminal called Quint Connors who has brought a large amount of grizzled cutthroats to Princetown over the past few weeks... oh... uh..."

Mathilda suddenly stopped when she realized that one of the grizzled cutthroats Quint Connors had brought to town was one Jane 'Blackie' Durham who was now looking at her with a crooked, toothy grin and an eyebrow that was all-acoeked. "Uh, that didn't come out right... anyway, Henry Wilkinson Junior is a crook through and through, why, he even sent me to jail for three years for resisting his advances... or rather, his attempt at raping me."

Yvonne gasped loudly and put her hands to her bosom. "Surely not!"

"Every word is true, I swear," Mathilda said quietly, thinking about the nightmares she was still suffering from on the few nights she and Jane weren't sleeping in each other's warm embrace.

Lady Yvonne's face gained an unhealthy gray tinge and she jumped up from the chair to escape the onslaught of depression that threatened to drown her. In two heartbeats, she was at the large windows that overlooked the courtyard, but struggled badly when she tried to open one of them.

"Let me, Yvonne," Karla said and came to her old friend's rescue. With their combined strength, they were able to get the frame to move which allowed the window to swing on its hinges, something it hadn't done in years. Once it was open, Karla squeezed Yvonne's shoulder and sat down again.

The fresh, if warm, breeze that swept through the room did Yvonne a world of good. She felt the wind blow away some of her insecurities and restore some of the spirit she'd had in the good old days when she was still a carefree

young girl in search of adventures on and around the Circle Y ranch - and perhaps a kiss from her tall, dark-haired friend.

After a brief while, she turned around and looked her guests in the eye. "I'm Yvonne Ballentine, not my Pappy," she said in a voice that was much stronger than it had been only minutes before, "but it's high time that some of the things he gave me by blood are put into use. Honor, pride and, dare I say it, the Ballentine stubbornness. As the only daughter of one of the founding fathers, I will not allow Princetown to be run over by scoundrels and bandits... no offence, Miss Durham."

"None taken," Jane said with a chuckle.

"No," Yvonne said and pushed herself away from the window, "if Princetown has been infested by rats, we need to flush them out. Let the Wilkinsons try to take the deeds from us. I wish they would!" Yvonne said and thumped her fist into her open palm.

Karla stared wide-eyed at the near-miraculous transformation of Yvonne from a blubbering ghost of a woman to a mirror image of her father. She quite simply couldn't believe her eyes, but after rubbing them thoroughly, Yvonne still had the same fire about her, so Karla reckoned she was witnessing the truth and not just suffering the colorful after-effects of a mescaline-laced cigarette.

"Sheriff Cutler, is the law on our side?" Yvonne said, slowly unbuttoning her mourning dress.

"Uh..." Orin said, staring at Yvonne's slender fingers that went down her body a button at a time. "Uh, I certainly am, and I know Victoria Lynn is as well, but we shouldn't forget about the Chief Justice. He's a formidable opponent, uh... what are you doing, Miss Ballentine?"

Yvonne chuckled and kept the mourning dress closed so her guests wouldn't catch a glimpse of her salmon-colored undergarments. "Well, Sheriff, I know the mourning period is two weeks, but I'm changing back into my regular clothes. If my Pappy was here, he'd tell us to get a move on."

"He would indeed, Miss Ballentine," Orin Cutler said and rubbed his hands. "Which is a great cue for me, at least. See you in town, fellas, uh, and ladies."

"See ya, Sheriff," Jane said, grinning from ear to ear at the unexpected sight of ladies' undergarments in the daytime, but Mathilda was soon on her feet and escorted the outlaw out of the study as well, leaving Karla and the Lady of the house to themselves.

As the sliding doors closed behind their guests, Karla let out a long breath and looked down at her hands. "Lady Yvonne, I hope you're not upset that I left you to get them."

"Certainly not, Karla," Yvonne said and released the grip she had on the dress - after all, Karla had already seen her in nothing at all so an undershirt wouldn't cause her embarrassment. "In fact, I'm glad you did. You know, when I stood at the window, I... I could almost hear Pappy speak to me."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, and he told me to stop crying and get down to business," Yvonne said and walked over to sit down next to her old friend. "Karla, I'm truly sorry that I treated you so poorly... but I'm back now. The old me. Will you join forces with me to get the better of these nasty people?"

Once again, Karla scrunched up her face and shook her head slowly. "Are you sure you're all right, Yvonne? You seem so... so... I don't know. Different."

"Maybe I am," Yvonne said and nodded somberly. "Maybe I just woke up? Maybe I'll go back to being the new, intolerable me with the dainty lace gloves and the umbrella when this nightmare is over. Maybe Elmira will want to bash my head in for the things I've said to her. I can't say, Karla. But will you help me with our problems?"

Karla chuckled and shook her head once more. She looked at her old friend and decided that whatever the cause had been for the transformation, she greatly preferred the new, old Yvonne Ballentine from the vain, aloof, insufferable and snooty Lady Yvonne. "Do you even have to ask? Hell yeah, I will. But we still need to square it with Mr. Haggerty. He'll get angry."

"Don't worry about Mr. Haggerty. I'll deal with him," Yvonne said assertively, adding a hand gesture that proved that she wasn't kidding.

Nothing more needed to be said. The two old friends looked at each other and broke out in identical grins, both very happy that things were slowly returning to how they had once been.

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CHAPTER 5

The next day.

"Hoah! Hoah!" Karla cried, pulling the reins taut to get the two-in-hand to slow down so the carriage would be able to make the turn from Sullivan Street onto LaRue Lane without tipping over.

The two horses did as their mistress commanded and slowed down to an easy trot. The carriage creaked and groaned as it rolled into the uneven lane which nearly unseated Yvonne and Elmira in the back, but they managed to hang onto the railing.

"Oh dear!" Yvonne squeaked, almost losing her umbrella in the process. Even though she was wearing a plain, dark green dress - plain for her standards - she had decided to bring her umbrella as the sun was already beating down from a clear sky, belying the fact it was barely eleven o'clock.

"I'm sorry, Lady Yvonne. It can't be helped. The lane is in an awful condition," Karla said as she pulled over next to the attorney's office that shared a building with the debt collector.

She quickly jumped off the board and opened the little door. "Watch your step, Lady Yvonne. The ruts are deep here."

"I would have to agree with you," Yvonne said, looking down at the four-inch deep ruts in the otherwise hard-packed dirt on LaRue Lane. "I should have worn boots..." she continued as she raised her skirt and stepped off the carriage.

While Karla helped Elmira down, Yvonne furrowed her brow at the slightly dilapidated look of the building, but remembered her father's words that one shouldn't choose a law firm for how they painted their office, but for the quality of their work.

The exterior of the low, wooden building was dominated by a green-and-gold rectangular sign next to the door that proclaimed the owner to be Milton Starr, Attorney At Law - the rest of the house was in less good shape with several boards hanging loose by the windows and a gutter that was drooping quite severely at one end.

Yvonne was quickly at the door to the attorney's office, but turned around to wait for her handmaiden - and for her friend. "Karla? Please?" she said with a smile.

Karla had already climbed back up on the board, but she quickly jumped back down and followed her Lady inside.

The air inside the office was stale and stuffy from the many papers that were there, and there were no less than four kerosene lamps burning at various spots in order to create a modest amount of golden light to counteract the fact that all curtains were drawn.

The office held four simple chairs and a utilitarian desk seemingly made of undressed wood. Behind the desk stood a row of filing cabinets that were all past overflowing, and there was an old wind-up clock on the wall where the hands had stopped working at seventeen minutes past nine - the dust on the frame suggested that it had been a while since the clock had worked.

Yvonne, Karla and Elmira were treated to a few colorful curses from someone who was rummaging around in the back room, and Yvonne had to put her hands on her lips to stop herself from laughing out loud at the inventive language.

"Ahem! Mr. Starr?" she said to make the attorney aware that he had customers.

Moments later, the round and slightly disheveled head of a visibly confused man peeked around the doorjamb, squinting for all he was worth at the three people in the office. "Ah, good day, Miss Ballentine. My condolences. Your father was a great man."

"Thank you, Sir."

"I'll be with you in a moment... I just need to find my damn spectacles," the lawyer said and disappeared back into the small room beyond the office.

Looking at Karla, Yvonne had to stifle another snicker at the fact that the attorney's spectacles were safely perched on his rosy, glistening forehead.

'Oh... there they are,' Milton Starr said from the back room, quickly followed by a cough caused by the dust his rummaging around had kicked into the air.

Wearing his round spectacles on his nose, Milton Starr came into the office and buttoned his collar that he always wore loose when he was alone. The veteran attorney was in his late fifties but he appeared older due to his face being permanently rosy, his hair and impressive whiskers and chin beard being prematurely gray, and his figure being somewhat on the plump side.

"Miss Ballentine," he said as he walked around the desk and put out his hand. "I must say that you grow more beautiful each time I see you. Of course, the last time was eight years ago... but still. How do you do."

This time, Yvonne couldn't hold back the laughter. "Thank you, Mr. Starr. How do you do," she said with a smile as the attorney gave her hand a very faint squeeze.

"You're welcome. Good day to you, too, Misses," Milton said to Karla and Elmira who simply waved and nodded in return, respectively.

"Right," Milton said and sat down behind his desk. "I had a feeling you would show up, Miss Ballentine. When I learned of your father's unfortunate passing, I-

"His murder," Yvonne said darkly.

"Uh, indeed," Milton Starr said and adjusted his spectacles. "When I heard of the incident, I took the liberty of finding his last will and testament so I wouldn't have to turn one of my filing cabinets upside down searching for it while you were here, waiting for it." - Leaning down, he opened one of the desk drawers and pulled out a leather-bound folder with a silver crucifix on the front.

As he opened the folder, he looked at Karla with a puzzled look on his face - or rather, at her plain clothes that were typical of a simple ranchhand and not a well-paid foreman, as he had expected. The last of the three women had an air of a servant about her so he had no qualms about speaking in front of her, but it was clear he felt the wrangler was a different story. "Before we go on, I'd think I need to know your identity, Miss. I prefer to know to whom I'm speaking."

"Karla Stuart, Sir. I'm Miss Ballentine's driver. I'm also a bronc buster out at Circle Y," Karla said, fidgeting with her Stetson.

"Oh. Well, I'm of the opinion that it would perhaps be best if-

Yvonne leaned in towards Karla and put a comforting hand on the driver's denim-clad knee. "Miss Stuart is my closest confidante. She stays, if that's what you're alluding to, Mr. Starr."

"It was," Milton said and adjusted his spectacles. "All right, with that settled, let's get on with it, shall we?"

He took a deep breath and began to read from the top page: "I hereby declare that I, George Beauregard Oswald Ballentine is of sound mind and body upon the creation of this legal document, the fourth edit slash update of my last will and testament on April eleventh, 1878, as witnessed by Milton Starr, licensed attorney, and Henry Wilkinson, Sr., Chief Justice of the Peace of Princetown and Princetown County."

Wilkinson's name made Yvonne's nape hairs stand on edge, and she shuffled around on the hard chair to think of something else than growling out loud.

Milton Starr hadn't noticed and kept reading: "My earthly possessions are to be distributed between my daughter Yvonne Margaret Daphne Ballentine, her husband and children if she has started a family at the time of my death, and Eileen Kavanagh, the housekeeper at the Circle Y ranch."

"Oh!" Yvonne said, smiling at the mention of Eileen Kavanagh. "Mrs. Kavanagh will be pleased. She certainly deserves it."

"Mmmm," Milton said before going on. "To my daughter Yvonne Margaret Daphne Ballentine and potentially her husband and children, I leave the working ranch that bears her name, the Circle Y. At the time of writing, April eleventh 1878, that includes the stud farm, the contracts for the men working at the stud farm, the mansion, the contracts for the servants working at the mansion, the sleeping barracks, the barn, and every tool, horse and tack otherwise present at the time of my death. As calculated by Mr. Archibald Finsby, employee of the Princetown Bank on April tenth, 1878, the value of the above was estimated at \$750,000.00."

Hearing the amount, Karla's eyes popped wide open and she turned to look at Yvonne with her jaw suspended down near her chest - Yvonne just sighed and looked down at her hands.

Milton cleared his throat and continued: "In addition to that, I leave to my daughter Yvonne Margaret Daphne Ballentine, and potentially her husband and children, eighty-four deeds at the combined, estimated value of \$675,000.00, as calculated by Mr. Archibald Finsby, employee at the Princetown Bank on April tenth, 1878. The deeds are physically located in a safety deposit box in the vault at the Princetown Bank on Perry Street. There's a letter in the box explaining the details of the deeds, including where the lots are located."

"Oh... my... flippin'... God..." Karla breathed, looking at her old friend.

"The deeds," Yvonne whispered. "Six hundred seventy-five thousand dollars... that's why they want them."

"Pardon?" Milton said, but Yvonne merely shook her head. Clearing his throat, he resumed reading aloud from George's last will and testament: "And finally, I leave to my daughter Yvonne Margaret Daphne Ballentine, and potentially her husband and children, the amount of cash I have in my safe at the mansion and in the safety deposit box in the vault at the Princetown Bank on Perry Street. This amount will fluctuate weekly and cannot therefore be estimated correctly ahead of time."

Milton Starr adjusted his spectacles and looked at Yvonne over the rim. "Miss Ballentine, are you interested in hearing what Mrs. Kavanagh will inherit?"

"Yes, please," Yvonne said and sought out Karla's hand out of sight of the attorney.

Smiling, Karla took Yvonne's hand at once and gave it a little squeeze.

