



Moonlight Magic: Jenny Kincaid (The Kincaids #4)

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Category: Historical

Description: Jenny Kincaid never imagined she'd fall for an Englishman—let alone one destined to leave. But Caleb Callahan, the newly appointed Earl of Tallant, isn't like anyone she's ever met. Their stolen moments are filled with an undeniable passion that's impossible to ignore, even as the knowledge of his impending departure looms over them.

Caleb knows his responsibilities will take him back to England, yet each encounter with Jenny makes it harder to picture a life without her. As the day of parting draws near, they're faced with a painful choice: risk everything to build a life together or let go and return to their separate worlds.

Total Pages (Source): 10

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:43 pm

CHAPTER 1

Bravo, Colorado Territory

Triple K Ranch

“Ellie,” Jenny Kincaid said gently to one of her dearest friends. “Stop sobbing, and please tell me what happened. You have been crying for almost an hour! Would you like to go inside? Ma is baking her famous apple pie with cinnamon.”

The wind, gentle and lovely, whistled down through the mountains, stirring the tall blades of grass near where they stood by the prodigious stables. Ellie’s sunflower yellow dress whipped around her ankles, and wisps of her blonde hair curled around her face. Her friend’s eyes were red and puffy, and she had a most miserable air about her.

“Would you like me to call Beth?”

Jenny’s sister-in-law, Bethany, and Ellie had become fast friends these last few months, and she hoped whatever Ellie could not tell her, she could confide in Beth.

“No.”

“Ellie, please—”

“He says he will not marry me,” her friend hiccupped, looking miserable and as if she wanted to be anywhere else but talking to Jenny. “That is why I feel so... shattered.”

Her heart started to pound as she understood the full implications of what made her friend so miserable and afraid.

“But you are with child,” Jenny said softly. “You cannot have a belly and be unmarried.”

“I know,” Ellie wailed.

“Does he know you are with child?”

“Yes.” She sniffed. “I do not know how I am going to tell Pa. I am unmarried and pregnant. Oh, Jenny, what am I going to do? I am so afraid; I have not been sleeping well. Ma is starting to get worried, and she has been looking at me with this expression that tells me she suspects something. Oh God! ”

Jenny fisted her hand at her side. “Who is the father?” she demanded because she knew precisely what needed to be done.

A shotgun wedding .

If this unknown man had wanted to remain a bachelor, he should have kept his cock inside his trousers. Jenny winced; even though her uncouth words were in her thoughts, she still glanced around, guiltily looking for her mother.

“Will you...will you promise not to scold me, Jenny?” Ellie asked, her voice cracking.

She sighed and gripped her friend’s hand. “Ellie, our mothers were pregnant together, and as we have heard the story a thousand times, we took our first steps together and our first words were also to each other. You are my dearest friend. There is nothing that you could tell me that would make me angry. Do you understand?”

Ellie's wide blue eye pooled with more tears, and a harsh grimace of emotions Jenny did not understand crossed her face.

"Ellie—"

She tossed herself into Jenny's embrace, her shoulders shaking fiercely. Unease pricked along Jenny's spine, and her heart started to pound an even harsher rhythm.

"Should I get my ma or pa?" she whispered, wondering if something terrible had happened to Ellie that she could not say.

The West was hauntingly beautiful but also lawless and savage, filled with men who thought they could take whatever they wanted without consequences.

Ellie lurched from her arms. "No! Promise you will tell no one about my situation, Jenny Kincaid, or I will never forgive you!"

She stared at her friend. "I promise. But Ellie, you will need to tell your mother soon. You are three months pregnant and will start showing soon, yes?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "I..."

"Tell me, who is the father?"

"I..."

"Tell me, Ellie!"

Guilt flashed in her eyes, and she looked away.

"Ellie! Why are you being so stubborn about this? Were you attacked—"

“I was not attacked!”

“Then why—”

“Caleb Callahan!”

Shock froze Jenny in place. A peculiar tightness rose in her throat, and an awful sense of loss pierced her chest. She closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and stared at her friend.

“Caleb Callahan? He is...your lover, Ellie?”

That awful pain twisted low in her belly again, and Jenny had to bite her bottom lip to suppress the unfamiliar emotions rushing through her.

Ellie glanced away and pressed a palm over her mouth. Thankfully, her sobs stopped even though slight tremors still worked through her body. Jenny’s heart was beating fast, and she tried not to picture the man she had felt an unwilling fascination with for the last several months. Stormy blue-gray eyes set in a far too handsome face filled her thoughts. She slammed her eyes closed and dazedly shook her head, shutting out all thoughts of him. She had carefully hidden her interest, not understanding the shattering awareness that bloomed inside her whenever she saw him.

“Why are your eyes closed?” her friend hoarsely asked.

Jenny allowed her lashes to open. “I...I do not know what to say, Ellie,” she said, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Have you spoken to his grandfather? Mr. Colton is well respected and—”

“No ; promise you will not say anything to Mr. Colton!”

“Ellie,” Jenny snapped. “You are pregnant . This is not a small matter. Caleb Callahan needs to marry you. Gossip around her might not be as terrible in one of those fancy cities, but you know many in town will turn their noses up if you have a big belly and no husband to show for it. How dare he seduce you and then not take responsibility?”

That familiar stubborn expression settled on her friend’s face.

Jenny groaned, tossing her hands up in the air. “Fine,” she snapped, “I will not say anything to my pa or ma or his grandfather.”

Only to that wretched libertine!

“Thank you,” Ellie said, swiping the tears from her cheeks. She took a deep breath. “I just need time to think and understand exactly what I want to do. I will eventually have it all sorted. I promise.”

Jenny almost scoffed at Ellie's words. Ever since they were small, Ellie had always avoided anything that caused her discomfort or pain. One time, they sneaked away from the schoolhouse to climb a tree in town. A branch broke, and they both ended up with skinned knees and scraped palms. Jenny went home and braced herself for a scolding from her mother, only to be met with care as her mother cleaned the wounds and applied a soothing salve. In contrast, Ellie hid her injuries, and three days later, her hands were sore and oozing because she avoided facing the consequences.

Jenny had accumulated many such memories that highlighted their differing natures. She knew her friend well enough to suspect that Ellie might wait until she was in labor before she admitted what was already obvious to everyone else.

“Jenny, you are getting that stubborn look, “Ellie cried. “Allow me to sort this myself. I will, I promise.”

“Very well, I—”

“Jenny,” a voice called.

She smiled, recognizing Jack Hartigan, a young man who had been sweet on her for the last several months. Ellie flushed, a complicated look entering her eyes as she stared at Jack, who rounded the side of the barn.

“Jenny—”

He faltered abruptly at seeing Ellie. Jenny frowned, noting the unusual tension that arced between them.

“Jack,” Jenny said, smiling. “I forgot you wanted us to ride out today. I got caught up with helping Bethany bake a few apple pies earlier.”

He smiled warmly, his gaze sweeping the length of her body. “I am here now. How long will it take for you to get ready?”

Jenny lifted her chin toward Ellie, silently communicating that he should speak to her. Jack turned his attention to her, a tentative smile shaping his mouth. As he took in Ellie’s shattered expression, his lips flattened.

“You’ve been crying, Ellie?” he asked, his expression veiled. “What is wrong? Did someone hurt you?”

She sniffed and tossed her head. “It is none of your concern, Jack Hartigan! Do not ask me anything.”

Then, to Jenny’s surprise, her friend stomped away like a petulant child and not a woman of eighteen years.

She frowned at seeing the red that flushed against his jawline. Ellie and Jack had always been snarky to each other, often engaging in bickering, which made Jenny tease them that they were like an old married couple. However, she had never seen Ellie display such rudeness toward him. Once, Jenny suspected her friend admired Jack's handsomeness. He was a tall young man with rusty brown hair and dark brown eyes, with many ladies vying for his attention. Ellie had denied it, and Jenny had not teased her again.

"Has something happened between you and Ellie, Jack?" she asked, staring at his expression to gauge the truth.

"No," he said tightly.

"You know Ellie is my dearest friend."

He sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. "I think she resents how often we walk together in town. Maybe she thinks I am stealing too much of your time."

"I see." Jenny sighed. "Do not be too hard on her. She is having a hard time."

He smiled wryly. "I won't take anything she says or does to heart."

Jenny grinned and strolled up to him, lifting onto her toes to kiss his cheek quickly. Desire darkened his eyes, and he slipped a hand around her waist and lowered his head. She twisted, freeing herself from his embrace and tossed her head.

"I have told you before, there will be no kissing until we are married, Jack Hartigan!"

His face grew pained, and he groaned, leaning against the side of the barn. "You are a wicked wildcat, Jenny Kincaid. I have been sweet on you for ten months, and you have not allowed a proper kiss. When are you going to put me out of my misery?"

She peeked at him from beneath her lashes, oddly enjoying that she tormented him.
“Do you wish to talk with my brothers or my pa?”

He straightened, glowering at her, and Jenny laughed. Jack was one of the only men who had been brave enough to come courting. Her father, August Kincaid, known for his slow-to-provoke temper but was deadly when riled, had placed his shotgun across his knee and listened to a stammering Jack, who wanted to take her to the local dance in town.

“Jenny, do you wish to attend Mrs. Beckett’s dance with this young man?”

“Yes, Pa.”

“Then you have my blessings . Wear your gun, and if he gets too handy, put a bullet in him . I will then string up his body to set as an example .”

Jack had gaped while she had laughed, but Jenny had obeyed her father and went dancing with Jack with her gun belt strapped to her hips. Her father had said no more about their courtship, trusting her capabilities and choice. Since then, she had dined with Jack at Maggie’s restaurant in town a few times, rode with him across the prairie and even swam in the lake on several occasions. But Jenny had allowed no intimacies, taking to heart all the lessons her ma taught her.

“I am ready to talk to your father,” Jack said, taking a deep breath. “I want to marry you more than I want anything else in this life.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. Though she teased him, she had not anticipated an offer of marriage so soon. “I...”

He walked over to cup her cheeks. “Why do you look so uncertain?”

She mustered up a smile. "I am not sure I am ready to get married, Jack. I am only eighteen."

"That is the only way you'll allow me to have you," he said, his gaze intent on her face. "And I want you, Jenny Kincaid. I have had my fair of dreams tormenting me."

"Is that the only reason you want to marry me, Jack?" she asked tartly, pulling away from him. "So you can take off my pants?"

He dropped his hands to his sides and grimaced. "Yes, and put you in a dress! I swear you'll not be wearing any darn pants and those gun belts on your hips once you are my wife."

She scowled. "Is that so?"

He slanted her a teasing smile. "I do not want to quarrel. Come with me into town. A poster says a circus tent will be there tonight and for a few days. Everyone is talking about it. Let's see it together."