"All right. Let me see... I leave to my housekeeper, Mrs. Eileen Kavanagh, the net sum of fifteen thousand dollars as a token of my appreciation of her hard work through the many years she has been under contract with us. The sum is to be handed out in correlation with Mrs. Eileen Kavanagh's own preferences, and Mrs. Eileen Kavanagh's own preferences alone. Alone is underlined twice," Milton said with a chuckle.

"Goodness me!" Yvonne said, looking at Karla.

"Miss Ballentine," Milton Starr said, pushing his spectacles up his glistening forehead, "you have just become a very, very wealthy woman. Are you married?"

Yvonne shook her head.

"Well, that'll soon change, I imagine. Actually, I can see hopeful suitors lining up from here to the ranch!" Milton said with a laugh.

Yvonne sighed and shook her head again. "I'd rather have my Pappy back," she said quietly. She gave Karla's hands a fair-sized squeeze that was responded to in kind.

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An hour later, Karla, Yvonne and Elmira drove into the alleyway next to the Birrell Hotel, ready to attend the meeting with the men from the railroad company. As the carriage came to a halt, Yvonne kept sitting and let out a long sigh.

Elmira leaned forward from the spot on the other seat and took her mistress' hands with a worried expression on her face. "Is something wrong, Lady Yvonne?"

"No, I... I'm fine, Elmira. Thank you. It's just a lot to take in all at once," Yvonne said and stood up after closing the umbrella and putting it on the seat. As she waited for Karla to jump off the board and come around to open the door, she looked up at the hotel with a look of trepidation on her face that clearly spelled out she had doubts she'd be able to do what was necessary.

Once Karla had helped her down, she turned around and opened her mouth to speak, but at first, nary a sound came out. "Elmira," she said after a little while, "please wait in the DuBois Café next door. There's no point in you coming along. I don't know how long the meeting will take. We'll find you afterwards."

"Yes, Lady Yvonne," Elmira said and curtsied. With a smile, she raised her skirt and walked through the alleyway until she reached the sidewalk.

Yvonne sighed deeply and looked up at Karla who was watching passively. "You know... I have no idea what to expect in there... but I have a curious feeling in my stomach... almost like butterflies flapping their wings. Will you help me? And speak up if I miss a point?"

'Well, that won't do us much good... you're by far the smartest of us,' Karla thought, but kept it to herself - "Of course, Lady Yvonne. Four ears are better than two."

Walking into the hotel lobby, they noticed a well-dressed gentleman speaking with two officers from the US Cavalry in the smoking lounge, occupying three of the four leather wing chairs.

Edward Royce, the hotel manager, came out to stand behind the long, highly polished counter after Yvonne had dinged the little bell. As soon as he saw the identity of his latest guest, he bowed deeply and put out his hand. "My condolences, Miss Ballentine."

"Thank you, Mr. Royce. Ah, I was wondering if you could help me?"

"Certainly, Miss Ballentine."

"At some point today, I was supposed to have had a meeting with representatives from the railroad company and the Milligan Stage Company, but I'm afeared the details were lost in the kerfuffle surrounding the funeral. Is it possible for you to see if I am too late? Do you know if the representatives have left?"

"Oh, Miss Ballentine, you're very much in luck. The gentlemen you see there," Edward Royce said with his best, toady smile as he pointed at the smoking lounge, "are Mr. Plummer from the railroad company, and Colonel Guthridge and Lieutenant Carruthers from the United States Cavalry. Mr. Fitzpatrick from the Milligan Stage Company has gone home, but since he lives here, one of my bellboys can easily summon him."

"Oh! Oh, how excellent," Yvonne said after looking at the men who were looking back at her and Karla. "I might as well speak with them first. If we need Mr. Fitzpatrick present, I'll let you know. Thank you."

"You're most welcome, Miss Ballentine," Edward Royce said and bowed.

Taking off her lace gloves, Yvonne nodded to the manager and went over to the smoking lounge with Karla in tow.

The three men all rose to greet the two young women, stepping forward one at a time. "How do you do, Miss Ballentine. We spoke briefly at the funeral," the pipe-wielding Rex Plummer said as he held out his hand. He was a sturdy man in his early sixties, broad-shouldered, weather-beaten and the proud owner of a bushy mustache, and his voice carried a broad, central Texan dialect.

Rex Plummer wore a high-quality pale gray Western suit over a white shirt, though Yvonne felt he would be more at home in a rancher's outfit, like her father had been. "How do you do, Mr. Plummer. I'm terribly sorry, but I forgot all about our meeting. If it hadn't been for my friend and confidante here, Karla Stuart, I would have been lost completely," Yvonne said, shaking hands with the old man before moving onto the two Cavalry officers.

"How do you do, gentlemen. I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with the ranks of the Cavalry," she said sheepishly as she studied the brass both men wore on their shoulders.

The older of the two - the bearer of a gray full beard - let out a loud, braying laugh and kissed Lady Yvonne's hand. "We forgive you, Miss Ballentine. I'm Colonel Guthridge of the United States Cavalry, L Company 1st California stationed at Fort Bowie. This strapping young lad here is my best Lieutenant, James Carruthers."

The young, bare-faced Lieutenant stepped forward and took Yvonne's hand a mere second after the Colonel had let it go. "I'm delighted to meet such an enchanting beauty, Miss Ballentine," he said in a deep, manly voice that was so buttered-up it was a miracle he could even speak.

"Ah yes... thank you," Yvonne said with a blush tinting her cheeks.

The Colonel put a fatherly hand on Yvonne's elbow and pointed up the grand, curved staircase. "Miss Ballentine, we have several things we need to discuss, so perhaps we should proceed to the Washington Room that we have recently vacated to get on with the program?"

Half an hour later, Yvonne leaned back in her armchair and crossed her legs the other way. Around her, Karla, the pipe-smoking Rex Plummer and the two Cavalry officers were either sitting on various chairs and footstools or standing at the windows in the smartly decorated, yet surprisingly small suite. "So, Lieutenant Carruthers, what you're saying is that there's still quite an Indian presence in the Territory?"

"There is, Miss Ballentine," James Carruthers said from his position at the window overlooking Main Street. "These days, most of our tasks consist of keeping the Indians inside the boundaries of their reservations, but there has been an increase in hostile activities over the past year. As you may know, the Apache leader Cochise was killed six years ago, but there are several powerful, young leaders on their way up."

"Hmmm," Yvonne said and rubbed her chin.

"We've had a few Indian battles in the past years, though none have been as bloody as they were in the old days where the Apache alone were responsible for scores of fatalities among the settlers. With that in mind, our conclusion is, as we have told the senior members of the railroad company," the Lieutenant said and walked over to Rex Plummer's chair, "there should be no major problems building and maintaining a railway line in Princetown County nor in the neighboring counties.

"No major problems?"

"This is the wild frontier, Miss Ballentine. Problems are to be expected. Indians, road agents, the heat... it's how we deal with those problems once they arise that'll make all the difference."

"Indeed, Lieutenant," Yvonne said and leaned back in her chair with a pensive look on her face. She thought about how all this was directly connected to the deeds she had inherited, and looked across the room at Karla who grunted and shrugged in return. "Mr. Plummer, the railway line you propose, where would it actually run?"

Rex Plummer leaned forward and knocked the surplus contents of his pipe into an ashtray. "It would run from the east to the west, Miss Ballentine. It would make stops in Evansworth, Snake Pass, here, Tolliver, Guthrie, Dillonworth and finally Blaise City before it would move out of the Territory."

"So it would follow the old stage lines?"

"It would. That's why the Milligan Stage Company is a partner in the arrangement, Miss Ballentine."

"Mmmm," Yvonne said and scrunched up her face in thought. "The trains... will they only be made up of passenger wagons or will you have freight wagons as well?"

"Depends on the demand, Miss Ballentine. Are you thinking about transporting horses? This is a subject your father considered as well, though we never had time to discuss it further."

"Yes I am," Yvonne said and got up from her chair. "My associate here, Karla Stuart, is the expert on the equestrian side of things. Karla, can you give us a rough estimate on how many horses you typically shift per month?"

Karla felt everyone's eyes lock onto her, and she squirmed in her seat, feeling completely out of her depth in the presence of people of such stature and experience. "Uh... well... with the Mustang drives we do now," she croaked before clearing her throat a couple of times to get the frogs out, "we have... oh... sixty horses once a month, or thirty horses twice a month. Depends. I, uh... suppose we could have fifteen horses every week, but that would be too few for a drive. I guess it would be different if they were shipped by train."

"I see. Thank you, Karla," Yvonne said and went over to her friend to squeeze her shoulder, chuckling inwardly at the surprising reversal of their roles. "Mr. Plummer, in addition to that, we get regular shipments of dry goods, haybales, feed for the stud farm, et cetera. They're currently delivered by wagon, but it wouldn't really be much of a difference for my men to pick them up at the freight station instead of at the general stores around town."

"Your men'," Colonel Guthridge said, chuckling into his beard. "I must say, Miss Ballentine, you are quite an unusual woman. And I mean that in the good sense, of course."

"Of course, Colonel Guthridge," Yvonne said with a smirk. "We're bred tough out here... even if I did spend the last eight years in Philadelphia learning how to walk in high heels and to sip tea without making slurping noises."

The humor made the men and Karla laugh, and Yvonne felt it was a good cue to end the meeting. "Thank you for speaking to me, Gentlemen. It was a most productive meeting. I imagine that we shall meet again once the actual track gets closer to us. Mr. Plummer, where is it right now?"

"Oh, nearly a hundred and ninety miles east of here, Miss Ballentine," Rex Plummer said as he took several deep puffs from his pipe. "But it's moving faster than we think."

"Excellent. Now, if you will excuse me. My associate and I have agreed to enjoy a slice of apple pie in Harvey DuBois' Café next door," Yvonne said and put out her hand.

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While Karla and Yvonne had been speaking to the men, the heat had risen to unbearable levels, and they were both glistening with perspiration after walking the fifteen paces between the hotel and the café.

The temperature inside the wooden building housing the café wasn't much lower, but at least it smelled of apple pie and fresh coffee. "Oh," Yvonne said and took a deep sniff of the air. "I declare I will never grow tired of that smell. Harvey DuBois makes the best apple pie I have ever had. Oh, there's Elmira," she continued, making a beeline over to the table her handmaiden was sitting at.

"Well," Karla mumbled, "the one down at the Friendly Folks Eatery is just as good, actually... only costs a third, too."

Yvonne stood next to one of the white chairs and waited for Karla to pull it out. Once she had been seated, she swept a few damp strands of hair away from her forehead. "Oh, I wish I had worn my bonnet today," she said, looking at the empty plate in front of Elmira. "How is the apple pie, Elmira?"

"Excellent as always, Lady Yvonne," the handmaiden said, dabbing the corner of her mouth with a napkin.

"Mmmm. Would you like another slice?"

"No thank you, Lady Yvonne."

Smiling, Yvonne reached across the table and gave Karla's hand a little squeeze. "A slice, Karla?"

"Yes, thank you."

"All right. Elmira, fetch two slices of apple pie and two coffees," Yvonne said and started pulling off her lace gloves so she could wipe her damp hands.

While Elmira pushed her chair back to get to the counter, Karla narrowed her eyes and studied Yvonne as she carefully wiped her hands with a handkerchief. It wasn't her place to make a comment, but in her heart, she didn't like how Yvonne was bossing Elmira around, handmaiden or not.

"You look thoughtful," Yvonne said, locking eyes with Karla.

"I am. The proposed changes are gonna have an influence on my job, too. And there's somethin' we haven't talked about... your father's last will and testament didn't mention the business of breakin' in broncos. That's really what I do at the Circle Y. Well, that and drivin' the carriage and the various wagons, of course."

"That's true... I didn't think of that. Why wouldn't Pappy write that into his will?"

"That's not for me to say, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and made room on the table for the two plates of apple pie and the two mugs of steaming hot coffee that Elmira was carrying back from the counter.

Now it was Yvonne's turn to look thoughtful. She chewed on her cheek as she looked at the pie that Elmira put down on the table in front of her. "Well... rest assured, Karla, I'm not about to give you up so easily. I'll need a few days to sort out the details, but I'm convinced that Circle Y is running like a well-oiled machine. However, I'm not as hands-on as my Pappy was. Guinn Haggerty is to be given more responsibilities in his role as foreman," she said and picked up her fork. "And so are you, for that matter," she continued, giving Karla a soft, friendly smile.

"Thank you, but... I think you give me too much credit, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and looked down at her coarse, callused hands.

"I do not, Lady Karla," Yvonne joked, reaching over to nudge Karla's denim-clad legs. "Come on, eat your apple pie. It would be a crime for it to go to waste."

Karla smiled and cut off a bite of the pie though she had little appetite. "Lady Yvonne," she said, putting down the fork without tasting the pie. "There's something I need to say to you. It's personal," she continued, looking at Elmira.

Yvonne caught the hint and nodded discreetly. "Elmira, you're excused."

"Yes, Lady Yvonne," the handmaiden said and left the table.

Once they were alone, Karla leaned back on the chair and let out a sigh. "After what I'm about to tell you, Lady Yvonne, you'll need to rethink your plan to give me more to do at the ranch."

"Oh? What could possibly be so horrible that I'd knock you down the roster?" Yvonne joked, looking at the driver's long, denim-clad legs, her pleasantly filled-out bosom and her impressive shoulders and arms.

"I can't..." Karla started to say, but her voice trailed off into nothing. "You weren't wrong when you called me a dimwit earlier. I can neither read nor write, Lady Yvonne," she said quietly, looking anywhere but at her old friend.