She laughed, the sound low and a bit mocking. "You better ask someone else's pa to marry them. I will not stop wearing my trousers and gun because you want me to."

"Jenny—" he began tightly.

"I have something urgent to take care of, Jack. I want to see the circus, but this is more important. Perhaps we could go tomorrow."

"What could be more important than spending time with me?" he snapped.

"Many things," she said, keeping her tone calm. "I do not say this to be mean, Jack. I wish I could confide in you what I need to deal with, but it is not my matter to talk

about. Trust me when I say that it is important.”

Jenny walked away, ignoring his sigh of frustration. An odd sensation stabbed in her heart. This was not the first time Jack said that he did not like that she wore trousers or guns on her hips. At first, it was teasingly mentioned, and he even grumbled that she could outdraw him and use her Bowie knife with greater skills. The frequency at which he referred to her wearing a dress and not acting like a lady had grown, but Jenny had ignored him. She looked over her shoulder to see him staring at her, a frown on his face. Sighing, Jenny glanced away, only to falter at the sight of Ellie standing on the front porch of the main house, staring at Jack, her expression one of agonized uncertainty.

Jenny hurried over to her. “Ellie? What is wrong?”

She cleared her throat and tried to smile. “Did...did Jack ask you to marry him? Is that what you discussed?”

“He said he wanted to talk to Pa.”

“That means he is going to ask to marry you.” Ellie wiped at the tear that tracked down her cheek. “You do not look thrilled at the notion, Jenny. How can you be indifferent to a thing many others wish for? Last week, when we chatted with Meave and Clara, they all wanted to marry, and only you looked bored with our conversation. I do not understand it.”

She had never hidden anything from Ellie, but Jenny did not wish to unburden her thoughts to her, given that Ellie was upset and worried about her future.

“We can talk about this another time.”

“You do...do...not love him,” Ellie said, her voice cracking. “Is that your reason?”

Jenny sighed, sitting on the lower step of the porch and looking out into the distance. Stretching for miles in every direction, the Triple K ranch's land was a lush, green, vibrant tapestry of rolling grasslands that seemed to dance under the touch of the wind. Small creeks, born from the mountains that stood as silent guardians on the horizon, meandered through the property, their clear, cold waters nourishing the earth and providing a vital resource for the ranch's operations. Dotting the landscape, clusters of wildflowers added splashes of color—yellows, purples, and blues—creating a natural mosaic that changed with the seasons.

It was a sight that never ceased to steal her breath. The Triple K was one of the largest ranches in their territory, and many called her father a cattle king. Jenny was happy here and could not envision leaving her mother and father. And was that not what a married woman did? Leave her parents' home to start a life elsewhere with a man?

Jenny could not bear the thought of leaving the Triple K. Jack's family had a homestead several miles from their ranch, but Jenny could not see it as her home. She liked Jack, his presence and flattering attention igniting a warmth within her that Jenny couldn't ignore. Often, she would lay in the grassy meadow, letting the soft blades envelop her as she gazed into the endless sky above. There, amidst the whispers of nature and under the watchful eye of the sun, she allowed her thoughts to wander to a future with Jack.

They would run his homestead together, ensuring it thrived. They would eventually have children, and she envisioned teaching them to ride, tend to the animals, defend themselves, and appreciate the sunrise and sunset that marked their days. She saw Jack, strong and steadfast, instilling in their children the same passion for the ranch that burned within their parents.

A part of Jenny felt unmoored, as if such a life could never make her truly happy, as happy as her Ma, who loved her husband with every emotion in her heart. However,

Jenny did not understand the unknown restlessness that often burned inside her heart.

What was it for?

An image of Caleb Callahan rose in her thoughts, and Jenny forcefully pushed it away.

“Please answer me, Jenny. Do you love him?” Ellie asked, coming down on the steps to sit beside her.

“I am not sure what loving a man feels like, Ellie. That is the honest truth.”

Ellie sucked in a breath. “How can you not know? Does Jack make your heart race at a mere glimpse? Does he make you ache in the nights for him...wishing that his arms were around you while you slept?”

The rough pain in her friend’s voice informed Jenny that was how Ellie felt about the man who got her pregnant.

“Ma said love was about duty, choice, passion and loyalty. She says it is all of that, not just one part. When I love a man, I will know it because I will always want to walk beside him.” Jenny chuckled. “I am certain I do not feel for Jack as Ma described it. Perhaps there are different ways to love a man. I also do not know if I love Jack how you say it, Ellie.”

“Then what do you like about him?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. “He makes me laugh; he is also good company, and I like being with him. I know I will eventually marry him, for I have imagined what life with him would be like, and I felt some measure of contentment.”

“I see,” Ellie said softly, gripping her fingers tightly. “So you are sure you will marry him?”

“Eventually,” she said.

“I wish...” Ellie sighed.

“What do you wish for?”

“I cannot bear to speak about it anymore, Jenny.”

For a long time, neither spoke. Ellie stood, lightly dusting off her dress. “I should be getting home. It is about to get dark soon.”

The forlorn ache in her friend’s voice lit a spark of fury in Jenny’s chest. An unknown storm gathered inside her—one born from the helplessness of seeing her dearest friend so wounded, unhappy, and terrified of her future.

“It is getting late, Ellie. Please stay with me. I’ll send a ranch hand to inform your parents that you will be home in the morning.”

Her friend hesitated, then nodded before going inside. Jenny stood, took a deep breath, and walked down the front steps.

There will be a reckoning tonight .

Caleb Callahan would be brought up to scratch, or she would put a bullet through him.

CHAPTER 2

As dusk settled, the sky darkened with shades of amber and vermillion. Jenny, trained by her brother Joshua to move quietly, navigated the dense woodlands that acted as a natural boundary between her family's land and that of Jeremiah Colton, a neighboring rancher whose lands were rumored to be as vast as his wealth. His grandson, Caleb Callahan, was the target of her ire.

She secured her trusted stallion, Hercules, to a branch behind the dense foliage with a gentle pat. Hiding behind a tall juniper, she observed the main house on the property of the Tumbling S. It was a striking three-story building, its size indicating the prosperity of its owners. The house was well-built, with large sash windows and the land around the house spread for miles with rolling grass and scattered trees leading up to the distant dark mountains. The outline of junipers and pines against the backdrop of the ranch added a wild, natural beauty.

Jenny waited in the dense woodlands with patience learned from tracking with her brothers. She stood behind the tree for more than an hour observing. Most of the noise came from the bunkhouse several hundred yards from the main house. There was no light in the main house. From her understanding, only Mr. Callahan and his grandfather lived in the main house with their housekeeper and cook. Perhaps they had gone into town to watch the circus.

She moved purposefully among shadows as she approached the main house. The cover of night was her ally, allowing her to slip undetected across the open ground. With practiced ease, she reached the front door and tested it gently, a wave of relief washing over her as it gave way without protest. The interior of the house greeted her

with dim light that had not been evident from outside. The few lamps cast long, flickering shadows that danced across the walls and floors, creating an almost unsettling atmosphere.

She did not pause to admire the intricate details of the house's interior or how the sparse lighting added a layer of mystery to the already imposing structure. Instead, Jenny's focus was singular—finding Caleb Callahan's bedchamber. She hastened down the long hallway, headed for the grand staircase that dominated the entrance hall. She carefully moved up the steps, listening to the silence of the house. Once on the second floor, Jenny moved like a ghost through the hallway, opening doors with a careful, almost reverential touch. Room after room, she searched, her heart pounding and each space fueling her determination and heightening the anticipation that thrummed through her veins.

Surely, another hour passed in the time it took her to search the second floor. Time seemed to stretch, each minute an eternity, as she continued her quest. Finally, her persistence was rewarded. On the third floor, facing east, she found a large bedroom practically decorated with rustic yet comfortable furniture, with touches of personality—a fencing sword mounted on the wall and a painting of England—that made it distinctly Caleb Callahan's bedchamber.

As she stepped into the room, a familiar and distinctly masculine scent enveloped her, potent and evocative. Unbidden memories surged of a moment shared in proximity: standing close enough in the bank line to breathe in his scent, thinking it nothing short of divine. The memory brought an unexpected blush to Jenny's cheeks, and she scowled.

That she had this unpardonable reaction to him was another reason to put a bullet through his dishonorable hide. Jenny moved to a large armchair in the corner of the room, its bulk offering a semblance of concealment and comfort. Settling in, she positioned herself with her gun in hand, waiting for the moment Mr. Callahan would

enter. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply to slow her pounding heart.

Who exactly are you, Caleb Callahan, that you would seduce a lady and then leave her to face the consequences and judgment of society alone?

Her brothers had an instinct for judging men's characters and their abilities. The youngest of her brothers, Noah, had met Mr. Callahan when he first moved to his grandfather's ranch, and her brother had not been able to form an impression of Caleb Callahan.

Lord Caleb .

She snorted, uncaring that his brother was rumored to be an earl, which meant he was an important figure in the country he had left. After several minutes of waiting, footsteps echoed outside. She tightened her grip on her Colt. Jenny's senses thrummed with awareness, and her heart, which she had calmed, quickened. Despite the veil of darkness that shrouded the room, Jenny felt rather than saw the imposing figure of Mr. Callahan as he entered his bedchamber.

The air seemed to shift with his presence, a testament to his physicality and the inherent strength in his frame. She heard the unmistakable sounds of a man unwinding after a long day—the soft thump of boots hitting the floor, the jingle and slide of a belt being undone, followed by the muted sound of it being tossed aside. Then, a deep, tired groan accompanied his descent onto the four-poster bed that dominated the room, its sturdy frame creaking slightly under his weight.

The room fell into a profound stillness, and Jenny could hear the rhythmic pattern of his breathing, a sound that, for a fleeting moment, seemed to sync with her own heightened senses. She remained motionless, a statue in the shadows.

Then, cutting through the silence, a low and surprisingly calm voice said, "Why are

you in my bedchamber, Jenny Kincaid?"

Despite her careful silence, the shock of being discovered jolted through her. How had he known? The room was cloaked in darkness so complete that she had been confident of her invisibility. Yet, without a single lamp to guide his sight, he had pinpointed her presence.

"Have I stolen the words from your tart mouth?"

She narrowed her eyes at that mocking statement.

"I can smell you, Miss Kincaid, like honeysuckle and sun-ripened peaches. I have never scented this fragrance on another woman. A most delectable blend."

His voice's low, soothing timbre vibrated through her, and her breathing quickened.

"Women only sneak into my bedchamber for one thing," he drawled provocatively. "Is that why you are here, Miss Kincaid?"