Yvonne furrowed her brow like she couldn't believe what she had just heard. "I'm... I'm sorry? That can't be right, Karla? Surely you can-"

"I can't, Lady Yvonne," Karla said quietly. "When I look at the work sheets at the ranch, the letters run together until they're just a pool of squiggles. I've tried to read the Princetown Bugle, but it's the same."

"I- uh... maybe you're just long-sighted? Maybe you need spectacles? How many fingers am I holding up?" Yvonne said and showed Karla four fingers.

"No, it's not that. I can see for miles... and pictures and drawings are just fine, but there's nothin' I can do about the text. I'm just an idiot."

"Oh..."

"So you see, Lady Yvonne... you can't give me more responsibilities 'cos I wouldn't be able to-"

Commotion at the door made Karla and Yvonne spin around in their chairs and stare at the street - it turned out to be Elmira who entered the café in a hurry.

Out of breath, the handmaiden hurried over to the table and grabbed hold of the backrest of Karla's chair. "Two men are waitin' at our carriage! They look mean!" she said in an agitated voice that brought out her native Pennsylvania accent.

"Two men? Maybe it's Mr. Plummer and Mr. Fitzpatrick?" Yvonne said, but Karla was already on her feet.

"Stay here. Both of you," Karla said, pointing at Yvonne. "I'll check it out. If it's nothing, I'll come back and finish my apple pie... but if there's trouble, I'll get the Sheriff. You understand?"

"But Karla, you don't even have a gun!" Yvonne said, jumping out of her chair. "Oh God... please be careful," she continued in a whisper as Karla strode out of the café with determined steps.

Karla hurried along the sidewalk past the Birrell Hotel until she was in a position to peek around the corner.

The two men weren't Rex Plummer and Mr. Fitzpatrick as Yvonne had hoped - they were none other than Quint Connors in his customary dark gray Western suit and white Stetson, and Eugene Moehring, the drunkard ex-foreman that 'Gentleman' George Ballentine had thrown out for drinking, in a pair of filthy denim pants and a holed flannel shirt with large patches of sweat under his arms and on his chest.

As always, Moehring looked like he was on the fourth day of a three-day bender with red eyes, a faceful of week-old stubble and greasy, unkempt hair.

Quint Connors appeared to be unarmed, but Moehring wore a Smith & Wesson on his hip on a gunbelt that was hanging outside his suspenders.

Karla didn't like firearms - though she could use one if she had to - but now, she felt horribly naked without a six-iron to back her up. Looking over her shoulder, she tried to calculate how long it would take her to run to the

Sheriff's office, but she realized that she'd be in plain view from the alleyway which would most likely make Quint and Moehring go to the café.

Sighing, she moved away from the corner and stepped into the alleyway with her hands on her hips.

"And there the bitch is," Eugene Moehring slurred, proving that he was still under the influence.

As Karla walked over to the carriage to check up on the horses, Quint Connors pushed his white Stetson back from his face that still bore the scars and faded bruises of his rough treatment at the hands on the vigilantes after the troubles on payroll Friday.

"Oh, I had hoped it would be you, Karla Stuart," he said in a slight lisp that didn't suppress his lyrical Scottish accent - the lisp was caused by a few missing teeth, another lasting legacy of the troubles. "May I call you Karla?"

"Mmmm," Karla said, standing in a way so she could view the inside of Quint's right sleeve - a small but deadly Derringer was attached to a metal frame that could spring out if he needed it.

"My new friend Eugene here says a bronc buster like you makes, oh, ten dollars a week compared to the six or seven for a regular cowpuncher. Is that so?"

"Yeah. What of it?" Karla said and dusted off her hands after checking the horses. She shuffled back to the carriage and leaned against the side of the board.

"Well, by my calculations, that comes to about five hundred twenty dollars a year, give or take. Plus a Christmas bonus, no doubt. And whatever else you can get along the way," he said, leering down her shapely body.

"Is there a point to this?" she said, feeling a shiver run down her back.

Eugene Moehring growled out loud and moved far into Karla's personal space. "You betcha sweet tits there's a point to it," he said, standing so close that his boots were interlocking with Karla's.

His whisky-laced breath almost clogged up Karla's sinuses and she had to move her face away to get some fresh air.

"Have ya had her yet? The boss' daughter?" Eugene said, pushing himself even closer to Karla. "She's a hot little package, ain't she? Mmmm-yeah. I know about you, bitch. I know you're one of them perverts who prefer to lick the pit and not the stem."

"What we're trying to say," Quint said and put a hand on Eugene's shoulder to get him to move back, "is that by listening to us, and helping us with an insignificant little problem we have, there's a big payday in your immediate future."

"A payday?" Karla croaked, thoroughly fed up with Moehring's creepy presence.

"No, I said a big payday." - Quint slid his hand into his jacket pocket and found a white envelope. Opening it, he spread out five one-hundred dollar bills and showed them to Karla. "Wouldn't you call this a big payday? I do believe this is an entire year's wages for you, Karla Stuart."

Karla bit down so hard that her jaw muscles bulged out. She stared at the money with the same look a drowning woman would give a sandy shore, thinking about how it could be used to buy the dove Libertad and her child Lucinda free from her brutal Madam - but at the same time, she knew in her heart it was blood money and that she would have to kill Yvonne to earn it.

She had rarely seen that much money in one place before, but the staggering amounts the attorney had mentioned earlier in the day made five hundred dollars seem like chicken feed, and she knew Yvonne would gladly lend her five times that if she asked. "Quint," she croaked, keeping her eyes on the bills.

"Yes?"

"I won't be your Judas. Go to hell." - With that, she pushed herself off the carriage and sprinted up the alleyway, accompanied by a barrage of loud, rude curses from Eugene Moehring and a sound reminiscent of a revolver being drawn from its holster - the shot never came, though.

Karla ran back along the sidewalk and tore into the café where she bumped into Yvonne who had been standing at the door. "Oh! Lady Yvonne, you need to stay here... it was Quint Connors and our former foreman..."

"Wh- what happened?"

"Nothin'. They offered me money, no doubt to get you out of the way... though Connors didn't say that in so many words. Listen, I'm goin' over to the Sheriff... I'm... hell, I can't protect you by myself, Lady Yvonne," Karla said and took Yvonne by the shoulders to make her understand the gravity of the situation. "We need all the help we can get now..."

Only after a few seconds did Karla realize that she was holding on quite firmly to her boss' shoulders. Though the look on Yvonne's face didn't show displeasure, she knew she had overstepped the line and let go of the young woman's shoulders like she had been stung by a bee. "I'm... I beg your pardon, Lady Yvonne. I didn't mean to touch you."

"Oh, but that doesn't-" Yvonne said, but Karla had already left, cutting her off for the second time in as many instances. "Oh!" she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest.

Halfway up Perry Street, Karla stormed into the Sheriff's Office but came to a sliding halt in the middle of the wooden floor, wishing she'd taken the time to knock - she was staring down the barrel of Jane 'Blackie' Durham's Peacemaker. "Jesus," Karla mumbled, throwing her arms in the air.

Looking around, she could see she had interrupted a poker game between Jane, Sheriff Cutler and the only woman in Princetown she didn't want to see, Victoria Lynn Cooper, though the game had come to an abrupt end when Jane had thrown her cards into the air to draw her gun.

"Damnation," the outlaw grumbled, lowering the hammer of her revolver. "Next time, I suggest ya knock first, Karla. I almost gave ya a third eye in the middle o' ya Goddamn forehead. That woulda been hard ta explain 'round the dinner table."

"Sorry," Karla squeaked and took down her hands. "I need your help, Sheriff. Quint Connors is on the warpath. Not three minutes ago, he tried to grease me into helpin' him with a little problem he had, his words. He was down by our carriage at the Birrell Hotel. I'm... Jesus, this is gonna sound so cowardly, but I don't feel I can protect Lady Yvonne... she and her handmaiden are in the café."

Sheriff Cutler drained his whisky and put the empty glass down on his brand new blotting pad - the old one had been ruined by the temporary management - before pushing his chair back. "No problem, Karla. That's what we got our tin stars for. Blackie and me will scout out the alleyway and come back to report. I advise you to stay here in the meantime," he said and grabbed his trusty old scattergun from a rack next to the wall of Wanted posters.

"And I'll give the li'l Lady a li'l briefin'," Jane said and reached down for her half-smoked cigarette that had gone flying when she had jumped up from the chair.

"Thank you," Karla said and wrung her hands. When the heavily-armed duo had left the Sheriff's Office, she turned around to look at Victoria Lynn - or more precisely, at the empty, pinned sleeve of her sweat-soaked shirt.

"Y'know," Victoria Lynn said as she collected the cards that had been flung everywhere in the confusion, "I'm kinda glad to get a reprieve from their incessant smokin'. Brings tears to my eyes, it does. It's been a while since we've talked... how's it goin', Karla?" the Honorary Deputy said and put out her left hand.

"Well... okay, I guess," Karla said with a shrug as she used her wrong hand to shake Victoria Lynn's. Ten thousand thoughts flew around and around in her mind, most carrying the same, un-answerable question: *'Does she know I was the one who mowed her down?'*

"How are things going at the ranch? I wanted to come yesterday, but I can't ride anymore. Kills my knee," Victoria Lynn said and reached under the table to massage her stiff knee.

"Oh, it's, uh... we're slowly getting back to business," Karla said and shuffled around on the floor.

Victoria Lynn nodded and took the bottle the Sheriff had been using. "Uh-huh? Well, that's good. Want a drink?" she said as she poured herself a shot of the amber liquid.

"No, thank you. I only drink after work."

"Wow, finally a straight-up youngling... pardon the pun," Victoria Lynn said with a throaty chuckle. "Well, since I don't work at all, I can have one whenever I choose. Your health," she continued, gulping down the shot.

Karla folded her hands in front of her mouth and looked intently at Victoria Lynn as she began to distribute the cards for a game of King's Solitaire - she only had one hand to use but she dealt the cards as fast as most people would with two. Karla thought she didn't seem to be too marked by her fate, even though her physical disabilities had to be a constant reminder of her accident.

Scrunching up her face, Karla opened her mouth to speak - but was interrupted by Sheriff Cutler returning from the scouting mission. She quickly clicked her jaw shut, groaning inwardly at the horrible timing.

"Karla, the coast is clear... they ain't there now. What have you and Miss Ballentine been doing today?" the Sheriff said as he put the scattergun against the side of the desk and took off his Confederate Cavalry hat to wipe his sweaty brow.

"We were at the attorney's office to hear about Mr. Ballentine's last will... and then we drove down to the hotel for a meeting with someone from the railroad company."

"Oh?"

"It's a long story... I honestly don't know all the details, Sheriff Cutler," Karla said with a shrug.

Orin Cutler put his gray hat back on and grabbed the scattergun. "Well, it doesn't matter anyhow. Blackie is up at the café. I spoke briefly with Lady Yvonne and she'd like to go home... Vic, you wanna hold the fort or come with us to see them off?"

"Come with you, Sheriff," Victoria Lynn said, got up from the chair and took her dark gray Stetson that had been hanging on the backrest.

As she pushed back her chair, it was revealed she was wearing a special gunbelt that was hanging low on her left hip. The leather holster was holding a new Colt Peacemaker, and there were two initials carved into the curved surface an inch down from the top - a V and an E, separated by a small rosette.

"Vic and Emily... my girlfriend," Victoria Lynn said with a broad grin when she noticed Karla was looking hard at the initials on the holster.

The heat hit the two women and the Sheriff like a sledgehammer when they stepped outside onto Perry Street. They hadn't moved more than thirty paces before Victoria Lynn had streams of sweat dripping down from her temples, a result of the fact that she could only hobble along.

Walking past Sofus Mikkelsen's gunshop, the Sheriff waved his hat in the air to signal Jane - who was still inside Harvey DuBois' Café with Yvonne and Elmira - that it was safe to come out.

Jane stepped out onto Main Street and performed a thorough visual sweep of the entire area. When she couldn't see anything untoward, she waved behind her, and soon, Yvonne and Elmira joined her on the sidewalk.

Karla watched it unfold from the other side of Main Street. She had a feeling in her gut that it had gone too easily, but she couldn't see anyone who'd pose a threat, either - because of the heat, the street was mostly deserted, though there were a few cowpunchers here and there, mingling at the saloons.

Just as she looked across Perry Street at the all-day bakery, she caught a very brief glimpse of the sun glinting off something metallic - possibly the barrel of a gun - on the roof of the building.

She didn't even have time to yell a warning before the gun opened fire, dousing the sidewalk in front of the café with six rounds of burning hot lead.

"Yvonne!" Karla screamed, knocking off her hat and clutching her head when she saw Yvonne collapse outside the café in a shower of glass.

Jane returned fire at once, fanning her gun to pepper the roof of the bakery.

Sheriff Cutler and Victoria Lynn spun around and joined the fray; the hard booms of the Sheriff's double-barreled scattergun overpowering the fainter barks from Victoria Lynn's Colt.

"Blackie!" the Sheriff roared, pointing at himself and then at the bakery. He quickly cracked open the scattergun to reload it, and then took off across the street.

"Karla, let's go!" Victoria Lynn said and gave the driver a hard shove with her shoulder.

Karla sprinted across Main Street faster than she ever had. She threw herself down onto the sidewalk and picked up the collapsed Yvonne who was bleeding from a cut on the cheek and a scratch on her left upper arm. "Oh God, no!" she croaked as she ran her hands all over the petite body to search for other wounds.