Jenny's heart raced, caught between the urge to confront him and the irrational wish to flee, to vanish into the night as silently as she had come. Jenny cocked her Colt, the sound a dangerous warning in the silence of the room.

"Ah, it is a murderous intent, then. A pity. The tiredness had fled my bones at the thought you were here for something more wicked."

The wretched man had no shame.

"You have a gun pointed at me. Why? You and I have no hostility, Miss Kincaid."

"You are new to these parts, Mr. Callahan, so you might not understand how we do

things around here,” she drawled.

“I am waiting to be enlightened.”

His tone was flat and cold.

“You will marry Ellie-Marie. This fills me with regret because no honorable gentleman would pursue a woman without marriage in mind. She deserves a man of honor who would treat her with kind consideration.”

“Hmm,” he said, the low sound unconcerned and dismissive.

Jenny’s anger spiked. “While Ellie deserves better than to marry you, it is best that she does so than face the condemnation that will follow her as an unwed mother. The sweet words that you used to get her into your bed, you will use them to make Ellie understand that you want to marry her, or I will put a bullet through you,” Jenny said icily.

“I was never the kind of man to take kindly to threats,” he said softly, the bed creaking as he shifted.

Jenny saw the outline of his body as he rose, and she stood, the gun steady in her grip. A match flared, and the lamp on the desk beside his bed was lit; the wick turned low. Dark pockets of shadows still lingered in the room, but there was enough light for her to take the full measure of Caleb Callahan. Her belly tightened with a strange heat when she took in his partially nude body. He presented a picture of rugged sensual appeal that infuriated Jenny because all her senses thrummed with awareness. Why had she never noticed how compelling he was before?

You did , a silent voice murmured.

He wore denim that hung low on his hips, the top buttons undone. His feet were bare, and he wore no shirt; the sculpted contours of his torso were on full display; his chest was well-defined, and the muscles across his abdomen were sharply etched, each line and curve speaking to the physical demands of his life in the West. His face, clean-shaven and strikingly handsome, was framed by a mane of midnight black hair curling slightly at the nape of his neck. The sight of it, so carelessly perfect, stirred an unexpected impulse in her, a desire to reach out and feel the softness of those curls between her fingers.

“You are staring, Miss Kincaid.”

Jenny felt like she couldn’t drag enough air into her lungs. “You are half-naked, Mr. Callahan. It is normal to stare at beautiful things.”

Oh, God, why did I say that?

His gaze sharpened, drifting over her like gliding hands. “I understand the temptation. Try not to toss yourself into my arms. I have always been a tad irresistible to ladies.”

“Self-flattery and conceit oddly suit you, English,” Jenny said, using the moniker many people in Bravo used when they spoke of him.

A small smile quirked at the corner of his mouth, rendering him astonishingly handsome.

Irritated with her reaction to him, she jutted her chin, aiming her Colt with calm and calculative deliberation at his kneecap. “Will you give your word to marry Ellie-Marie, Mr. Callahan?”

He took a few measured steps closer. “No.”

Jenny stiffened her spine and narrowed her eyes at him. “Have you no care for her future?”

A hard smile touched the curve of his mouth. “None.”

“ Why ?”

“Her future is no concern of mine.”

How callous and uncaring!

Jenny aimed above his knee. Sensing her intention, he darted forward with graceful agility just as the shot rang out, missing him. He knocked the gun from her hand in one swift movement. Her wrist stung, but Jenny darted away from him, her hand going to her thigh with speed, unsheathing the Bowie blade strapped there.

“Bloody hell,” he hissed, his gaze dropping to the knife held low against her side. “You hellion!”

He moved much faster than she anticipated, wrapping a hand around her waist, and turned swiftly, causing them both to fall onto the bed. She dropped the knife on the floor, knowing the danger of being accidentally cut when they were pressed this close. Jenny was immediately, overwhelmingly conscious of everything about Caleb Callahan—his rousing scent, the hardness of his body, the smooth, silky feel of his bare skin.

As Jenny tried to squirm from under him, her legs parted, unintentionally creating an opening for him to settle his weight. His powerful body came over hers, pinning Jenny on the mattress. She wriggled beneath him wildly, bucking her hips to unseat him. Shockingly, the move pushed her upward on the bed, allowing him to cradle even more perfectly between her parted thighs. The hard ridge of his rising erection

was unmistakable. Jenny's limbs became weak. Her heart kicked painfully against her ribs, and she had trouble drawing in a breath, redoubling her efforts to unseat the brute.

A sharp hiss slipped from him, and he froze above her. "Be still!"

Jenny could feel his heart thudding against her breast. Warmth unspooled low in her belly, and a peculiar feeling tightened her nipples. Infuriated with her reaction, she lurched upward and sank her teeth into the muscles of his chest.

"You damn hellcat," he snarled, wrenching his body off hers.

"You deserve it!"

He lowered his head, his teeth clamping over the soft hollow of her throat. When Jenny realized he meant to bite her in retaliation, a garbled sound of shock left her. She stilled, conscious of the feel of his mouth against her flesh, his teeth raking against her pulse. Her heart pounded a harsh beat, and she realized he had also frozen, and his mouth had softened.

She slammed her eyes closed and swallowed tightly. "I think you need to get up."

The softness of his lips eased from her skin.

"Will you shoot at me again?" he murmured, his breath fanning against her skin.

"I can make no promises in that regard, Mr. Callahan. The outcome will depend entirely on your skill of evasion."

A low sound of amusement came from him, and he lifted his head. Jenny could not make out his features, straining her eyes to catch any detail hidden within the

shadows.

“You shot at me. What if I had been hit?”

“You would have lived,” she snapped, “but the pain would have reminded you of your cruelty to a woman who trusted your words, you...you...flea-ridden mangy dog filled with maggots.”

There was a beat of silence, and then he laughed, the low sound far too warm and sensual.

Incensed further, Jenny said through clenched teeth, “You dare to laugh?”

“A most inventive curse,” he murmured, his breath fanning her forehead. “However, it is time I confess I have no notion who this Ellie-Marie is.”

“You do not even remember her?” Jenny asked, her voice cracking. “How many lovers do you have you scoundrel!”

“I recall every woman who has ever been between the sheets with me,” he said with icy indifference. “I also recall their names. Ellie-Marie is not a past lover unless she lied about her identity.”

Her heart slamming against her ribs, Jenny said, “She has blue eyes, blonde hair, and is very beautiful. We are often together and the few times you and I encountered each other in town, Mr. Callahan, Ellie was with me.”

“I have never spoken to the lady, nor is she my lover.”

Alarm cascaded over her senses. “What did you say?”

“This Ellie-Marie is not my lover, nor will she ever be.”

His words were like a low growl. Jenny’s chest squeezed. It bemused her that she believed the sincerity in his tone, and even more puzzling was that she did not understand the relief rushing through her veins.

Thank God they are not lovers , she said silently, briefly closing her eyes.

“I...” her throat tightened. What could she say to justify her impetuosity?

“Did your friend name me as her seducer, or did something else lead you to that understanding?”

Jenny heard the dangerous throb in his tone.

“This is a misunderstanding,” she said softly, not wanting to implicate Ellie until she understood why her friend told such a lie. “Mr. Callahan, I am sorry—”

“Surely you can call me Caleb after breaking into my chamber and trying to kill me.”

Jenny sniffed. “I was aiming for the soft flesh of your thigh. You would have lived.”

He grunted, shifted, and rolled from her, taking his warmth. Jenny sat up, her mass of hair tumbling over her shoulder and down to her midback. She felt behind her for the pins that came loose in their tangle and encountered something hard.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a low, strained tone.

“I am searching for the pins that held up my hair.”

“Woman, does that feel like a damn pin to you?”

Jenny did not understand what kind of deviltry inside pushed her to squeeze his flesh so she could understand exactly which part of his body she accidentally touched. He groaned, the sound rough and sensual. Understanding dawned, and she snatched her hand away as if she had been burned.

“I...I...am sorry, I did not...” Mortification and amusement rushed through Jenny, and laughter spilled from her. She had touched his manhood! Good heavens. “I do not know what to say! I assure you I have never groped anyone before.”

His hand snaked around her hips, sharply tugging her so that she fell atop his chest. He rolled with her, and she loathed how wonderful it felt to have his weight pressing her into the mattress once again. Her entire body flushed as a shiver of need arrowed through her, the sensation so acute Jenny almost cried out.

“You are going to want to shoot me again, but it will be worth it,” he said softly.

“What will be worth—”

He kissed the words from her mouth, swallowing the soft moan that rose in her throat. Her heartbeat danced swiftly, and a tremor went through Jenny’s body. He flicked his tongue against her bottom lip, coaxing her to part them with small nips and licks. She whimpered at the wonderful taste of him. Curious hunger bloomed inside, and she touched him all over, gliding the tips of her fingers through his hair down to his neck, his shoulders, his back. Jenny gripped his arms, dazedly marveling at his hardness, and opened her mouth. His tongue surged inside to tangle with hers in a wicked, sensual glide.

So this is a proper kiss ...

They kissed for a long time, short kisses, then deep ones. Pleasure rolled over her in hot, devastating waves when he rocked against her, his manhood dragging over her

sex.

Jenny moaned and tightened her fingers on his shoulders. She felt as if she wanted to surrender everything to this man. Shocked by such a thought, she wrenched her mouth from his, panting.

“By God, you are so sweet, so incredibly sweet,” he murmured against her skin, dragging his mouth down to her throat where he sucked the flesh. “I want to taste all of you.”

She moaned, hips lifting in instinctive want. He rocked against her again...hard, the thick, hard bulge in his pants dragging over her clitoris. Pleasure slammed into her belly, and wetness saturated her folds.

“Stop,” she gasped, alarmed by her body’s response.

To her surprise, Caleb immediately rolled his weight off her body, his chest lifting harshly.

“That was a mistake,” she said, breathing raggedly. “I...” her throat closed over the words, and Jenny truly did not know what to say.

“Go,” he said tightly. “I am barely holding on to my restraint.”

She rushed from the bed and his bedchamber, sprinting down the hallway as if the devil himself chased her. Jenny slowed her steps once she reached outside, keeping to the shadows as she approached the woodlands. She glanced over her shoulder and upward. The faint outline of a shadow stood before a window on the third floor.

It was Caleb. Despite the darkness, Jenny felt he watched her with perfect clarity.

Raucous laughter and the sound of a fiddle came from the two-story bunkhouse in the distance. She untethered Hercules, mounted him and steered him on the familiar path leading to the Kincaids' land. She rode at a quick pace, trusting her horse and her instincts until she reached home. Jenny dismounted and led him to the stables, where she rubbed him down, took him to the water trough, and fed him an apple.