"She did'n get hit! The winda' broke an' sent shards in her face... she fainted!" Jane said, grabbing hold of Karla's sleeve. "Stay here. I'm goin' with Cutler."

"All right!" Karla cried, reaching in under Yvonne and picking her up like she weighed nothing at all. Standing up straight, she kicked open the door to the café and tore inside where she put Yvonne down on the first available table.

Taking a step back, her mind was reeling at the thought that like 'Gentleman' George only a few days before, Yvonne was now lying on a table, bleeding and unconscious. "Elmira? Elmira!"

"Y- yes..." the handmaiden said, staggering inside and bleeding from a wound on her hand.

"D'ya get hit?"

"No... glass..."

Yvonne suddenly let out a terrified cry and jerked so hard she nearly fell off the table, but Karla was at her side in a heartbeat and held her tight.

"It's all right, Yvonne... you're not hurt! You hear me, you're not hurt!" Karla chanted, rocking her old friend back and forth on the table to stop her from thrashing about.

"God..." Yvonne croaked, reaching up to touch her tender cheek. "Blood... I'm bleeding..."

"You didn't get hit... it was the glass. Blackie and the others are chasin' the shooter," Karla said, running her hands through Yvonne's corkscrew curls without caring a bit that several of the café guests were giving them funny looks.

Yvonne stared up at Karla with wide, frightened eyes, but after a brief while, the rocking motion calmed her down and she buried her head in the nook of Karla's strong shoulder and let out a trembling sigh. "God," she whispered, shaking her head slowly.

Behind them, Victoria Lynn hobbled in through the busted door, breathing heavily from the exertion. "I... went... back... to... the hos- hospital," she said, sitting down with a bump on a chair and immediately starting to massage her stiff knee. "Nurse... Monahan... will come... in a moment. Whew... it had to... happen on the hottest... Goddamn day we've had in weeks..."

Outside, several shots from a handgun were heard, followed by two hard booms from the Sheriff's scattergun - then silence fell over Perry Street once more.

"Thank you, Deputy," Yvonne said, still holding onto Karla's strong arms.

"Honorary Deputy," Victoria Lynn added, pointing at the special tin star she had on her shirt. "Oh... Jane's coming back from the bakery now... with the Sheriff," she continued, looking out of the window.

A minute later, Jane Durham and Orin Cutler stepped into the café, holding their recently discharged weapons that still smelled of cordite. "Y'all can relax now. We found 'im... an' we got 'im," Jane said and wiped her sweaty brow.

"Quint Connors?" Yvonne said.

Jane shook her head and dug into her pocket to get her tobacco pouch. "Naw, a bum. A real filthy fella."

"Eugene Moehring, that son of a bitch..." Karla said under her breath.

Grunting, Yvonne swung her legs over the side of the table, but before she had time to go anywhere, Lucille Monahan came rushing into the café, adding a touch of hysteria to what was already a confusing situation.

While the frantic nurse tore off the left sleeve of Lady Yvonne's plain, dark green dress to treat the wound on her arm, Yvonne scrunched up her face and looked at Orin Cutler. "Sheriff, the man you shot was the previous foreman at Circle Y. My Pappy let him go because of excessive drinking. Would it be possible to see him?"

"No," Sheriff Cutler said firmly, tapping his index finger against the barrels of the scattergun to express that Moehring's remains weren't a pleasant sight for sensitive people.

"Oh... I see," Yvonne said, nodding quietly. As Lucille Monahan did her best to treat the small cut, Yvonne reached up with her free hand and pulled Karla into a comforting half-embrace. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't thank me, Lady Yvonne... I didn't do a damn thing," Karla mumbled, clenching her fists to counter the terrifying thought that she had nearly lost Yvonne without having had a chance to tell her how she felt inside.

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CHAPTER 6

The next morning at ten to eight, Karla walked out of the barracks at the Circle Y ranch and struck a match against the board of the empty, open wagon she was to drive to town to get the payrolls from the Princetown Bank. As she lit her freshly rolled cigarette and took the first, deep puff, she turned around and looked at the eight men on horseback that were scheduled to ride with her.

In addition to the Colt Single Action she wore on a belt on her hip, every member of the escort team was armed with a scattergun or a rifle, and if anyone was dumb enough to stage an attack on them on the return trip, it would be the shortest bandit charge in the history of the wild west.

Chuckling through a cloud of cigarette smoke, Karla stepped up on the board and took the reins, but before she had time to slap them to set the convoy in motion, a fair voice cried out behind her.

"Karla! Wait!"

The voice was Yvonne's, but when Karla turned around to see what the Lady of the house wanted, she nearly choked on her cigarette as she took in the sights.

Instead of one of the highly feminine dresses Yvonne had been wearing since her return from Philadelphia, she had changed into a pair of blue dungarees with the pantlegs neatly folded up past her work boots, a blue-and-green flannel shirt, a brown suede vest, a red bandana around her neck, and finally, a very familiar pale brown Boss Of The Plains hat that sat quite low on her blonde corkscrew curls that seemed horrendously out of place compared to the rest of her garb.

Walking with determined steps, Yvonne climbed up on the board and got comfortable on Karla's left side. "I wanna come along," she said with a grin.

"Uh-huh?" Karla said, studying the remarkable transformation. The Yvonne sitting next to her was the **real** Yvonne, not the upper class lookalike that had been walking around recently - apart from the corkscrew curls. "Tell me, what did Elmira say to that outfit?"

"I don't know... she hadn't recovered by the time I left," Yvonne said with a snicker.

"Okay... oh, we better get a move on. Yah! Yaahh!"

As the convoy set off towards Princetown, several of the escort riders let out resounding whoops and rebel yells, and some even threw their hats in the air.

Three horses back from the open wagon, Vince MacCleary steered his bay mare towards that of Freddy Maynard. "Psst, Freddy... I think you might as well forget all about yer little wager. Ain't no way... no *way* you're gonna be rollin' in the hay with Karla tonight... no *way*."

Freddy shook his blond head vehemently and kept his horse on a steady track. "Nope, Vince. The bet stays. Twenty bucks, two weeks' pay, just like we agreed on."

"Your loss, buddy," Vince said, grinning on his way back to the left flank.

Just over an hour later, the convoy rode past Boot Hill on its way into the outskirts of Princetown. Yvonne couldn't stop her eyes from seeking out the fresh headstone on her father's grave, but unlike the other times she had gone past, she didn't cry.

Noticing the change, Karla felt brave and reached down to put her hand on Yvonne's thigh, a move that earned her a wink and a smile. "How are you feelin', Lady Yvonne?" she said as she put both hands back on the reins.

"Like I'm waking up from a long, awful dream, Karla. My heart still hurts terribly when I think of Pappy, but it's getting better," Yvonne said and looked down at the sandy trail ahead of them that bore her father's name. A few heartbeats later, she looked back up to study Karla's profile, wearing a broad grin on her face.

"Hoah! Hoah!" Karla shouted, putting her weight on the brake to get the two-in-hand to stop outside the Princetown Bank. Their eight escort riders soon crowded them so no one could get between the wagon and the sidewalk in front of the bank.

Yvonne quickly jumped off the board and went inside. It didn't take long before she returned with two sturdy men who were carrying a large wooden chest between them. The open wagon creaked mercilessly and the leaf-spring suspension moved down quite dramatically as the chest was placed and roped tight in the center of the cargo bed.

Karla watched the event unfold with a disinterested look on her face. Even though it was a potentially dangerous task - especially with the way Princetown had become - she had done it so often it felt like nothing special.

Once the heavy chest was loaded safely onto the wagon, Yvonne thanked the men from the bank and stepped up on the hub of the front wheel to be closer to Karla. "Hey, I have something I need to ask you. Would you mind relinquishing the reins and coming with me on a little mission?"

"Uh... sure... I mean, no problem, Lady Yvonne. Where are we going?" Karla said and put the reins down on the board.

"Over to Town Hall. Last night, sleep was unwilling to claim me and I ended up staring at the ceiling of my bedroom for a couple of hours. Then I started thinking, I can't live my life the way I want to live it if I have to look over my shoulder every breathing minute. Perhaps it's time to lean on the Wilkinsons. What do you say?"

Sighing deeply, Karla scrunched up her face and racked her brain to come up with words that would explain how she felt without insulting her new boss. "Lady Yvonne... I think it would be a bad idea. And that's my honest opinion. From what I've heard around town, the Wilkinsons have no scruples. Junior in particular. There's a risk your plan could come back to haunt you," Karla said quietly.

"Hmmm... perhaps if we asked Sheriff Cutler and Miss Durham to come with us?" Yvonne said and absentmindedly put a hand on Karla's thigh.

Behind them, Freddy studied the touch with great interest. Putting his Winchester over his other arm, he waved Vince over to him. "Psst! Pssst!"

"What now, Freddy?" Vince said and steered his horse over to his colleague.

The ladies' man nodded at the tender exchange between Karla and Yvonne with a puzzled expression on his face. "Look at where the boss' hand is... if I did that, I'd have at least three dislocated fingers now... then again, I suppose wimmen are touchy-feely types when they're amongst their own kind..."

"Freddy, I swear... sometimes, you're dumber than an upside-down sack of shit."

"What? What? Vince, what the hell are you talkin' about?"

Vince MacCleary rolled his eyes and was on his way back to the other side when Karla raised her hat in the air and called for him. He quickly turned his steed around to hear what she had to say.

"Vince, I need you to drive the wagon back to the ranch," Karla said and jumped off the board. "I have some business to attend to with Lady Yvonne and the Sheriff."

"All right," Vince said and dismounted. After tying his own horse's reins to the side of the wagon, he climbed up on the board and got himself comfortable on the hard seat. "Should we wait for you, or...?"

"No, Mr. MacCleary," Yvonne said, stepping back from the open wagon. "The payroll is more important. Make sure Mr. Haggerty is alerted the second you return. He's in charge while I'm away."

"Yes, Miss Ballentine. All right, fellas, make way for the hay!" Vince said and slapped the reins to make the two-in-hand come alive.

Yvonne and Karla stepped up on the sidewalk and watched the convoy move away from the bank; the wagon creaking and groaning from the heavy load on its way up Perry Street.

"Let's go pay Sheriff Cutler a visit," Yvonne said once they were alone.

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The windows on the third floor of the building that housed the Town Hall were wide open to get some respite from the stifling heat, but it didn't stop Yvonne's cheeks and forehead from sporting several dark red blotches.

"Oh, I can assure you, Sir," she said and rose from the armchair she had been sitting in in Henry Wilkinson Junior's office, "that even though I'm merely a woman, as you so eloquently put it, the deeds are safe with me."

To try to calm herself down, she walked over to the windows in the smartly decorated office and looked down at Perry Street where life continued in its regular patterns.

Henry Junior pushed himself away from his blackwood desk and leaned back in his high-backed armchair. "Naturally, Miss Ballentine, I didn't mean it quite that condescendingly," he said, toying with a fountain pen.

The son of the Chief Justice of the Peace cocked his head and looked at his guests with a sneaky gleam in his deep brown eyes. While he was waiting for Yvonne to make a comeback, he reached up and stroked his goatee, the beard he had chosen to grow this week.

At the back of the room, Orin Cutler and Karla looked at each with identical expressions of disbelief on their faces - they were both convinced that Junior had meant every word.

"Mmmm," Yvonne said and turned around to face Henry Junior.

With the blackwood desk as the centerpiece, the office was in a high class and tastefully decorated. Several tall bookcases with plenty of leatherbound tomes had been placed on the back wall on either side of Junior's high-backed chair, and the dark red carpet on the floor was visibly of a very high quality.

There were a few original paintings on the walls that weren't covered by the bookcases, but Yvonne wasn't close enough to read the names of the artists, and even if she had been, her fit of pique meant she didn't care one bit.

"To rephrase my previous comment, Miss Ballentine," Junior said and reached into one of his desk drawers to find a silver ashtray and a pack of cigars, "in my opinion, financial matters and the businesses we are speaking of here are best run by men. Women are quite simply too emotional and often too pre-occupied with keeping their husbands and families happy and well-fed to truly understand such tedious nonsense as wages, contracts, work disputes, deeds, et cetera."

"Mister Wilkinson," Yvonne growled, "I do not share your opinion of the fairer sex in general, nor your opinion of me in particular. Like I told you before, the deeds shall remain in my possession."

"Miss Ballentine," Henry Junior said in a voice that was dangerously close to mocking Yvonne, "I am convinced you do not understand the details or indeed the historical background of the agreement the late Mr. Ballentine made with my father and the other gentlemen who founded Princetown. We-"

"Perhaps I do not know every last detail, but I understand more than you think, Sir," Yvonne said and spun around which made Junior shy back for the briefest of moments. "You wish to acquire the deeds in order to increase the property tax. By being the sole owner of the land upon which Princetown is located, you would have free rein to do as you please, to the detriment of the residents. Isn't that a fact?"

At the back of the office, Karla had to bite down on her lips to stop herself from laughing out loud at the sight of Junior's face turning just as beetroot red as Yvonne's had been earlier - if not more. The lothario squirmed in his seat, his lips moved without speaking, and his hand trembled as he lit the cigar he had long since held between his fingers.

"Why, that is preposterous!" he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

"Is it? Perhaps it is. However, it's something I've been considering as well. After all, the deeds I possess, compared to most of those you and your father have, are all in the wealthy areas of Princetown. The Birrell Hotel, Harvey DuBois' Café, the Golden Wings Saloon, the Bugle and even the Princetown Bank are all on my land, Sir. Yours, or so I've been told, mostly cover the poorer areas."