"Sleep well, Hercules," she murmured, then handed him over to one of their stable hands, Timothy.

Jenny rubbed the back of her neck, sighing wearily. The main house was aglow with light, and she gathered they were eating supper. Why had Ellie lied? Jenny did not understand it because they had always been honest with each other.

"Damn it, Ellie, what do you want me to do?" a voice demanded harshly.

Jenny frowned, glancing toward several bales of hay in front of the stables. Was that Jack? She almost called out but stopped herself, walking over.

"I love you, Jack," Ellie sobbed. "I cannot raise this baby on my own. If you tell Jenny that you and I...that we...she will understand and give us her blessings."

Jenny's heart lurched, and she faltered.

"Don't you know who Jenny Kincaid is?" Jack hissed. "She is liable to shoot first and ask questions later. She will not forgive me for this betrayal."

"Do you not love me, Jack? Is that it?" Ellie snapped, her voice breaking. "It did not seem like it when you sweet-talked me to your bed!"

"I...you know I do! I simply love Jenny, too."

She rounded the hay, a lump forming in her throat at the sight of Ellie wrapped in Jack's arms. Jenny stared at them until her eyes smarted. The ache in her chest swelled until she could barely breathe around it.

"I love Jenny as well, Jack," Ellie said between sobs. "I do not want to hurt her, but you cannot marry her and leave me alone with our babe."

"Ellie, please, give me some time to figure—"

"What is there to figure out?" Jenny coldly drawled. "I would not forgive is you leaving Ellie to face having a child alone."

They sprung apart as if she had tossed water on them. Ellie's face crumpled, and she buried her head in her palms and sobbed. Jack shook his head dazedly and took a halting step forward. Jenny stared at them, curious about the lack of anger or emotions. She withdrew her gun and pointed it at Jack.

He paled and said, "What the hell are you doing, Jenny?"

"Inside, both of you," she said. "I will put a bullet in you, Jack Hartigan, if you hesitate."

Jenny allowed Jack and Ellie to walk before her until they reached the main house. They clambered up the steps to the wide wrap-around porch, opened the door, and entered. The flavorful scent of apple pie and roasted meat lingered in the air. Jenny marched them to the dining room, where her father and mother dined.

Her pa lowered his fork and leaned back in his chair, arching a brow. "What is the meaning of this, Jenny?"

"Mr. Hartigan and Ellie are expecting their first child, Pa."

Her mother gasped, her eyes widening, then she scowled.

“There is no need to worry, Ma,” she said with a tight smile at Jack, who fidgeted with discomfort. “I did not allow him to kiss me once. I am not losing anything but a cur with little to no honor.”

Ellie burst into tears. “I am sorry ,” she wailed. “I know you did not love him, Jenny...and I...”

“I brought them here, Pa, because we need the town preacher immediately. Mr. Hartigan will likely run off on Ellie, and a wedding needs to happen.”

“I would not run off,” Jack said, fisting his hands at his sides. He looked like a man who badly wanted to talk but held his tongue.

Her father stood and walked over to her. He rested a hand on her arm and eased it down. It was at that moment that Jenny realized her gun had been pointed at Jack’s chest.

“Are you hurt?” her father gruffly demanded.

Jenny peered up at him, and smiled, knowing if she answered yes, he would tear Jack Hartigan’s limbs from his body. There was an emotion in her heart that she did not understand.

“I feel foolish, Pa,” she said softly, “I trusted in their character, but they both deceived me. You taught me how to take the measure of a man and measure the sincere honesty of a friend, and I failed.”

He hugged her, and she went into his arms.

“When you find a good man, you will know,” he said. “If you live with us forever, that is an even better scenario.”

“August,” her mother scolded.

A soft laugh escaped Jenny, but it quickly turned into a sob as the pain she was trying to hold at bay dug deeper.

“Now, Jenny Kincaid,” her father said sternly, “I’ll handle the arrangements for this wedding. You, meanwhile, should head to your room. It’s fine to shed a tear if need be, but remember your sorrow isn’t for the man you’re losing but for the trust and respect broken between two friends.”

Jenny embraced her father tightly before letting go. She turned away without glancing at Ellie and Jack, whose presence suddenly felt like a weight. Jenny made her way up to the third floor of the expansive home her family had built on the Triple K ranch. Her bedchamber awaited—a comfortable and elegant sanctuary within the mansion her father had constructed as a testament to his love for her mother. With its intricate design and modern conveniences, their home stood as a marvel in these parts, often leaving visitors in awe of its elegance and rustic comfort.

Upon entering her room, Jenny methodically removed her gun belt, boots, and clothes. The large bathroom attached to her chamber offered a welcome retreat. She was particularly thankful now for the modern plumbing, which, according to her ma, was a luxury that made her home feel akin to the grand residences of Boston or New York.

Drawing a bath, Jenny let herself sink into the water’s warm embrace, the heat seeping into her muscles, coaxing the tension from her body. As she lay there, the heated memories of being caged intimately inside Caleb’s arms teased her. Forcefully shutting them out, she scrubbed her skin until she was satisfied.

Jenny made her way to her bed, collapsing onto it with a soft sigh. Despite the events that had unfolded, tears did not come. She didn't dwell on Ellie and Jack, the betrayal of their hidden relationship or Jack's audacious plan to marry her while entangled in an illicit relationship with Ellie. Instead, Jenny's mind was filled with the enigmatic figure of Caleb Callahan. Thoughts of him, elusive and intriguing, crowded her mind, following her to sleep. Jenny yawned and rolled onto her belly, burrowing deep into the coverlets. She felt the phantom weight of Caleb's body behind her, felt the ghost of his kiss against her mouth, and felt that odd ache inside her sex.

What is this? Is it desire?

The feeling was so unfamiliar that she could not name it. Caleb's presence, though not physical, was there with Jenny, sparking curiosity and a desire to understand who he was and why she found him so compelling.

CHAPTER 3

Two years later ...

The Tumbling S.

The night was alight with celebration. Several large bonfires blazed, and sparks danced in the air, reminding Caleb of fireflies. The music was a lively heartbeat of the get-together, created by the spirited strumming of banjos and the cries of fiddles. Caught up in the energy of the occasion, the musicians played with infectious enthusiasm. The gathering was vibrant with laughter and dancing, men and women's dancing figures silhouetted against the flames. Others stomped their boots to the rhythms and shouted encouragement to the dancers.

Caleb stood apart from the revelry, resting against the sturdy base of a tree, enveloped by the darkness. Jenny Kincaid held his regard, and he stared at her, no longer daunted by the hunger that crawled through his body for her. Once, it had infuriated him, for he did not like the notion that he was not the master of what he felt. Now, Caleb accepted that she had the power to provoke his heart and body.

She tipped back her head and laughed at whatever the lady beside her said. Jenny's raven black hair was arranged artfully on top of her head, a few strands dangling over her cheeks and down the slender elegance of her throat. She wore a yellow Mexican-style summer dress that hugged her upper body and flared from the waist down. The lady's curves were mouth-wateringly sensual, and whenever she moved, her motions were infused with confidence and sensuality.

Caleb had never met a woman like Jenny Kincaid. She was a hellion at heart and far from the genteel ladies with their perfect manners that he knew in England. A woman like her did not belong in his life, and he did not belong in hers. However, that reasoning did not stop the curious hunger in his gut to know this woman. The memories of the last time she snuck onto the Tumbling S wafted through his thoughts. It had only been a few months after the first time, and even then, the memory of their first encounter had tied him in knots. It was her soft womanly scent that had roused Caleb, and then he'd felt her presence and heard the cock of her gun. The damn woman had been sitting on the edge of his bed.

“ I can tell that you are wanting more kisses, Jenny Kincaid . Surely there can be no other reason for you sneaking into my bedchamber a second time? ”

She'd made a low dismissive sound, and the warm sensation he'd felt in his chest was baffling.

“ You are a menace, Miss Kincaid . What is it this time? ”

Caleb had said that too fondly, for she had smiled, the beauty of it striking his heart with want.

“ Some of your men are rustling cattle from the Triple K and being a menace . It needs to stop, English.”

Shock had blasted through him, then outrage. “ That is not our style .”

“ I followed the tracks from one of our poisoned wells to here, Caleb Callahan! ”

“ I will investigate it .”

“ See that you do .”

Silence had lingered, and the hellion made no effort to leave.

“ This did not warrant you sneaking into my room again, Miss Kincaid . I cannot help but think you snuck into my bedchamber for another reason, perhaps a delightful one .”

She had sniffed and started to stand when Caleb had gripped her hips and hauled her on top of his body. The feel of her curves and womanly scent had rushed to his head, intoxicating his senses.

A rough, hungry sound had rumbled in his throat. “ By God, you feel so good .”

“ My gun is still cocked, English .”

He had felt the harsh thumping of her heart against his chest. “ Kissing you will be worth the bullet . Try to miss vital organs .”

“ You are infuriating! ”

“ You still want to kiss me .”

Her aching sigh had pierced his heart with unfathomable sensations.

“ I do, English, so very much .”

How soft her words had been filled with want and confusion. This time, she had been the one to slam her mouth against his, kissing him with eager passion. Hunger surged through him like wildfire racing through dry brush. She'd ended it before he could roll her beneath him. Jenny had lurched off his body and hastened from his bedchamber. The next day, Caleb had ridden out to the Triple K with flowers. She had ridden out to meet him with many ranch hands and even her parents watching.

Jenny had stared at the flowers in his grip for a long time, a flush on her cheeks. The eyes that peered at him were shadowed with doubt and mistrust.

“ I am not interested in courting or marriage, Mr. Callahan .”

Though it felt like a boulder had slammed into his gut, Caleb nodded, handed her the bouquet, wheeled his horse, and rode away. He had visited the Triple K a few times afterward to discuss business with August Kincaid, and each time, Caleb had taken flowers for her. She would accept them, bury her nose in the bouquet, and peer at him with that inscrutable expression before walking away.

Caleb had been unable to take another woman to his bed since he first met Jenny Kincaid. Her mere presence was a temptation, her smile a beautiful thing to behold. In total, he had kissed her five times, each deeper and hotter than the last. He carried her sweet taste, soft moans, her fingertips gliding through his hair as they kissed to his dreams and even when they woke, the hunger for more dodged his footstep. However, the last time she allowed him close enough to steal another kiss was eight months, one week, and three days ago.

When will I stop wanting you this badly?

She was now laughing and dancing with a cowhand, moving her feet impossibly fast at the crowd’s encouragement. She tilted her head ever so slightly and looked directly at him. The shadows should have hidden him from her view, yet Caleb felt as if her stare pierced him.

Even with the distance separating them, he could see the beauty of her forest-green eyes. There was a paradoxical allure in her gaze—a daring challenge that seemed to warn him to maintain his distance, yet simultaneously, a gentle, almost imperceptible invitation that tempted him closer, whispering the promise of a dance and perhaps more kisses. Caleb, however, ruthlessly denied the desire to approach her and

remained an observer for the moment, rooted in the comfort of the shadows.

“You are watching that young lass like you want to eat her up,” an irritated voice said at his elbow. “Why don’t you go to her?”

Smoothing his expression, he turned to his grandfather and arched a brow. “And here I was, under the impression you were too exhausted to make an appearance at your own birthday celebration.”

His grandfather’s eyebrows furrowed into a deep scowl. “How is one to find any semblance of rest with such a racket outside?” he grumbled, clearly vexed by the disruption to his sleep.

Caleb smiled. “Is the commotion the sole reason for your presence tonight?”

In response, his grandfather’s sharp, blue-gray gaze—mirroring Caleb’s own—fixed him with a stern look. “Why else would I forsake the comfort of my bed if not for this infernal noise?”

He moved a bit closer to his grandfather. “Perhaps the widow Johnson might be a compelling reason? I noticed you observing the festivities from your window, and curiously, you descended almost immediately following her arrival.”

To Caleb’s mild amusement, a noticeable blush spread across his grandfather’s cheeks. Even at seventy years old, Jeremiah Colton stood as a testament to resilience and vitality, actively engaged in the ranch’s day-to-day operations. It was rare to witness such a flush of youthfulness on his weathered face, hinting that his heart wasn’t as guarded as he liked to portray.

“Why don’t you join Mrs. Johnson, Grandfather? She is also looking at you.”

His eyes sharpened, and his lips thinned. “No.”

“She asked about you earlier. It seemed she also knitted you a blanket as a gift.”

“I am too old for this nonsense,” he grumbled, raking his fingers through his hair.

Caleb grinned. “You do not look a day over fifty years. I think you have plenty of this romance nonsense left in you. Mrs. Johnson seems to think the same.”

His grandfather smiled, his mustache twitching. “Perhaps I will have a short conversation with her.” He turned to walk away and paused. “Are you not going to ask that lass to dance?”

No . “Perhaps,” he said noncommittally.

His grandfather muttered something about young fools and kept walking. Caleb smiled and watched as he approached Mrs. Johnson, who patted her hair when she saw him coming over.

There is no reason to dance with Miss Kincaid and fall deeper into her allure. Not when I will be leaving soon .

Though he had lived in the West for three years, Caleb had never felt like he belonged. Separating from his family in England had been difficult, and there were days when loneliness sometimes cleaved him in two. Caleb’s relocation to the western frontiers of America, where he settled with his maternal grandfather, marked a significant shift from his earlier life. In London, Caleb had reveled in the company of numerous friends, indulging in the exuberant pleasures of youth. They spent their nights attending balls or questionable clubs and gambling dens, savoring the finest liquors that money could buy, and engaging in spirited wagers over the swiftest horses. His social circle regarded him with respect and camaraderie, and he stood out

as a distinguished figure among the young gentlemen of the ton .

Ladies found him attractive, competing for his attention with hopes of securing him as a partner. He had a few lovers who were widows but had never kept a mistress. Caleb had been the quintessential catch—an eligible bachelor expected to lead a life of ease, prosperity, and distinction. He had met a lady he wanted to marry, but that did not last.

Then, one night, he'd found his sister, Daphne, curled into a ball, sobbing, bruises on her arms, lips swollen, and heartbreak in her eyes. Caleb had mercilessly beaten the lord who had tried to take such ruthless advantage of her. The only problem was that the man had been the son of a duke. In the pecking order of the aristocracy, as the second son of an earl, Caleb was not able to bring the law into the entire matter.

He did not regret his actions, but his brother had urged him to leave England to avoid the wrath of a powerful duke who could manipulate the law to serve his purpose. Caleb had expected his brother, the Earl of Tallant, to offer his support. Instead, George wanted to bury everything, so the families did not suffer from any scandal. Their mother had agreed, saying their family would never recover from such a scandal, and all his sister's chances for a decent match would be irrevocably ruined.

That aching grief welled inside Caleb's chest once more, and he walked away from the revelry, going deep into the woodland where he had turned an area by the brook into his alcove. The letter in his pocket taunted him. He had read it several times since receiving it months ago. Still, he reached for it and unfolded the paper, tilting it toward the moonlight.

Dearest Caleb,

It is with deep sadness that I write to inform you of our brother George's sudden passing. He collapsed in his office a few days ago without any prior signs of illness,

leaving our family in a state of shock. Now, more than ever, Mother and I need you. With George's untimely departure, you have inherited the title of the 12th Earl of Tallant, a role I know you never expected to assume, especially given that George was only five and thirty. The formal writ has been sent to Parliament, and it is imperative that you return home to take up the responsibilities of the earldom.

Mother and I have missed you terribly, and I believe George felt your absence deeply, often expressing regret over your departure. Rest assured, there has been no scandal here; Lord Brandon and I have managed our difficulties quietly. I must confess, the memory of how you defended me from him still brings me solace during trying times.

Enclosed with this letter are additional documents detailing the legal and financial aspects of your inheritance.

Please return as soon as you can. We await your presence with eager hearts.

With all my love, Daphne

He had also received several other letters from his mother and the estate's solicitors. It had taken almost a month for Caleb to accept that he was now the Earl of Tallant. The initial shock left him feeling numb for over a week before he managed to respond to their letters and address the tasks they outlined. During this time, his grandfather Jeremiah suffered a fall from a horse, resulting in a couple of broken ribs and a severe fever. Despite his health concerns, Jeremiah insisted on Caleb's return to England, his eyes reflecting a mix of loss and sorrow as he spoke. Feeling torn between the needs of his family in England and his ailing grandfather, Caleb finally saw a glimmer of hope as Jeremiah began to recover.

Still, Caleb was reluctant to leave because his grandfather also needed him to help run the ranch since his half-brother, Samuel, seemed disinterested. Jeremiah had given up on cattle in the last few years, with the Kincaids driving more to the market

than he ever could. The ranch had been floundering, and needing a distraction from hungering for the life he left behind for the last three years, Caleb poured everything he had into the ranch's operation. Their profits had increased by thirty percent in the first year, pushing his grandfather to admit that perhaps his education obtained from Cambridge University had some use.

Caleb lifted his gaze to the sky, taking a deep breath. He then reached for another unopened letter—this one from Lady Henrietta Moulton, a woman from his past whom he once thought he wanted to marry until he caught her in a compromising embrace with his brother George. His brother was more appealing than a second son with less wealth.

As he contemplated opening Henrietta's letter, Jenny Kincaid's voice broke his concentration.

"I can always tell when a man is thinking about a lady. Who is she?"

Startled, a jolt ran through Caleb. He shifted on the stone bench.

"Miss Kincaid," he responded, watching as she stepped closer.

The moonlight illuminated her features enough for him to notice the playful curl of her lips.

"Mr. Callahan," she murmured.

"You followed me."

"That I did. You did not join in the dancing."

"Is that why you came after me?"

She paused, wrapping her arms around herself as if to ward off a chill. “No. Your grandfather mentioned something that...”

Despite the moon’s brightness, the night’s shadows hid her expression from him; however, Caleb heard the sadness in her tone. He stood to face her more directly. “What did he say?”

Delicately clearing her throat, she moved closer, making Caleb’s head spin slightly like he’d had too much whisky. The air was fresh and cool, the heavy fragrance of the pines redolent on the air but still her scent invaded his lungs.

“Mr. Colton said you will soon depart for England.”

Caleb cursed under his breath. His grandfather, it seemed, was quite determined to interfere.

“Are you leaving, English?” Jenny asked.

“Yes,” he responded, more gruffly than he intended.

Her eyes widened, searching his face for a moment. “Would you have left without telling me? Without bidding me farewell?”

“Perhaps.” Only because something inside warned him it would be difficult to bid Jenny farewell.

She tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear, her expression carefully inscrutable as she peered up at him. “How long before you depart?”

“Roughly two weeks.”

Her fingers fluttered to her throat. “Will you come back?”

“To visit,” he replied. “My duties in England will make it difficult to travel often, and I hope to return to see my grandfather after a couple of years of settling some affairs.”

“Oh,” she murmured, disappointment evident in her tone. “You might return in two years and only for a brief time. Is that what you are saying?”

“Yes.”

Her green eyes glittered with indefinable emotions, and she seemed to want to say more. Jenny shook her head, then whirled around. “I... I must return to the celebration. I apologize for intruding on—”

“Stay with me, Jenny,” Caleb said, the words escaping him before he could weigh them.

She stiffened and slowly faced him. In her eyes, he saw relief, which mirrored his emotions. He ran his fingers through his hair, bemused by the depth of their connection, something he had never experienced.

“Stay with you and do what, Caleb Callahan?” she asked, a playful challenge in her tone.

He smiled. “Watch the moon.”

“What the moon?”

“Yes.”

Taking a step back, she tilted her head upward, exposing the graceful arch of her

throat. The sight tempted him impulsively, so he leaned forward and pressed a closed-mouth kiss there, his lips lingering. Jenny gasped, but she did not shift away from him.

Bloody hell, why are you not running? he silently snarled.

The way she looked at him, her soft smile, and her eyes glittering with desire gave him the answer. Jenny Kincaid wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“The sky is indeed beautiful tonight,” she whispered, shifting her regard from him to the heavens. “How astonishing. I have watched the stars many nights but never admired the moon. I have never seen it shine so brightly...or so beautifully. I do believe it is moving.”

He lifted his head, wondering who he was around this lady. “Greek mythology claims Selene is the goddess of the moon. She travels across the sky in her chariot every night, pulling the moon behind her. That is a fanciful explanation, but the truth is that the moon keeps moving forward but is also pulled toward Earth due to gravity. This creates an orbit.”

She laughed. “I like the fanciful notion better.”

Caleb smiled. “We will have a better view from the boulder near the brook.”

They walked toward the brook, where a large boulder rested in the gentle flow of water, providing an ideal spot to observe the sky. Carefully, they stepped along the stone path that rose from the water, ensuring their boots remained dry.

Caleb settled on the smooth surface, the sound of the water mingling with the rustle of leaves in the night breeze, the birthday revelry a faint hum in the background. Jenny sat gracefully on the boulder, her raven black hair cascading down her back in

a silken waterfall.

He pulled a flask of whisky from his jacket and took a healthy swallow. “Would you like a drink?”

Jenny smiled and reached for the flask, tipping it to her mouth. She handed it back to him, pressing her palms against the rock so she could lean back and stare at the vast, starlit sky. The pulse at the base of her throat beat visibly, and he was once again tempted to kiss her throat.