Henry Junior didn't speak - instead, he just let out another big plume of cigar smoke, though the look in his eye proved that he would much rather jump up and throttle Lady Yvonne than continue the conversation.

Yvonne grunted and tapped Karla's shoulder to let her know the show was over. "Well. I can see this was a waste of time. Good day, Mr. Wilkinson. We shall meet again, I'm sure." - With that, she strode out of the office with Karla and the Sheriff in tow.

A few moments later, the door to the office was slammed behind them with such force that a small painting in the corridor fell from its nail and cracked the frame when it hit the hard floor.

Down the end of the hall, Yvonne came to a stop and let out a husky, throaty chuckle. "I do declare, I must have a mean streak somewhere inside me... that was fun."

Sheriff Cutler chuckled as well and put his Confederate Cavalry hat back on. "It was your father speaking, Miss Ballentine... pure and simple. Goodness me, he would have loved that performance."

"Thank you," Yvonne said and touched the Sheriff's arm. "Karla, you still look pensive?"

Karla nodded with a look of worry on her face. Putting on her hat and making sure the Carlsbad swoops were lined up just right, she turned to face Yvonne. "I am. Although it was kinda amusin' to see Junior squirm in there, I know that animals are the most dangerous when they're cornered. And Junior is an animal. A snake. I've heard stories that-

"That are all true. And then some," a male voice said from further down the dark hall. The voice had been speaking in a lyrical Scottish accent, giving away the identity of its owner:

"Quint Connors!" Sheriff Cutler growled and immediately drew his Colt.

Karla did, too, and she resolutely stepped in front of Yvonne so the Lady would be a smaller target.

"No no, there's no need for all the hardware," Quint said and held his hands in the air. "I'm here to do a good deed... ahem. Pun very much intended," he continued in a way that made the cheroot he was smoking bob up and down in his mouth.

"I'll believe that when I see it," Karla mumbled, keeping her eyes trained on Quint's right sleeve and the Derringer she knew was in there.

Quint chuckled dryly and stepped closer. "Oh, you'll see it, all right. But not here. Let's go over to the Sheriff's Office... I have some information I would like to share with you, Sheriff Cutler."

Orin Cutler furrowed his brow and stared intently at the ruddy, slightly overweight man in the dark gray Western suit. "Fine. C'mon. But you take the lead down the stairs, Quint. That way, you'll get shot fulla holes first if this is an ambush like the other one."

"Oh, the one at the bakery?" Quint said and stepped between the three people to head down the stairs. "Wasn't me. That was all Moehring's doing, that drunken fool. If I were to stage an ambush, you wouldn't know about it until it was too late."

Quint's words sent an ice cold shiver down Yvonne's back, and she had to grab hold of Karla's free arm as they descended the stairs.

"Siddown!" Orin Cutler said, shoving Quint Connors down on a chair in the Sheriff's Office. He quickly found a pair of handcuffs and dangled them in front of the criminal's face. "Ya ain't gonna make me use these on your fat wrists, are ya?"

"Of course not, Sheriff Cutler," Quint said with a cool grin. Looking to his right, he made eye contact with Yvonne who hastily grabbed hold of Karla's arm again.

Karla just grumbled and patted Yvonne's suddenly cool hands.

"Now," Quint said, making himself comfortable on the chair and knocking off some ash on the floor. "I'm about to do my civic duty and inform you that I have first-hand knowledge that Mr. Henry Wilkinson Junior killed a whore at the Cheap Thrills cathouse earlier this month. A whore by the name of Canary Anne who was a much loved employee of Madam Corey's."

"And you know this, how?" Sheriff Cutler said, busy writing down Quint's words in a notepad.

"Upon a recent visit to the establishment, I realized that I hadn't seen Canary Anne for a while so I asked for her. Madam Corey told me Junior had beaten her to a pulp and that she had succumbed to her injuries a short week after the incident. There are ladies present so I won't divulge the gruesome details, but suffice to say she had been in a bad state," Quint said and shot Karla and Yvonne a gap-toothed grin.

Karla cleared her throat and patted Yvonne's hands again. "I knew Canary Anne, Sheriff. Quint is tellin' the truth. The last time I came to the Cheap Thrills on business, I was informed she'd been badly beaten though she hadn't yet died and I wasn't told who had done it... I didn't speak with her, but I know she wouldn't lie about that. She had an honest heart."

Yvonne looked up at Karla with huge, round eyes that conveyed that she could not believe what she had just heard.

"I'll tell you later," Karla mumbled for Yvonne's ears only.

Sheriff Cutler leaned back in his chair and started fiddling with his walrus mustache. His eyes locked onto Quint's and shone with an intensity that made the criminal look down. "And why do you come to us now, Quint? You've had plenty of opportunity to tell us that."

"Well... true. But I was outside the office listenin' to the mountain lion over there," - Quint pointed his thumb at Yvonne - "rip Junior a new one. And I thought, Quint, are you sure this house of cards isn't gonna come crashing down? I felt in my bones that it very well could. And you know me, Sheriff. I'm always lookin' out for number one."

"Mmmm," Orin Cutler said and scrunched up his face. He turned to look at Yvonne who was chewing on her lips. "No. It's not enough. The word of a wrangler and a Madam against one of the most important men in Princetown...? No offense, Karla, but... no. Even if we do try, Henry Senior will throw out the case in an instant."

Yvonne blinked once, then twice - then another time for good measure. The Sheriff's words got stuck in her craw, and she had to gulp several times to digest them and to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Sheriff Cutler, you must be pulling my leg! If Henry Junior killed a woman, it's your Goddamned duty to arrest him and throw him in jail!"

"Lady Yvonne, you don't understa-"

Karla's eyebrows shot up at the unexpected cursing, but before she could comment, Yvonne really let go:

"Oh, I understand, all right, and much better than you think! This is exactly what happened to that sweet, young redhead Mathilda Brown, isn't it? Isn't it, Sheriff? She was sent off to prison for three long years because she dared to resist Henry Junior! Isn't that a fact, Sheriff?"

"Well-"

"It is, don't you even try to deny it. How many women has Henry Junior molested or raped, or even killed over the years? Five, ten, twenty? More? Here's your chance to stop a vicious criminal, Sheriff Cutler!"

"Lady Yvonne... please let me speak," Orin Cutler said and rose from his chair. "It doesn't matter if we had fifty people witnessin' Henry Junior beatin' a whore... nobody would raise a finger to defend her, or even speak on her behalf. That's just the way it is out here in the west. I'm sure it's different in New York or wherever you went-"

"Philadelphia!"

"Philadelphia, all right. I'm sure it's different there," the Sheriff said with a shrug.

"I get it," Yvonne growled. "Out here, women are worthless. Simple property to command over, or to beat or rape when you feel a need to exercise your divine male rights... well, hear me now, Sheriff... those days are over," she said, stomping around the office.

She suddenly came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the floor and looked at her audience of three - The Sheriff who was staring back at her like she had grown a mustache, Karla who was gawking at her in a wide-eyed daze, and Quint whose ruddy face was twisted in a mask of amused surprise.

"Sheriff Cutler," Yvonne continued, waving Karla over to her. "First of all, I'm going down to Annie Mikkelsen's dress shop to find Jane Durham and ask for her help. If I can get it, we'll be going back to the Town Hall to make a citizen's arrest of Henry Junior. I suggest you either walk shoulder by shoulder with us or get out of our way. The choice is yours... but either way, Henry Junior's reign of terror is over."

With that, Yvonne spun around and stomped out of the Sheriff's office. Immediately turning left, she was soon out of sight.

Karla kept standing in the doorway with a look of shock on her face. She turned around to stare at the Sheriff but couldn't get a word past her lips.

Quint Connors took out his cheroot, leaned his head back and finally let out the belly laugh he'd been holding back since Yvonne started her tirade. "Thus speaketh the daughter of Gentleman George Ballentine!" he said and went into another loud laugh.

The Sheriff groaned out loud and threw his arms in the air. "Karla... go after her. Make sure she doesn't get into trouble. I'll... Jesus, I'll meet you at the Town Hall," he said and reached for the keys to the cells at the back of the office.

Fifteen minutes later, Yvonne and Karla turned the corner onto Perry Street closely followed by Jane Durham who was sitting high atop her bay gelding, armed to the teeth and wearing a grim expression on her face.

As the trio of women strode past the Golden Wings saloon - walking in the middle of the street - Victoria Lynn came out of the establishment with a glass of beer in her hand. "What the hell...? Where y'all goin' like that?"

"To arrest Junior," Yvonne said in a strong voice.

"Arrest Junior...? Hell... and you didn't ask me? I'm officially insulted!" Victoria Lynn said and drained the beer before putting the glass down on the sidewalk. "Wait up, I need my cane... no, screw the cane," she said and hobbled out onto the street with her hand on her revolver.

The quartet was met by Sheriff Cutler who was standing in front of the Town Hall with his scattergun over his elbow and a look of utter resignation on his face. "Gals... I'm mighty proud of you takin' a stand like this, but it's a

fruitless effort. No matter what we try, Henry Senior will just waltz down to the jail and demand Junior's release faster than we can lock him up. And then the heat is gonna come down on you... all of you."

"We brought our own heat, Sheriff," Jane Durham said and worked the action on her Winchester. "I've been lookin' the other way for too damn long. When Yvonne came to us now, my Mathilda started cryin' at the news that Junior had kilt a whore... she pleaded with me ta stop 'im from doin' it again. I always keep my promises."

"Jesus, Blackie... don't make this worse than it already is!"

"Jane is right, Sheriff, we have been looking the other way for too long," Yvonne said and stepped between the outlaw and the Sheriff to defuse the suddenly tense situation. "But I always keep my promises too, and I'm telling you we'll bring Junior to the prison alive and in one piece. Justice isn't served with hot lead... though my father was slain by a cowardly assassin, we shouldn't resort to using the same tactics."

Victoria Lynn turned around and looked across the street. "Well, whatever we do, we're already attractin' attention to ourselves. Look at them fellas over there," she said and pointed at a cluster of hard-looking men standing outside the general store, observing the scene at the Town Hall. "We shouldn't be forgettin' it's payroll Friday. There's gonna be a load of action here later on. Looks like some of 'em have come early today."

Karla shielded her eyes and tried to make out the faces of the men watching them - she couldn't, but she could recognize their body language. "Sheriff... Sheriff!"

"What now, Karla?" Orin Cutler said in a voice that betrayed he was slowly getting tired of the hubbub.

"I can't say for sure... but some of those men over there bear resemblance to the fellas I saw with Quint Connors on the evenin' of Mr. Ballentine's shootin'."

"What? Where?" Yvonne barked and spun around.

Jane turned as well. Two seconds later, she let out a grunt after recognizing one of them. "The second man from the left... the ugly one-"

"Hell... they're all ugly," Victoria Lynn deadpanned.

"Uh-huh, but the real ugly one, that's Clay McCaffrey. Do'n know them other fellas, but I suspect at least two of 'em are goin' by the names of Moss Lang and Joe Burroughs. They came in together. Looks like they've bought 'emselves a couple o' new friends somewhere along the way, too."

Yvonne sighed and rubbed her chin. "Just what we needed. All right... huh. Karla, I want you to stay down here and keep an eye on those gunslingers. If they make a move, uh... come a-running and we'll help."

"Come a-runnin'?" Victoria Lynn echoed, tapping her bad leg. "I can't come a-runnin' anywhere. And I sure as stink on shit can't get up those stairs in a hurry. Naw. There won't be no a-runnin'. If them critters come, Karla and me are gonna fight 'em, ain't we?"

Karla drew her lips back in a strong grimace at the thought of possibly going into a firefight - and with, of all people, the woman she had maimed. "All right," she said quietly. "But I'm warnin' you, I'm not a good shot."

"I am," Victoria Lynn said with a crooked grin.

"Good," Yvonne said and held out her hands. "That settles that. Jane, you go first... uh... if you please."

"Do'n mind if I do, Lady Yvonne," Jane said with a grin as she started walking up the many steps to get to the first floor.

"Thank you. Sheriff?"

Sheriff Cutler chewed on his lips, but eventually shook his head. "No. I take your word that you won't hurt Junior. I better stay here and help Victoria Lynn and Karla."

Hearing that, Victoria Lynn pushed her gray Stetson away from her face and pointed her thumb at the hospital. "Emily is workin' today, Orin. Perhaps you could go down there and tell her where I am and that there might be some action comin' her way soon?"

"Sure, Victoria Lynn. I'll do that."

"All right..." Yvonne said and looked up the stairs where Jane was waiting at the landing. "Here goes another," she mumbled and took the first step.

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Knock, knock!

'Enter!' Henry Junior said from inside his office.

Yvonne looked up at her black-haired companion - noticing that she was even taller than Karla - and sent her a silent question if she was ready.

Jane was ready - she simply kicked down the door.

"What the hell!" Henry Junior said and jumped up from his high-backed chair. He had a small caliber handgun in his hand that he trained on Jane, but he put it away when he noticed he was hopelessly outgunned. "You! You better have a very good explanation for this, Ballentine!"

"Oh we do, Junior. I, Yvonne Ballentine, and my associate, Jane Durham, hereby put you under a citizen's arrest for..." - Yvonne stopped and winked at Jane to let the tall outlaw know she should follow Yvonne's lead - "partaking in a conspiracy to murder my Pappy, 'Gentleman' George Ballentine."

"What?" Henry Junior barked, clutching his head and ruining his meticulously styled hair. "That's... that's diabolical! Where's your proof, woman?!"

"You'll see once we get down to the Sheriff's office so you can be formally arrested."