“Does the sky look the same in England?”

The soft question saved him from acting like a scoundrel. “Sometimes. From our country estate in Hertfordshire, it is just as lovely. London has much fog and often obscures the beauty of the night sky.”

“Why must you leave, Caleb? Is it because you miss your family?”

Jenny’s voice contained an emotion he could not name, but somehow, it hooked deep within his chest, tugging him toward her.

CHAPTER 4

“ A part of me longs for them.” Caleb tipped the flask to his mouth again, the fiery warmth banishing the cold. “I also love my life here. It is different from life in England.”

“What is it like in the ton ? Is that the correct name? Ada tells me stories sometimes about the years she lived in England.”

Caleb frowned, then remembered that Noah Kincaid’s bride had lived in England for a few years. Caleb had not spoken with her much, as she had recently given birth to their first child.

“Fast,” he murmured. “When the season opens, there is a ball or some social event every night.”

She gasped. “Surely you jest! Every night?”

“Hmmm, each hostess is determined to outdo the other, so each ball is lavish, filled with music, food, and laughter. Outside the balls, we have the theatre and operas, the Royal Menagerie, museums, parks and botanical gardens, Hyde Park, and many other places considered wonders to behold.”

He could feel the familiar tension deep inside rise to the surface when another restless shift brought her even closer. Something unknown inside Caleb trembled.

“It sounds incredible.”

“It can be,” he said softly.

“There is no ball here in Colorado,” she said with a light laugh after taking another drink from the flask. “The most exciting event about these parts is the circus that comes to town once a year and Ma’s yearly bonfire and barbecue. Have you suffered with us these last couple of years, English?”

Caleb chuckled. “No. The pace is different, but something about the open land speaks to my soul. I never felt that connection back home.”

Her breath hitched, and when he turned his head, Jenny was staring at him with soft, luminous eyes.

She quickly glanced back at the moon. “I have only ever traveled to Wyoming to visit my brother Elijah. I went with Mama once to New York, but I was a girl of ten. I hardly recall the impression of the place. But I understand what you mean; this land feels like a part of me. I cannot imagine feeling this happiness elsewhere. Though I confess, I am very curious about the rest of the world. What does it look like? Have you traveled a lot, English?”

“I have visited Rome, Venice, France, and Egypt.”

“It must have been incredible. Seeing new places and experiencing different foods. Just living a moment in another place. I cannot imagine it. Ma says it’s our wandering blood that makes us restless sometimes. We get that from our father.”

“One day, I will take you to Egypt and Venice.” The words slipped from Caleb as if without conscious deliberation, but somehow, they felt right.

“I shall not forget you said so, Caleb Callahan,” she said with a smile, peeking up at him from beneath her incredibly long lashes. “We can watch the moonlight

there...and see if it is the same.”

“I think the magic lies with who you watch the moon,” he said, something inexplicable inside him reaching for this woman, even when it seemed so damn illogical. “Once we watch together, it will always be like this.”

I am leaving in less than two weeks so stop thinking about her in this manner, he reminded himself .

“I do believe you are right,” she drawled. “Many nights, I sit on my windowsill and watch the land and the sky. It has never felt this...lovely.”

The night grew quieter around them, and the only sounds were the gentle flow of the brook and the distant calls of nocturnal animals.

“Tell me about the lady who wrote you.”

Amusement rushed through him. “Are you so certain it was a woman?”

She tilted her head slightly as though taking a new measure of him. “Yes.”

“She was once my fiancée.”

“ Fiancée? ”

Now, why did Jenny Kincaid sound so annoyed? Caleb smiled. “Yes.”

Jenny’s expression grew thoughtful, myriad emotions flickering across her face. “Why are you hesitant to read her words?”

“When I left England, she was no longer my betrothed. There was also the possibility

that she would marry my brother.”

“Goodness!”

“I never inquired about their wedding, and neither my mother nor sister never mentioned it in the few letters we exchanged. I suspect Lady Henrietta is now writing to me because I am the new Earl of Tallant.”

Jenny froze. “Your brother died?”

That raw feeling surged inside his chest once more. “Yes. A few months ago.”

“I am very sorry for your loss, Caleb,” Jenny said softly. “It must have been very hard for you, given you are away from your family.”

“I...” bloody hell, his throat closed over the words. It had indeed gutted him that he had not been there to comfort his mother and sister.

Jenny stood, sat on his thigh and wrapped her arms around his neck in a comforting embrace. Her honeysuckle and peach scent flooded his senses, and he became all at once aware of small things about Jenny Kincaid—the subtle scent and softness of her skin, the sensual shape of her derriere and hips, perfume and the woman herself, how delightfully rounded her backside was as it settled on his upper thighs.

A jolt of pure physical want tore through him, and he barely suppressed a groan. Caleb wanted to kiss her more than he wanted to take his next breath. However, he also wanted to simply bask in her hug. The initial shock of his brother’s death had passed weeks ago, but the grief was still bottled up inside him. He was so damn tempted to lose himself in what she so sweetly and innocently offered each time she stared at him with those eyes.

At that moment, he realized just how much he needed the comfort of another person. Since moving to the West, he had made few friends and kept his grief tightly contained, discussing his brother only with his grandfather and, even then, without allowing his emotions to surface. A shudder ran through Caleb as he returned her hug with an intensity that might have made it hard for her to breathe.

I am sitting on Caleb's thighs .

A rush of heat swept up Jenny's throat and flushed her cheeks, but she did not release him from her scandalous embrace. She was painfully aware of the erratic beat of her heart, and she was extraordinarily aware of his hands, strong and warm, on her back, caging her against his chest. A low sound of grief escaped him, and his arms tightened around her. She wanted to tell him it was fine to cry or shout if he wished but held her tongue. Perhaps a few years ago, that was how he might show his grief. Caleb was wildly different than the man she had first met.

Back then, he had been the epitome of a fashionable young man, looking out of place as he surveyed their small town with a shocked gaze. The West had changed him, hardening him in ways that even her father often remarked upon with a mix of respect and admiration. There was now an air of danger about him that hadn't been there before. When rustlers had started decimating his grandfather's herd last year, Caleb had tracked the four men alone, following them all the way to Abilene. His grandfather had sent men to back him up, but by the time they arrived, Caleb had already ended what was evidently a brutal fight that left two men dead. The Tumbling S had not been bothered by rustlers since.

She closed her eyes, remembering the sharp pang of fear that had gripped her when she overheard the cowhands in the barns talking about what he had done. Their voices were laced with admiration, but for Jenny, worry consumed her thoughts. Eventually, Noah had ridden out to the Tumbling S ranch under some pretense, only to return with news that somewhat eased her mind: aside from a knife wound to his

side, Caleb was in good spirits, robust and busy breaking in wild stallions.

Another shudder worked through his body. Jenny tenderly teased the hair curling at his nape, hoping he found comfort in her touch. She realized why there had been a haunting shadow in his eyes whenever she saw him at the mercantile in town these past couple of months. He would tip his hat politely and continue on his way, avoiding any further interaction. The intensity in his gaze, which often left her feeling flushed and restless at night, had been restrained. Jenny had sensed that something was amiss but hadn't wanted to overstep with intrusive questions.

Now, with the knowledge that he was soon leaving the country, Jenny felt a painful wrench inside. The thought of never seeing Caleb again, never exchanging playful banter or sharing an impulsive kiss, filled her with a deep sadness. He had a pull on her heart like no other man, and the prospect of losing him before having the chance to delve deeper into these burgeoning feelings was almost unbearable.

I was too silly to have been afraid when you came courting .

Jenny gently disentangled herself from Caleb's embrace. She moved to sit on another boulder a few feet away.

A dark brow winged upward, and he glanced at the vacant space beside him. "Why did you move?"

He looked down at her with a hard, intense, hungry cast on his face.

Her breath hitched and her heart somersaulted. "Denial of self builds character," she drawled with a slight smirk, trying to mask the turmoil inside with a bit of levity.

His mouth quirked in a far too sensual smile that sent spirals of longing down her spine. To look at him was immensely pleasurable. Regret sat heavy against her chest.

I will miss you, English , she silently confessed, truly hating the ache in her throat.

“I understand why you must leave. Your family and dependents need you. We...we will miss you.”

His expression grew inscrutable. “We?”

Jenny lifted a shoulder. “I will miss you. I am not afraid to admit it.”

That wicked look of hunger flared in his eyes before he lowered his lashes. She jutted her chin to the letter he had set down on the boulder. “Are you going to read it?”

He plucked it up and handed it to Jenny. “Read it for me.”

Her heart jolted, but she did not object. She opened the envelope and tilted it toward the bright moonlight. The scrawl was feminine and elegant.

“Dearest Caleb .” Jenny snorted her irritation at that intimate salutation. Caleb’s low chuckle made her blush, and she wrinkled her nose, feeling contrite.

Clearing her throat, she started reading again,

“Dearest Caleb,

Please forgive my boldness in reaching out to you in this manner. Lydia has graciously agreed to ensure this letter reaches you despite my previous attempts having gone unanswered. I find myself compelled to write again, especially under these unhappy circumstances, and I sincerely hope this letter finds its way into your hands.

First and foremost, I must extend my deepest condolences for the loss of your

brother. It pains me greatly to think of the sorrow this has brought you and your family. You would know I did not marry George if you received my earlier letters. He chose not to pursue our engagement as he had no wish to hurt you further. I understood and agreed. The entire matter has weighed heavily on my heart, particularly because of the unresolved feelings and misunderstandings between us.

I deeply regret the pain my actions caused you, and the long silence that followed has been a source of great remorse for me. The indifference you showed during our last encounter left a profound impact, and it has troubled me ever since.

As London is once again vibrant with the bustling activities of the season, I am reminded of the times we once shared during these lively months. The streets are alive with the energy of balls, soirées, and many social gatherings that bring to mind the joyful moments we once experienced together. This makes me long for a chance to revisit our past and perhaps mend the threads that were severed.

The parks are awash with summer colors, and the theatres echo with applause. Yet, amidst all this festivity, I feel a palpable emptiness when I recall our days wandering through those same streets, discussing our dreams and aspirations. These memories propel me to reach out to you now, hoping that you might find it in your heart to forgive the past and allow us the opportunity to start anew.

I hold on to the hope that you will grant me the opportunity to explain myself in person. When you return to our shores, it would mean the world to me to meet and perhaps close the chapter of our past with understanding, if not to rekindle the attachment we once cherished.

With hopeful regards and in anticipation of your forgiveness,

Lady Henrietta.”