"Poppycock! This is the worst twaddle I've heard in years! You have nothing because there's nothing to be had!" Junior said and thumped his fist onto his blackwood desk, making several items dance about on the desktop.

Jane snorted and shifted her grip on her Winchester. "So ya sayin' ya have no idea why a gang of pistoleros is lookin' up at these here windas right now, maybe hopin' for ya to signal 'em so they can get started doin' the nasty on Lady Yvonne here, like they did her Pa?"

"I declare, woman, you must be inbred," Henry Junior said angrily, sitting down with a bump in his chair, "I can't understand a word of what you're saying."

"Mmmm?" Jane said with a cold smile slowly forming on her lips.

Yvonne knew she had better step in before she'd be unable to keep her promise to the Sheriff, so she went over to the other side of Henry Junior's desk and leaned down towards him. "But what about Canary Anne? Do you deny beating her to death?"

"C- Canary Anne? What the hell... she was a whore! You're not taking me down because of a whore!" Henry Junior barked angrily and lashed out at Yvonne.

Before the hand could strike the young woman, Jane squeezed the trigger of her Winchester and fired a round that went into the wall behind Henry Junior a mere three inches from his head. "Damn... I missed. Must be the inbreedin'," she drawled and worked the action to have her Winchester ready to fire again, watching with interest as the smoking casing exited the rifle.

"So I got a little rough with her! Isn't that what whores are for?" Henry Junior screeched, though his voice had lost a lot of its bluster.

"No, quite frankly," Yvonne said, pinning him to the spot with her flaming, green eyes. "But jail cells are for rats. And that's where you're going. Get up... get up or we'll make you," she continued, stepping back to make room for Jane.

Reluctantly, Henry Junior rose and moved around the desk with a deep scowl on his face, but stopped walking almost as soon as he had started. "May God be my witness," he hissed, pointing an accusing index finger at Yvonne and Jane, "If it's the last thing I do, I'll put the noose around your necks and pull the handle myself! I will see you two bitches brought to justice!"

"Like ya did with Mathilda Brown?" Jane said and rammed the butt of her Winchester so deeply into Henry Junior's gut that it nearly came out the other side.

The impact was so hard that Junior was almost wrapped around the wooden hilt. Groaning loudly, he slowly slipped off the rifle and fell to the floor, whimpering in pain.

"Ooops," Jane said and flipped the rifle around. "I guess that's another side-effect o' my inbreedin'."

"Jane..." Yvonne pleaded quietly, reaching down to take Henry Junior's arms.

Grunting, Jane shifted her rifle to her other hand and worked together with Yvonne to lift Junior off the expensive red carpet.

A scant minute later, the mismatched trio stood at the bottom of the staircase and looked across the street at the group of five bandits who were still waiting for something - or someone.

Yvonne left the whimpering Henry Junior in Jane's custody and went over to Karla. "Have they attempted anything yet?" she said, quietly putting a hand on her friend's elbow.

"No, they've been smokin' and talkin'... and smokin' some more," Karla said, wiping her clammy palms on her denim pants.

Victoria Lynn hobbled away from the corner she'd been leaning against to take a look at Henry Junior's face that was a study in pain. "But I'm afeared that could change soon. Once they see this rattlesnake here, I'll bet they'll come over for a sniff."

"Where's the Sheriff?" Yvonne said, looking around for their pot-bellied associate.

"In his office. Ahhh, he said he couldn't be seen here when you brought Junior down. A star always outweighs no star," Victoria Lynn said with a chuckle, tapping the empty spot on her chest where the tin star proclaiming her to be an Honorary Deputy was usually located.

"Oh... makes sense," Yvonne said and chewed on her cheek. "All right, let's-"

"Ain't got no time for talkin' now, Yvonne. Things are 'bout ta get real ugly he'," Jane said and shoved Henry Junior behind her.

Across the street, all five of the bandits fanned out and set off in a slow shuffle towards the Town Hall.

"And the Reaper came a-knockin'," Victoria Lynn growled as she drew her Peacemaker.

Karla hurriedly grabbed Yvonne's shoulders and pushed her behind the thickest of the support pillars that held up the Town Hall's balcony. "Stay... please stay... please!"

"Y- yes... but you gotta promise me not to get hurt!" Yvonne said in a trembling voice, looking at the five bandits and at the rifles and revolvers they were wielding.

"I- I'll try," Karla said and rushed back to stand between Victoria Lynn and Blackie where she drew her revolver. She gulped several times to get the sourness at the back of her throat to go away, but no matter what she did, it kept coming back. *'Five against three... oh God, this is madness...'* she thought, gripping the hilt of the Colt so hard her knuckles turned white.

When she glanced to her right, she couldn't believe the steely determination displayed on the face of the tall outlaw. Jane 'Blackie' Durham's jaw was firmly set and her lips were two narrow lines in her face. Her eyes were darker than normal, and they never stood still as they kept track of what the five bandits were doing and where they were going.

To Karla's left, Victoria Lynn appeared no less determined, though the shorter woman showed it in a different manner. Her eyes were roaming the bandits as well, but a nasty smile played across her lips and her skin was flushed.

"Halt, strangers!" Victoria Lynn said loudly when the bandits were fifteen paces from the sidewalk. "Y'all be interferin' with a citizen's arrest. I advise you to turn around and head back to the other side of the street."

The lead of the five bandits - a swarthy man in his late thirties wearing a Confederate Cavalry hat, a long, dark brown buckskin jacket and a pair of dark gray pants - chuckled dryly and locked eyes with Jane Durham.

"Oh, I don't think we're gonna halt, li'l lady. And we ain't no strangers. Hello, Blackie," he said, tipping his hat.

"Clay. I did'n think ya wus still alive," Jane said calmly.

"Oh, but I am. I heard ya found yaself a sweet little crumpet ta chew on... but it can't be any of these hard-ridden skanks. They ain't yer type. Well, maybe that blonde dame over yonder behind the support pillar," Clay McCaffrey said and nodded in Yvonne's direction.

"State yer business an' leave."

"Business? I ain't got no business, we're just two old comrades in arms who be flappin' their gums. Hey, have ya met Moss and Joe? Fine men both," Clay said and pointed at the two men next to him.

Moss Lang was in his early thirties and just as swarthy as his boss, though his electric blue eyes gave away that he had even less of a conscience than Clay. Joe Burroughs was older, in his early forties, but his bony face and beady eyes made him look younger. Unlike the other four, Joe had a full beard that had begun to go gray in places.

"Naw, never met 'em, but it's good ta know their names. Tombstones always look mi'ty em'ty without names ta go on 'em," Jane said, studying the weapons their opponents were using - Clay, Moss and Joe were carrying Colt Peacemakers, but the man on the far right looked like he was packing an old Navy Colt, and the one of the far left appeared to have a sawn-off scattergun under his jacket.

"Aintcha gonna tell me the names of them fightin' girls, Blackie?" Clay said, focusing intently on the most visibly nervous of the three, Karla.

"Naw. No point," Jane said calmly. "We ain't gonn' need no tombstones, Clay."

"Huh, is that a fact?"

Henry Junior suddenly appeared behind Jane, Karla and Victoria Lynn, leaning against the wall of the Town Hall and clutching his aching gut. "Will you morons stop talking and kill those bitches like I damn well paid you to!"

Time seemed to slow down to a crawl for Karla. Even while she turned her head to look at Henry Junior, she heard several weapons drawn from leather holsters and hammers being cocked by the men in the street. Then Jane roared and fired her Winchester; Victoria Lynn raised her revolver and fired at the men, and Yvonne let out a blood-curdling scream.

The next split second, time returned to normal and Karla found herself standing like a salt lick in the middle of the worst lead-storm she had ever experienced.

Everywhere around her, revolvers, rifles and scatterguns were fired ceaselessly, burning hot lead and pellets zinged through the air all around her, and foul-smelling smoke billowed out from the muzzles of the guns to create a smokescreen that obscured the street around the shooters - and somewhere in the background, Yvonne was still screaming.

Shrieking, Karla drew her revolver, dove down onto the sidewalk and fired again and again at the men that were attacking them, shooting blindly until she ran out of ammo. By the third time the hammer clicked harmlessly against a discharged cartridge, she realized it was empty, and she let it go and buried her head in her hands.

Moments later, a loud bump from the street signaled the end of the exchange - all in all, it had taken less than thirty seconds.

"Call in!" Jane roared, putting down her Winchester and drawing her Colt while the clouds of cordite drifted away to reveal a bloody carnage in the middle of Perry Street.

"I'm okay," Victoria Lynn said from somewhere on the left, panting from the agitation. "Got two of those sons o' bitches. How 'bout you?"

Jane grunted and moved out into the street. "I got nicked on mah shoulder, but I got Clay smack bang in the kisser. Karla...? Karla?" she said and looked up when she realized the wrangler hadn't replied.

"I ain't... I ain't hurt... I think," Karla croaked, slowly disentangling herself from her own arms and rolling over onto her back.

A heartbeat later, she was tackled from above by Yvonne who wrapped her arms around the wrangler's body and gave her such a strong squeeze that the air whooshed out of her.

"Oh, Karla, I was frightened out of my wits... please tell me you're all right!" Yvonne howled, holding Karla's head so tightly her face was pressed into Yvonne's flannel-clad bosom.

Victoria Lynn laughed out loud at the comical sight - "Lady Yvonne, I think your friend there is just fine... if ya catch my drift."

Yvonne opened her eyes and realized she was smothering Karla with her bosom. "Oh!" she said and pulled back from her cross-eyed friend.

Victoria Lynn hobbled out into the street and looked at the four dead men - Moss Lang was merely wounded in the knee and the chest. "I got this fella here and the other on the left, you got Clay... which means Karla there got both the fellas on the right. Goddamn, that's not bad for someone so young, huh?"

"No," Jane said, checking out the tear in her shield-front shirt and the underlying nick she had received on her shoulder. She furrowed her brow when she realized the tear looked like it had come from behind.

Turning around, she wanted to ask Karla her opinion of the odd-looking hole but noticed Henry Wilkinson Junior lying motionless on the ground next to the Town Hall. Grunting, she picked up her Winchester and strolled over to the prone man. When she kicked him over onto his back, the blood that seeped out of his gut and chest proved that he had been hit at least twice - and the dull, blank stare in his deep brown eyes proved that it had killed him. "Well, ain't that poetic justice... just like ol' man Ballentine," she mumbled as she looked at the gut shot. "Hey Yvonne, lookie here," she said out loud.

Yvonne turned around and stared at the dead body. After a few seconds, she shrugged and turned back to comfort Karla.

"Yeah... that's how I feel, too. Mathilda's gonn' be celebratin' tonight, tho. Oooh, I better be there when she does," Jane said and walked back out onto the street.

Around them, people were slowly returning to the street to see who had made it and who hadn't. On the sidewalk, Sheriff Cutler lumbered closer to them at a speed that could best be described as a slow jog. "Anybody needin' medical attention?" he said once he was close enough.

"Blackie got scraped," Victoria Lynn said and pointed at the tall outlaw. "And Moss Lang there looks like he'll be spendin' some time sittin' down. We need to call the undertaker for the rest. Oh, and Junior's dead by the looks of it."

"Tarnation... all right, I'll deal with the livin' bandit first. Vic, I could need a hand," Sheriff Cutler said and walked out onto the street.

"Well, ain't that fortunate... I only got one to give ya, Orin," Victoria Lynn said with a chuckle that was perhaps just a little too manic and loud. She turned around and looked at Karla and Yvonne who were still in each other's arms.

"Ah. Puppy love. Ain't it perdy?"

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EPILOGUE

A few hours later.

Chief Justice of the Peace Henry Wilkinson Senior sighed deeply as he looked at his son's dead body lying on a table in the undertaker's store. "And you're saying he killed a woman, Sheriff Cutler? A prostitute?"

"That's correct, Sir. A young woman called Canary Anne. She was working over at the Cheap Thrills cathouse on Sullivan Street. She succumbed to the beating he gave her."

"Damnation... he promised he'd stop," Justice Wilkinson said under his breath. "Is it true that we have several witnesses who heard him yell that he had paid the bandits for killing Lady Yvonne Ballentine?" he said out loud.

"Yes, Sir. Lady Yvonne and the others as well. Regretfully," Orin Cutler said, holding his Confederate Cavalry hat to his chest. When the Chief Justice looked away, Orin made a disgusted face at Henry Junior's body.

"All right. I'll be at home if you need me," Henry Senior said and put his top hat back on. "I have a funeral to plan." - With that, he spun around and left the undertaker's.

"Yes, Sir. My condolences, Sir," Sheriff Cutler said, but Senior had already left.

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Down the other end of Perry Street, Alfred Beardsley had his newspaper press going faster than ever. The line outside the office of the Princetown Bugle rivaled the one from when a lightning bolt had set a saloon alight, and the copies he was handing out for a quarter were still hot to the touch.

Having paid her quarter, Yvonne stepped away from the Bugle and looked at the full-sized headlines that screamed - underscored and in extra-bold - *'Henry Junior slain by bandits! Avenged by three brave women!'*

"Huh," she said as she began to read the hastily assembled report on her way back to the grassy field between the hospital and the Sheriff's Office where a huge marquee was in the process of being erected for the big wild west hoedown that would soon get underway.

A while later - after the preparations at the marquee had proved just a bit too chaotic and disorganized for them - she and Karla were sitting at a table in the Bull Rider Saloon, mulling over a small glass of whisky. The festivities that were about to start had put a stamp on the town that seemed even busier than usual for a Friday night.

The famed Bull Rider dancing girls, who were all dressed, unlike the previous payroll Friday, were busy strutting their stuff on the stage to a faint tune from the upright piano and the typical background buzz of people playing at the twenty poker tables.

"Goodness gracious me... I can't believe the headline is talking about us! We took part in a shootout, Karla," Yvonne said and toyed with the glass that was filled to the brim with the amber liquid. "The ladies from the boarding school would have soiled their drawers... I'm amazed I didn't!"

"Mmmm!" Karla said, offering Yvonne a sympathetic smile.

"I have a hard time fathoming it's over, though... I mean, the whole thing."

"Well, it ain't fully over... Quint's still around. Then again, I overheard Sheriff Cutler mentionin' he was gonna wire for a US Marshal. That'll wipe Quint's cocksure grin off his face for sure."

"Yes. The situation with the deeds is still unclear, too," Yvonne said and gulped down the rest of her whisky, wiping her eyes on her sleeve when the strong liquid burned its way down her pipe.

"True, but I doubt Henry Senior will do anything about it. At least not until the railroad plans get further along."

"Mmmm. Oh look, there's Milton Starr," Yvonne said as she looked up at the swinging doors. "He's looking for someone... which I do believe is us," she continued after making eye contact with the attorney.

"Good evening, ladies," Milton said and took off his hat to dab his glistening forehead with a handkerchief. The attorney was wearing a derby, woolly pants and a penguin coat over a vest and a white shirt, and the ensemble looked to be rather warm.

"Good evening, Mr. Starr," Yvonne said and removed her Boss Of The Plains hat from the table. "Would you care to join us?"

Putting away his handkerchief and adjusting his glasses, Milton Starr smiled at Yvonne, but shook his head at the same time. "Oh I can't, I'm sorry. I promised my wife I'd be home before the festivities start. She doesn't like being alone on payroll Friday, you see."

"Oh, that's understandable."

"Yes. I only came to show you this," he said and reached into his coat pocket to take a large, plain folder. Opening it, he extracted a piece of paper that he put on the table. "I found it during my lunch break today. It had fallen out of the folder containing Mr. Ballentine's last will and testament. It's an addendum that's quite important for the ranch."

"Oh?" Yvonne said and took the document with a worried look on her face.

"I can read it aloud if you wish, Miss Ballentine?"

"No thanks, Mr. Starr... I got it," Yvonne said and began to skim down the page. "Mmmm... mmmm... I hereby declare that I, George Beauregard Oswald Ballentine is of sound mind and body upon the creation of this legal document, the first addendum to my last will and testament, on February third, 1879, as witnessed by Milton Starr, licensed attorney, and Henry Wilkinson, Sr., Chief Justice of the Peace of Princetown and Princetown County... oh... February third? That's only four months ago..."

"Indeed, Miss Ballentine," Milton Starr said and adjusted his glasses that kept sliding down his sweat-slicked nose.

"Huh," Yvonne said and resumed reading aloud: "To my most loyal wrangler, Miss Karla Stuart, I leave the business of breaking in, training, buying and selling broncos, including every tool, horse and tack present at the time of my death. In addition to that, Miss Karla Stuart must have full access to every wrangler working at the Circle Y ranch. As calculated by Mr. Archibald Finsby, employee of the Princetown Bank on February second, 1879, the value of the above was estimated at twelve thousand dollars with the caveat that the broncos cannot be priced until sold. Good Lord... good Lord, Karla! Do you know what this means?!" Yvonne said, reaching over to squeeze her friend's hands.

"Yeah," Karla said and furrowed her brow. "It means there's gonna be a heap of paperwork in my future," she mumbled under her breath.

"It means we're partners!" Yvonne squealed, not hearing the last part of Karla's statement. "Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Starr! This is wonderful news!" she continued, jumping up from the chair and pumping the attorney's hand up and down.

"Uh! You're most welcome, Miss Ballentine. Well, I better go now," Milton Starr said and put the document back in the folder for safe keeping. "Have a very nice evening, ladies," he said and tipped his derby.

"Good evening, Mr. Starr!"

Once the attorney had left the saloon, Yvonne reached over and pulled Karla into a half-hug. "Oh, this is such wonderful news... don't you think?"

Karla shrugged and let out a brief sigh. "I guess. I won't say I'm excited at the thought of goin' through all the paperwork. I know how big a hassle it was for your father... it'll be ten times that for me."

"But you have your own business now! Oh, Karla... I'm sure we can work something out," Yvonne said and stroked the back of her friend's hands. "I'll help you with everything... and maybe we could get a home tutor for you?"

"I don't know if that would be enough. I'm an idiot, Yvonne. Plain and simple."

"The hell you are! You have a problem, yes, but problems are there to be solved. Need I remind you that that's the Ballentine family motto?"

"No," Karla said with a chuckle as she emptied her whisky. "Twelve thousand dollars?"

"That's what it said."

Karla leaned forward and locked eyes with Yvonne, looking at her for so long that the world around them seemed to fade into nothing. *'I'll be a son of a gun... twelve thousand... and a business, too. Now if I can only get the girl, I can die happy. But first, I got another couple of girls who need my help...'* - "Hey... the bank's still open, isn't it?"

"Uh... I think so. Why?"

"With my new status, d'ya think I can get some kind of credit?" Karla said and twisted the empty glass between her fingers.

"Oh, I, uh... I honestly don't know. What for?"

"Well... remember I told you that... that I had visited the Cheap Thrills cathouse?"

"Yeah?" Yvonne said and furrowed her brow.

Karla opened her mouth, but the words wouldn't come. After a little while, she scrunched up her face and looked into the empty glass. "There's someone there I want to buy free from her Madam. A young Mexican woman by the name of Libertad. She has a baby girl, Lucinda... they're too good people to rot away in that awful place."

"Well... are you in love with her?" Yvonne whispered with a worried expression on her face, leaning in so no one else would be able to hear her.

Karla's head jerked up and she stared at her friend with wide, surprised eyes. "You knew about me? You knew I was one of those women? How?" she whispered back.

"Oh, this and that. Suffice to say I've known for a couple of years," Yvonne said with a chuckle.

"Huh?"

"Long story best saved for the intimacy of a darkened room... later."

"Oh... well... huh," Karla said, still staring gobsmacked at Yvonne's fair, gorgeous face. "Uh... uh, no, I'm not in love with her. She isn't family. But I won't deny that I came to her for company. Once. After that time, I've been payin' her a few dollars here and there... but as a friend, not a customer."

"That's all right, Karla," Yvonne said and put her hand on top of her friend's. "I'm not judging you. I just wanted to know the background. I don't know if you can get a credit without any papers, but it doesn't matter."

"Uh, why...?"

" 'Cos I can go into the bank and withdraw whatever I want," Yvonne said with a broad grin. "And I think we should do that right now. C'mon!" she continued, slapped her too-big Boss Of The Plains hat down on her corkscrew curls and grabbed hold of Karla's hands.

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When dusk fell, the night watchmen walked along Main Street and Perry Street to light the many torches. On the grassy field next to the hospital, the huge marquee was already quite full even though the hoedown hadn't officially started yet, but nobody had told the early cowpokes who had a gutful of beer or whisky and a pocketful of wages to burn.

The marquee was divided into three zones: on the right, closest to the hospital, twenty tables from several different saloons were lined up in orderly clusters of three or four, joined by a cooking cart from the Milligan Stage Company that was run like a military operation by Eileen Kavanagh, the housekeeper from the Circle Y ranch, who was serving her famed stew.

The biggest part of the marquee was still empty; the center, which would be transformed into the busy dance floor once the hoedown really got started.

At the far left, up against the Sheriff's Office, a small stage had been erected for the motley collection of musicians that were going to be providing the evening's musical background.

The first of those musicians - Victoria Lynn, in high spirits and wearing a clean suit - hobbled into the marquee and strode over to the stage where she sat down on the chair reserved for her. Putting her cane down on the wooden floor, she reached into her pocket to find her instrument of choice, a mouth harp.

Her fellow musicians soon joined her on the stage: her dear friend Emily Mason who was holding a stumpf fiddle, an odd-looking instrument she had borrowed from the Mikkelsens who had brought it with them from Denmark, Orin Cutler with a banjo, Philbin Zebediah, the undertaker, with a set of ceramic whisky jugs and finally Mumblin' Jack Barnes with a shiny fiddle.

"Evenin' ev'rybody!" the stage driver said as he stepped up on the stage wearing his traditional buckskin outfit and battered Boss Of The Plains hat.

"Evenin', Jack!" everybody said, preparing their instruments.

Emily carefully put down her stump fiddle and walked over to Victoria Lynn. The nurse was wearing the blue Frontierwoman's dress that had impressed the former Deputy so when they had met for the supper date that had changed both their lives. "Oh, I'm so happy this week is over, Vic. I've hardly seen you," the mature woman said quietly, pretending to lean down and straighten Victoria Lynn's collar.

"I know, it's been crazy. I promise that you'll be seein' a whole lot of me a little later on," Victoria Lynn said, winking saucily at her new lover.

Emily quickly looked around the marquee, and equally quickly bent down to place a tiny kiss on Victoria Lynn's lips. "To settle your nerves," she whispered.

A few minutes later, Karla walked into the marquee with an arm around the shoulder of a young Mexican woman who was carrying a toddler in her arms. The buzz proved too loud for the little girl who began to whimper and cry almost at once.

The bronze-skinned Libertad - in her early twenties but appearing older, marked irreversibly by the five years she had spent on her back - looked around the marquee with huge, dark brown eyes. "Thank you," she whispered, wiping her misty eyes that threatened to spill over at any moment.

"You're welcome, Libertad. It was the least I could do," Karla said and ran her thumb over the back of little Lucinda's head. "We go on like we agreed, yeah? You go down to the Preminger Hotel and get yourselves a room for the night. Then tomorrow, you and Lucinda will get a health check at the hospital and we'll drive out to the ranch for your new job. Yeah?"

Libertad nodded; the tears that had threatened to come finally spilled over and ran down her bronze cheeks.

"Yeah," Karla echoed and pulled the Mexican woman into a hug. "Everything's gonna be fine. I promise. C'mon, let's go down to the hotel so Lucinda can have some peace and quiet."

The buzz in the marquee grew exponentially when several men from the Old No.4 saloon started rolling in kegs of beer - twenty-two in total. When the first keg had been put up and knocked open, the crowd amassed around it five man deep, all holding beer glasses and little tokens that proved they could get a free, warm brew.

Jane Durham and Mathilda Brown walked into the deafening hubbub and slowly threaded their way up to the stage, evading cowpunchers with beer glasses and assorted other revelers.

"Hi, Vic," Jane said once they had made it to the stage. "Man, it's really goin' tonight, huh?" she continued, pushing her low-crowned hat down her back so it rested on its chinstrap.

"Yep, and we ain't even started yet. Hi, outlaw," Victoria Lynn said and took a swig from a glass of beer. "And hello, Mathilda. Oh my, I must say you look more charmin' every time I see ya!"

"You old smoothie, you!" Mathilda said with a loud laugh, reaching out to put a featherlight slap on the Honorary Deputy's arm. For the special event, she had decided to ask Annie Mikkelsen to sew in a second-hand dress she had been eyeing for several days, a layered prairie dress made of an electric red cloth that matched her hair perfectly.

"Smoothie, yep, that's me. How's the shoulder, Jane?"

"Aw, just fine. It was just a scratch. In fact, I've experienced worse scratches when my Mathilda here forgets to clip her fingernails," Blackie said with a wide grin, pulling Mathilda into a hug.

"Ohhhh!" Mathilda said, pretending to pout. "But didn't you tell me you liked it best when you could really feel what was going on...?"

"Wa-hey!" Victoria Lynn said and let out a bellowing laugh that only grew stronger when she realized that Jane 'Blackie' Durham, the much-feared outlaw, was blushing like a schoolgirl at that most private of revelations.

Yvonne hurried into the marquee and looked around for Karla. Huffing and puffing, she pushed her too-big Boss Of The Plains hat back from her eyes to be able to see if her tall friend had returned from the hotel. "Oh..." she said when she came to the conclusion the wrangler hadn't.

Eyeing Jane and Mathilda standing at one of the tables near the kegs - the beer-thirsty men had had their share and had moved on for the time being - she quickly went over there.

"Good evening, friends," she said between a huff and a puff.

"Good evening, Lady Yvonne," Mathilda said and took Yvonne's hand. With the remarkable transformation from dainty Lady to spunky cowgirl that Yvonne had been through, Mathilda clearly wasn't sure what to do with the hand she held.

In the end, Yvonne sealed the deal by pulling it up and kissing Mathilda's hand instead of the other way 'round - and they both laughed.

"Yvonne," Jane said, nodding.

"Have you seen Karla around? I need to say something to her before she speaks to Victoria Lynn."

"Uh... no?" Jane said and looked around the marquee; her greater height giving her an advantage over the shorter women. "No, I can't see her anywh'e'."

"Damn... thank you. Talk to you later," Yvonne said and continued looking around - just then, Karla entered the marquee and strode over to Victoria Lynn. "Oh! Oh, there she is... I need to... I need to... oh!" Yvonne growled when everybody in the tent seemed to step into her path.

At the stage, Victoria Lynn was already on her second beer when Karla came over to her with a look of trepidation on her face.

"Miss Cooper... we need to talk," Karla said, taking off her hat with the Carlsbad swoops and wringing it between her strong fingers.

"'bout what? Lordy, girl... you look like ya could pass out at any moment. Ya want a seat?" Victoria Lynn said and moved to get up, but Karla shook her head.