It felt as if an ice shard pierced Jenny's chest. What was this feeling clawing up inside of her? This Lady Henrietta wanted to reconcile things with Caleb, possibly restarting where they left off. Lifting her gaze to Caleb, she noted he seemed mildly surprised. "Did you love her?"

He stared at Jenny for several beats, his gaze caressing her upturned face. "Is the answer important?"

"Yes."

He did not ask why, and she was grateful.

"I thought I did," he said gruffly. "I liked and admired her."

"Why do you doubt it was love?"

"The moment I found her in my brother's arms, whatever I felt was severed. They both tried to explain it was a mistake, but I was not interested in listening. I gave neither a chance to explain nor did I feel regret until my brother's death. I wonder if he knew I did not resent him but was simply indifferent to the entire matter. Perhaps he did because I replied to all his letters over the years. I imagine love should be more...I don't know, perhaps forgiving or understanding?"

"Why should we be forgiving toward those who betray us?" Jenny frowned. "I would not forgive anyone who disappointed my love and expectations." She gently folded the letter and handed it to him. "Once I thought I would marry Mr. Hartigan."

"The lad who got your friend with child."

Jenny smiled, finding humor in Caleb calling Jack a lad when he was only a few years older.

“Yes. The moment I knew they had been together and hiding it from me...whatever affection I felt vanished. Many nights later, I wondered if I could love someone the way my Ma speaks about love. Ma often says that love forgives. After that first night, the sting of betrayal lessened, and the ache in my heart vanished. I dare say I perhaps forgave Ellie and Jack because I felt no hurt whenever I saw them together. Perhaps this lack of pain is a measure of forgiveness.”

He drank from the flask and handed it back to her.

“You might be right. This notion of passionate love others speak about might be nonsense. Have you ever thought about that?”

“Oh, it does exist,” Jenny said. “I see it every time Pa smiles when Ma sings or when he sees her. Even if he is furious about something, the moment he sees Ma, it melts away, and he is in a good mood. Elijah, Joshua, and Noah worship their wives with every glance—constantly lifting them, kissing them as if driven by an irresistible desire. I want that for myself. I shall only marry a man if I love him with every emotion in me,” Jenny said, tipping the whisky to her mouth before handing him the flask.

Caleb grunted, but a look in his eyes made her feel warm.

His mouth quirked, and humor danced in his eyes. “Where I am from, one does not marry for love.”

Jenny recalled Ada telling her tales of her time in London society and that people there did not marry for love but for connection and wealth. Ridiculous .

“I suppose you do not believe in love at all, English?” she demanded. “Not even slightly?”

“When I courted Lady Henrietta, I did not have romantic claptrap in my head about love. I just wanted a good marriage, a few children.”

“The years have not made you long for something deeper, especially when you see the evidence of it before your eyes?”

He raked his fingers through his hair, tousling the dark waves. “Your father worships your mother with his eyes, and your brothers treat their women as if they are their worlds.”

Jenny swallowed at the soft hunger heard in his tone. Did he realize the burn of longing held in the gaze that slid over so slowly?

“Unless you are offering marriage, Caleb Callahan, do not look at me like that,” she said softly.

“How am I looking at you?”

“As if you want to gobble me up.”

A sound hissed from him. “You hellion !”

Jenny laughed, feeling a rush of warmth spread across her cheeks, tinged with a giddy sensation. Perhaps it was the whisky—or just the magic of the night itself—that made her act so boldly. Without thinking, she launched herself off the boulder and back onto Caleb’s lap. He groaned in reaction. His hands landed on her hips, and she could feel the tension in his touch, as if he were caught between pulling her closer and pushing her away.

“Jenny,” he began, his voice low and hoarse, “this is dangerous .”

“I know,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the rapid beating of her heart.

Just being this close to him made her feel breathless. The intensity of her feelings for Caleb was something she couldn’t quite understand, let alone control. Her mother had often spoken of knowing instantly that her father was the one, despite their vastly different backgrounds. Jenny leaned further into Caleb, winding her arms around his neck. The tender familiarity of his embrace contrasted sharply with the storm of emotions raging within her, making this moment feel perilous and precious.

“When you visited the Triple K for the first time with flowers, I should have said yes to you courting me. I was so silly to have run from you when I knew I wanted to be in your arms. I felt I could no longer take the true measure of a man. I could no longer trust my instincts. Yet I looked for your coming every single day.”

He jolted and then stilled, something dangerous entering his eyes. He thrust his fingers into her hair, tugging her head closer.

“Why do you tell me this now?” he hissed. “I leave in several days!”

Jenny’s heart trembled and longing broke open inside her heart. The feeling was beyond her comprehension and experience. She lifted trembling fingers to his mouth. “Perhaps in the days we have—”

“No ,” he all but snarled. “Do not dare say it, woman.”

“You do not know what I was about to say, Caleb Callahan!”

“I know because I feel the same hunger for you. Do you think I do not understand the desire in your eyes; do you think I do not feel it every damn day?”

The rejection shattered her, and she pressed her forehead against his.

“Do you think me a man of such low honor I would make love to you and then abandon you, Jenny Kincaid?”

A lump formed in her throat, and she wordlessly shook her head. “I think you are wonderful , Caleb. I would not see our moments as something to be ashamed of. I am not afraid to tell you I want you.”

A rough sound left him, and she felt his surrender before his mouth took hers. His sensual lips were like a brand on hers, and Jenny moaned when he swept his tongue between her lips. She clutched at his shoulders, already lost in the pleasure of his embrace. They kissed for endless moments, their tongues gliding in a carnal dance.

His hands were moving over her body, and she reveled in his desperate touch. Caleb shifted her so that she sat astride him, and he never broke their passionate kissing. Her dress had ridden to her knees, and the cold air kissed over her flesh, yet somehow Jenny burned. His hand slid up the inside of her right thigh, callused fingertips sliding over the softness of her skin, leaving a trail of heat behind.

Caleb’s fingers hovered so close to her sex that Jenny moaned into his kiss. She ached. Her flesh was clenching and growing wet. Need tightened low in her belly, pulling tight in an agony of want.

She wrenched her mouth from his, breathing raggedly. “Caleb,” she moaned. “I...I ache .”

Another hiss escaped him, and he stilled. She felt him rein in his hunger, and then he removed his hand from beneath her skirt.

“You tempt me to madness,” he said roughly. “This will not happen again.”

“Caleb, I am certain—”

The tender kiss Caleb pressed to her forehead left Jenny breathless.

“Let me walk you back to the party.”

Feeling fragile, as if she might break at any moment, Jenny nodded silently. She slid off his lap and moved away quickly, acutely aware of his gaze following her retreating figure. The turmoil of emotions swirling within her was overwhelming. He was leaving, and realizing she might never see him again was unbearable. Yet, she couldn't bring herself to face that harsh truth.

Without waiting for him, Jenny hastened along the well-trodden path back to the festivities. She re-entered the lively scene, managing a smile and engaging in light conversation with a few people. All the while, she could feel Caleb's intense gaze from the shadows of the woodland. Despite her outward composure, inside, Jenny felt utterly bereft.

I will spend the next few days with you, Caleb Callahan, even if I must seduce you into it.

CHAPTER 5

A couple of days after the evening by the brook with Caleb, Jenny hurried down the boardwalk in town. Clutching her copy of *The Outlaw and the Lady* by A. Kincaid, she was eager to get home. Ada would be overjoyed to hear that her book was now on the shelves of Bravo's very first bookstore. The thought that they had an author in the family still amazed Jenny.

Her heart raced as she spotted Caleb tying his stallion to the hitching post. He surveyed the street with sharp, vigilant eyes as if he had always belonged in the West. Dressed in dark trousers, a matching shirt, and a striking blue vest, Caleb cut a dashing figure. Although he wore no guns, a large hunting knife was sheathed at his hip. Jenny almost called out to him, then checked herself with a wince, imagining her mother's chiding if she heard about her daughter behaving so boldly in public. She nearly scoffed at the thought, considering her mother had no issue with Jenny leaving the house that morning dressed in a boy's trousers and a white shirt tucked in, a gun belt strapped to her hips, and her hair pulled back into a loose chignon.

Tempted as she was to approach Caleb, Jenny held back, knowing her seduction plans weren't quite ready. After their encounter by the brook, she had found herself restless, lying awake without a clear idea of how to proceed. Her seduction knowledge was frustratingly scant, and her subsequent inquiries hadn't helped much. The following morning, she had approached her sisters-in-law, Bethany and Ada, for advice, but both had laughingly declined to divulge any secrets.

Jenny smiled as she remembered Joshua's scowl when he found out she'd asked his wife about such matters. When he demanded why she needed such knowledge, Jenny

winked, tossed her head and walked away without a word. Noah had also confronted her earlier this morning, half-jokingly threatening to put her over his knee. She had laughed off his words, but to her astonishment, he had gone to complain to their mother.

Jenny quickly hitched the horses to the wagon and sent a stable boy to tell her parents she was heading into town to shop. As she walked the boardwalk, she felt excited and nervous about her impromptu escape and the possibilities it might bring.

Caleb didn't notice her, and she felt a sharp pang of disappointment as he entered the mercantile. She swallowed her feelings, standing momentarily forgotten on the bustling boardwalk. Perhaps she should visit the Tumbling S before returning home. Her stomach rumbled, and she groaned. She had rushed away from home without eating because of Noah. Jenny narrowed her gaze and wondered how to take revenge on her brother for his tattletale.

What will Ma say when she sees me? Do I confess to her my feelings for Caleb?

Jenny started to walk and collided with a solid chest. She stumbled backward before regaining her footing. "I beg your pardon," she said with a gasp. "I was just a tad distracted."

Her smile faded when she looked up into cold, unfamiliar eyes. A knot of tension formed in her stomach; she did not like how these four men eyed her.

"Dang," one of them drawled, blowing a low whistle. "Y'all ever seen a gal as purty as this one?"

There was a chorus of agreement from his companions while the man she had bumped into merely let his gaze linger over her a moment too long.

“My apologies for bumping into you,” she stated coolly, maintaining her composure.

“No apologies needed, miss,” he replied with a crooked grin.

She nodded slightly in acknowledgment and maneuvered past him, feeling his eyes on her as she walked away. Jenny had just stepped off the boardwalk to head toward the wagon at the hitching post when two men stepped before her. Instinct warned her they were also with the other four men. Glancing behind, she noticed the others were following, prompting her to sidestep, avoiding being cornered. The leader of the group, observing her actions, paused momentarily.

Other ladies, escorted by their gentlemen, strolled along the boardwalk, casting wary glances at the men confronting Jenny before hurrying away. Jenny took some solace seeing Mr. Dunn heading toward the sheriff’s office.

“Why are you blocking my path?” she asked crisply.

“We’re new in town,” the leader drawled, his voice lazy and somewhat amused. “Is there a hotel where we can hole up?”