"No. No, I... Miss Cooper-"

"What's that Miss Cooper thing? I'm Victoria Lynn... Vic to my friends. We fought together, and that makes you a friend in my book."

"Uh... thank you. Well... you may not consider me a friend when I tell you that... that..."

"Did ya steal a kiss from Emily?" Victoria Lynn said and winked several times.

"What?" Karla said with a look of pale shock on her face. "No... no-no-no... I... oh... your accident... that night at the alleyway between Roscoe's and the general store..."

"Yeah?" Victoria Lynn said, sobering like she always did when somebody mentioned the accident that took her arm and left her a cripple.

"It... was me. It was me who mowed you down, Miss Cooper. I- I heard the gunshots and I thought that something had happened to my boss, and- and I wanted to get over there as quickly as I could. But I was drivin' on the wrong side of the street and I had the hosses really goin'... and then you came out of the alley... just there... and I couldn't stop... I just couldn't... oh, Sweet Jesus, Miss Cooper, I'm so sorry!"

Victoria Lynn quickly put down her glass of beer and raised her hand to touch the rambling wrangler's arm. "I already knew, Karla."

"You... you what? How? And why didn't you w- wipe me out...?"

"Somebody told me, I can't even remember who. And wiping you out wouldn't have given me my arm back, would it?"

"No, b- but..."

Just then, Yvonne came tearing through the massive crowd, wearing an expression that said she'd step on another two dozen toes to get the last bit of the way. "Please don't kill her!" she pleaded to Victoria Lynn. "I need her out at the ranch for... for... for... things!"

"Oh, 'things', eh?" Victoria Lynn said with a throaty chuckle. "Hell, Lady Yvonne, just for the record, I wasn't plannin' to kill her. Thank you for telling me, though, Karla. I 'preciate it. Now go get a beer or somethin'... you look like you're about to keel over and the dance ain't even started yet."

"Uh-huh," Karla groaned, staggering away from the stage, feeling completely drained and curiously satisfied at the same time.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Kavanagh's famed stew had been wolfed down and digested, and the dancers had started filing onto the floor.

"Y'all ready?" Mumblin' Jack Barnes said to his fellow musicians who all nodded in return. "Awright, he' goes old Jack," he continued and stood up.

"Ladies and germs! May we have yer attention, please! We, the incomparable Princetown Fife & Drum Corps would-"

"Ya ain't got neither, Mumbles!" a woman roared from somewhere among the crowd, scoring a large round of laughter.

"Haw, haw, I can reco'nize yer voice anywhe', Blackie! Now shaddup an' lemme get on with my speech that ah've rehearsed fer hours! Where wus I... oh yeah, we would like to invite all ya nice folks who ha' come here taught to a

li'l dancin', a li'l drinkin', a li'l laughin' an' if ya lucky, a lotta kissin'! When ya ready, grab a girl an' line up... this here all-original wild west hoedown is about ta get started! And a-one, a-two, a-one-two-hep-hep!"

Miraculously, the musicians all started playing at the same cue, and all were roughly playing the same song. Soon, the dance was going so well the rhythm was all that mattered, and they were all capable of striking that.

Once the band was thumping along, Jack turned around and began to call the dance: *"All join hands in the center fall, and up once more fer the good o' the hall. Then swing yer pardner, swing 'em all, an' promenade 'round the hall."* In the break, he fiddled furiously to keep up with his fellow band members.

Down on the floor, Jane grabbed hold of Mathilda and began to go through the moves of the dance, following Jack's calling to the letter and laughing out loud while doing so.

"First couple out ta the right now circle half, then dip an' dive at the inside under, inside over, upside down. Dip an' dive at the ocean roll, all the way there an' all the way back! And dip an' dive at the inside track."

On another part of the floor, Yvonne and the still shell-shocked Karla spun around and around, and then hop-hop-hopped across the dance floor until they reached Mathilda and Jane. Yvonne and Mathilda traded dancing partners and did a few tours of the floor with Jane and Karla, respectively.

"Then dip an' dive an' home you go an' swing your pardner. Promenade, go round an' round. Promenade the date an' all get straight!"

All around the four dancing women, the floor was alive with whooping revelers whose hard heels created a hailstorm on the makeshift wooden dance floor. Jane and Karla hooked up again and traded their dance partners back to the proper combination, grinning at each other as they lifted their shorter blonde or redhead beauties off the floor and swung them around to wild squeals.

"Now dip right through he', places all, an' everybody swing your pardner! Whoop! Allemande to the corners all an' away, with your honey now bran' an' chain, bran' right an' left, go 'round the hall. Your foot up an' my foot down an' rattle to the left an' all the way around!"

Up on the stage, Victoria Lynn was working her mouth harp hard; having stuffed the metal instrument between her lips, she was pinging and poinging on it like crazy.

Keeping perfect time, Emily thumped her stumpf fiddle down on the wooden stage at regular intervals, remembering to slap the cymbals, toot the horn and bang the little drum that had been attached to it when the tune called for it.

"Then dip an' dive, come on to the next an' circle half. An' dip an' dive, on with the last an' circle half. An' dip an' dive across the hall with the upside under, inside over, inside out an' upside down, dip an' dive."

The dance floor came alive again at the new calling, and soon, the pairs were swinging their gals left, then right, then left again.

At the entrance, a pair of familiar faces from Circle Y stepped into the marquee and began to look around at the ladies who were present. "Tarnation, we're late for the dance!" Freddy Maynard said wearing his Sunday finest; an all-black outfit with silver highlights on his dress boots, his pants, his shirt and his dress Stetson. "All the best wimmen are taken already!"

"We woulda been here earlier if ya hadn't insisted on brushin' ya teeth!" Vince MacCleary said, standing behind the ladies' man. "I mean, who the hell brushes their teeth on a regular Friday... Oh! There's Karla. Now's your chance to impress her pants offa her, Freddy."

"Oh, I... I can't see her anywhere."

"The hell you can't... she's right there, Mr. Chicken! Boc, boc, boc," Vince said into Freddy's ear, pointing over his shoulder at the tall wrangler who was busy with a particularly difficult calling.

"Quit hasslin' me, Vince! Aw hell! I said I'd get her in the hay... by good Gosh almighty, I'm gonna get her in the hay tonight if it kills me," Freddy said and stomped onto the dance floor.

"Can I inherit your hat, Freddy?" Vince said, but his buddy was already long gone, headed for a date with destiny.

"Now dip an' dive to yer places all, an' ev'rybody swing your pardner. Rollin' a little and a-rollin' a lot, then take your pardner promenade."

Easily falling into the step, Freddy swung himself through the dancers until he reached Karla. With a swift, smart maneuver, he sent Karla's dance partner off to the left and fell in to take the tall woman by the hands. "Hi," he said with his most winning smile.

"Hi, Freddy," Karla said, scrunching up her face but keeping track of the calling.

The two colleagues hop-hop-hopped across the floor, but when Freddy wanted to swing Karla around - in his opinion, that was the man's job, after all - he found himself swung around instead and nearly lost his hat.

"Once we're done here," he said and pushed his black hat back onto his golden locks, "could I perchance tempt you to meet me out back?"

"To do what, Freddy?"

"Promenadin' go 'round the ring. Allemande left by swingin' on the gate, an' a right to yer honey an' a right to the date. An' go all the way 'round."

The two dancers hopped back to the other side of the floor, traded partners once and then came back to each other. "Oh, you know. What men and wimmen do when they're tied together by the most basic of needs."

"What's that? Pee side by side?" Karla said flatly and swung Freddy around again. With a maneuver that was just as swift and smart as the one Freddy had pulled on her earlier, Karla let him go and quickly grabbed hold of a woman who was standing next to her.

"An' a deedle-leedle-doo an' a deedle-leedle-lay, go all the way 'round on the ol' highway. Your foot up an' my foot down, now here's your honey, swing 'er around!"

Two steps further on, the woman was traded for Lady Yvonne who let out a whoop when she noticed who her new partner was. "Hello, my fair lady!" she said and reached out to take Karla around the waist instead of her outstretched hand.

Freddy eventually came to a halt, alone and out of breath. Looking at Yvonne and Karla trading sly looks and holding each other closely as they danced, he scrunched up his face and slinked over to Vince.

"So?" Vince said, standing at the beer kegs with a full glass in his hand, soon taking a fair-sized sip of the warm brew.

Freddy opened his mouth to speak, but realized there was no point. Instead, he reached into his shirt pocket and found enough money to pay Vince the twenty dollars they had wagered.

Counting it, Vince leaned his head back and let out a resounding rebel yell. "Hell yeah, Freddy! Told ya it was a waste of time and money. So... what convinced ya?"

"That," Freddy said and pointed his thumb at Karla and Yvonne who had only moved even closer since he had left them. "How can any man come between that kind of closeness and affection? That must be what they call sisterly love."

Vince choked hard on his beer which sent streams down his chin and onto the floor. "Freddy... I swear... sometimes I worry about you. Were your parents related before they got married?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Vince said and wiped his chin. "C'mon, I'll buy you a beer. That's the least I can do for ya... poor fella."

"Rollin' a little an' a-rollin' a lot. Then take yer pardner promenade. You know where an' I don't care, you take yer honey to a nice soft chair... an' kiss yer girl!" Mumblin' Jack called, playing the last flurry of notes on his fiddle before raising it in the air with a resounding whoop.

Down on the dance floor, the dancers completed the last moves and held their partners tight - after cheering at the band, they did as told and kissed their girls. Right at the center of the floor, Jane slapped a big one on Mathilda, and Yvonne stood up on tiptoes to place a kiss on Karla's lips.

"An' that's it fer us fer a li'l while... now we's gonn' get our whistles wetted, but we'll be back with a few more poundin' tunes later on. So dontcha go nowhere."

Staring at the plethora of kissing women, Mumblin' Jack let out an embarrassed cackle and turned around to put down his fiddle - then he caught an eyeful of Emily and Victoria Lynn going at it with great gusto.

"What in the world," the old stage driver said, rubbing his eyes. "It must be sommit' in da water... not that I'd ever find out... Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, eh, Sheriff?"

"Yup," Orin Cutler said with a grin. "There sure are some special wimmen here in Princetown."

Down on the dance floor, Yvonne took Karla's hands in her own and led her off the floor and over to the entrance. "Phew, I need some air... pretty hot in here, huh?" she said and wiped her sweaty brow.

"Yeah," Karla said, thinking about Yvonne's cowgirl outfit rather than the general temperature.

The two women walked out of the marquee and strolled down Perry Street until they reached the alleyway between the hospital and Sofus Mikkelsen's gunshop. When they found it to be empty, Yvonne pulled Karla down the alley and pressed her up against the wall.

"Karla... there's something I need to say to you... and I need to say it in one go or else I'll lose my cool, so please don't interrupt me... all right?"

"Uh... sure," Karla said and pushed her dirty white Stetson back on her head.

Yvonne scrunched up her face while she gathered her thoughts, but when they were all lined up, she reached out and took Karla's hands in her own for support. "I had a wonderful time at the boarding school, but the young women I met there were so vastly different from you or me that I was eventually numbed by their presence.

"After a few years, I suddenly understood the look you'd had in your eyes when we had been together at the ranch. I had that look, too, when I thought of you. But at the school, such love between young women was considered a perversion and an affront to God, so I suppressed it.

"When I came back, I was still in denial. But now, my eyes have been opened. I refuse to deny it any longer, Karla. I feel something for you, something so strong that my heart skips a beat when I see you, my breath hitches, my stomach clenches, my... my body responds in a way it has never done for anyone else," Yvonne said and gave Karla's hands a strong squeeze. "What is this strange emotion inside me? I wonder... can it be love?"

Karla smiled wistfully at her old friend, but the smile soon faded from her lips. "Lady Yvonne, I... I'm an idiot who can't read or write," she said darkly. "I never spent a day in school in my life. All I can do is ride broncos and even then I fall off half the time. I- I just ain't worthy of your love," Karla said and ducked her head down between her shoulders.

Yvonne was taken aback for a few seconds, but she resolutely put her hand behind her tall friend's head and guided her down to her waiting lips; the kiss to end all kisses was the result when Yvonne claimed Karla's lips and simply had no intention of ever letting her go.

When they finally separated, flushed and out of breath, Yvonne traced Karla's prominent cheekbones with her fingers, caressing the young woman's weather-beaten yet youthful skin. "Don't tell me you don't feel anything, Karla. I refuse to believe that you don't."

"I feel plenty," Karla said with a chuckle, reaching up to hold Yvonne's hand. "Though I still don't think-

"Stop thinking. Love shouldn't be decided by the head, only the heart."

Back at the marquee, they could hear Mumblin' Jack announce the band's return, and it didn't take long for the musicians to strike up another wild dance using a swinging reel as the rough template.

When Karla still looked like she didn't feel worthy, Yvonne reached up and tickled the wrangler's long torso to get a reaction out of her.

"Oh, I'm gonna tell ya what we're gonna do, Karla," Yvonne said with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "We're gonna go back in there and dance the night away. We'll laugh, kiss and have a gay ol' time. When the hoedown is over, we'll find a gal and go home with her. How about that?"

Karla's jaw fell down to her chest and she stared at Yvonne with wide eyes. "But... I don't wanna go home with nobody but you..."

"Mmmm?" Yvonne said and winked at Karla.

It took Karla Stuart a few heartbeats to figure out she'd been had, but the endless, soul-engulfing, rip-snoiting payback kiss she shared with her dear friend and lover-to-be Yvonne Ballentine was so sweet and went on for so long that it more than made up for it...

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THE END