“Yes, we have two hotels here, along with a bank, a saloon, and even a sheriff’s office and a jail for miscreants,” she replied with a pointed glare.

The mention of the sheriff didn’t seem to faze them; they only appeared more amused.

“Boys, go have yerselves some fun at the saloon. I’ll take this one back to the hotel with me for a good time,” the leader said.

His casual audacity startled Jenny.

“No,” she snapped sharply, attempting to move past them.

One of the men chuckled, stepping to block her path again.

A surreal dread washed over Jenny as she veiled her eyes with her lashes, carefully controlling her expression to hide her growing alarm.

“My name is Jenny Kincaid,” she stated, her voice soft but firm.

Given their formidable reputations, her brothers and father had always instructed her to use their names as a shield in moments of danger.

“A man should always know the name of his lover,” the apparent leader retorted with a drawl.

Shock washed over her in chilling waves at his audacious words. This despicable man! Jenny scrutinized their faces for any sign of recognition of her last name. “My father is August Kincaid.”

Still, their expressions showed no awareness, and her palms began to sweat. “My brothers are Elijah Kincaid, Joshua Kincaid, and Noah Kincaid, also known as Lawless.”

At the mention of ‘Lawless,’ one man’s eyelid twitched, and he swallowed hard. Two others exchanged wary glances.

“She’s lyin’,” one of them blurted out, stepping back and looking over his shoulder as if expecting trouble.

“Look at her eyes,” the first man said. “They are like Joshua Kincaid’s. I ain’t messing with no kin of his!”

“Boss,” another started, his voice laced with hesitation. “Maybe we oughta let her go. We’re here for business, not trouble. She is trouble. I can feel it.”

Jenny didn’t wait to hear their final decision. She turned and made her way toward the mercantile, knowing her father had also taught her that there was safety in numbers. Instinctively, she felt that being near Caleb would make her safer. Her family had taught her well about the dangers of the West—savage and unforgiving. She’d survived more than one attack and knew she must never let herself be taken.

A hand suddenly snaked around Jenny’s waist, yanking her backward. She reacted instinctively, snapping her head back as Joshua had taught her, her skull colliding with a solid chest and not with a head as she’d hoped. With swift movements, Jenny reached for her Bowie knife, unsheathed it, and drove it deep into the thigh of the man holding her. His scream pierced the air as he released her, pain overwhelming his grip.

Jenny didn’t hesitate; she lunged forward, drawing her gun in one fluid motion and firing. The bullet found its mark on the nearest assailant, dropping him instantly. Her rapid, unexpected counterattack briefly stunned the remaining attackers. But the respite was short-lived. Another pair of hands grabbed her from behind, pulling her back with overwhelming force.

Oh, God, there are more than six of them!

“Caleb!” she screamed. “Caleb !”

He burst from the mercantile, his expression icily controlled. He clutched his large hunting knife and threw it with deadly precision. The blade arced through the air and embedded itself into the chest of the leader, who had reached out to grab Jenny again. The man fell to the ground with a thud , his body hitting the dirt hard.

“Boss!” the man holding her yelled.

The sheriff and his deputy ran into the fray, guns drawn. The scene turned into wild chaos. Caleb quickly subdued another of her attackers, breaking the man’s arm in a swift, brutal move. She writhed, trying to escape the punishing clasp around her waist.

“Be still, you damn wildcat,” he snarled. “You—”

He jerked, and then she was released. Jenny whirled to see him clutching his neck and blood spewing forth. Caleb stood behind him, his knife gripped in his hand. She had not seen it when he took it from the fallen man’s chest. Bile rose in her throat, and a shudder worked through her. Someone ran toward Caleb with a lifted Spencer .56, and Jenny lifted her Colt and fired.

The man stumbled and fell.

“Let’s go,” Caleb snapped, grabbing her hand and running toward his stallion.

Gunshots volleyed behind her, along with screams from the town residents. He threw her onto the saddle before swiftly mounting behind her.

“I should be behind you; we will move faster with you guiding your horse,” she cried.

“No,” he said. “If one of their bullets reaches us, my body will block it from yours.”

Dread pooled in her gut, and she cried out in instinctive fear at the thought of him being wounded so. He spurred the horse into a gallop with a sharp kick, leaving the chaos behind. To Jenny’s shock, the sounds of hooves thundered after them. She twisted in the saddle, looking behind Caleb. She went still, even the breath halting in her chest. More than five horses gave chase.

“They are following us, Caleb,” she said hoarsely.

“Do you know who they are?”

“No, I have never seen them before. I think this is their first time in Bravo,” Jenny said, her heart jerking so hard she felt faint. “They...the first man you took down wanted to carry me into a hotel room.”

A low vicious curse slipped from Caleb. He gripped the reins tightly as they sped along winding trails, the horse’s hooves thundering against the ground. They veered away from familiar paths leading to the Tumbling S or Triple K ranches. Jenny understood Caleb’s thinking—navigating lesser-known trails would be more difficult for their pursuers and wouldn’t lead danger directly to their families’ doorsteps.

Glancing around Caleb’s body, she noticed the cloud of dust kicked up by their chasers growing fainter.

“Where are we headed, Caleb?” she asked, her voice tight.

“To my brother’s cabin. It’s just a couple more miles from here,” he said. “It is closer than the Triple K or the Tumbling S. Zeus is powerful, but we won’t last long with both weights to outrun them. The worst thing that can happen is they catch up to us when we are miles away from our family. Sam might be at the cabin. We will stand a better fighting chance with one more gun. Even if he is not there, we will be fine. There should be a Winchester in the cabin, and we will be placed high on the mesa, so we will see whoever comes up the trail.”

A wave of relief washed over Jenny at the calmness in his voice, though her stubborn stomach remained knotted with tension. At least five men were chasing them, and while she had faith in her and Caleb’s abilities, their situation was dire. He was armed only with a knife, and she had about four bullets left in her gun. His brother, Sam

Colton, was well-known to Jenny and her family. Her brothers, Elijah and Joshua, had fought alongside Sam during the war. They respected him as a formidable and capable ally, yet they always cautioned Jenny to be wary of him. Sam was known to be a dangerous and ruthless man.

“Caleb, if they catch up to us before we reach it, I will have to put a bullet through my—”

“Don’t you fucking say it,” he snapped. “Don’t you dare Jenny Kincaid!”

She had never heard him sound more lethal.

“I have been taken before,” she said desperately, “and I knew then I had to find a chance to...to end it before I was raped. Joshua found me first and—”

“By God, I would never allow them to take you. Do you understand me, Jenny? They would have to crawl over my dead body to get to you.”

“No,” she hissed. “Nothing can happen to you; do you hear me?”

“We will be fine, both of us.”

The icy promise flowed over her, sinking deep into her body and replacing the knot of fear with warmth. The odds were against them, but she believed in his implacable promise.

CHAPTER 6

Caleb urged the horse forward, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. There was a faint cloud of dust still lingering in the distance. The men behind them were persistent, perhaps driven by the desire for revenge since Caleb had taken down three of their own. He knew they also coveted the prize of capturing Jenny, which added urgency to his actions. There was a resolute coldness inside his chest, and he knew the only way for them to hurt her was to step over his dead body.

As they reached a steep fork in the trail, Caleb slowed the horse and dismounted, signaling Jenny to do the same.

“We need to cover our tracks,” he said, scanning the area for the best route to obscure their passage. “We need to set it so they cannot determine our path. That way, they might split their efforts, and whichever team catches up to us, if they do, we can take them down easier.”

Jenny quickly joined him, grabbing a handful of brushes. “Joshua taught me how to cover and read tracks,” she said, her voice steady despite the pressing danger.

Swift admiration rose in him, and he couldn’t help but think any of the ladies he knew back home would have already descended into hysteria or fainted away. “My grandfather taught me the same when I first arrived here.”

Together, they hurried to disguise the signs of their passage. Caleb walked their horses up the trail and set back leaves and twigs on the ground, hoping they would see the area as undisturbed.

They were almost done when Jenny's low cry sounded. "Rattler!"

Before Caleb could react, he felt a sharp pain as fangs sank into his upper thigh. He hissed, the sudden shock freezing him for a moment. Jenny didn't hesitate—her gun was already in her hand, and with a smooth motion, she shot the snake dead.

Tears streamed down her face as she rushed to examine his wound, but Caleb pushed her hands away.

"No, we need to keep moving. That is what matters now," he said, though the pain was starting to cloud his vision. The dust cloud was closer now, a grim reminder of the danger nipping at their heels. "Look behind you. They are getting closer, and we cannot afford any more delays."

"But Caleb—" Jenny protested, her voice thick with fear.

"We need to go now." Caleb's tone left no room for argument.

Despite her protests, he helped her back onto the horse, and they set off again. The pain in his thigh was searing, his vision blurring more with each passing moment, but the drive to protect Jenny kept him conscious. Caleb pushed his stallion harder, the edges of his vision darkening, but the terror in Jenny's voice when she first screamed his name echoed in his mind, fueling him to keep going.

Finally, they reached his brother's cabin. The moment they dismounted, Caleb's strength gave out. The world tipped sideways, and he collapsed, the ground rushing to meet him. The last thing he heard over the pounding in his ears was Jenny's cry of alarm, her voice filled with fear and desperation as darkness claimed him.

Jenny struggled to support Caleb's weight as she half-carried and half-dragged him up the small steps to the cabin. He had regained enough consciousness to assist

slightly, slipping an arm around her shoulders while she bore the bulk of his body against her. His voice was barely a whisper, strained and faint, while sweat beaded on his forehead, a testament to his pain and the effort it took to remain even partly alert.

She had counted the seconds since he got bitten, and surely fifteen minutes had passed. Jenny's heart pounded with fear—she knew too well the deadly stakes of a rattler's bite, having heard tales of men who weren't fortunate enough to survive. She kept in mind that many also survived. Her emotions were a tangled mess of fear and tears, but a fierce determination steeled her resolve.

“You are not going to die, Caleb,” she whispered fiercely under her breath, her voice a mix of a promise and a prayer. “Do not leave me, please.”

She managed to get him into the cabin, which was tidy but uninhabited for some time, judging by the dust motes dancing in the slanting beams of receding sunlight. The cabin only had a single bed and two wooden chairs with a table. A small fireplace graced one corner with a huge bearskin rug. The furniture was simple, robust and masculine. There was no pretense here, only the essentials for living and a few comforts that spoke of a man accustomed to both the wilds and the need for a practical but comfortable space.

Caleb collapsed onto the bed, his body limp and his face ashen. A groan of pain was pushed from between gritted teeth, and his gaze was narrowed. More sweat poured from his body, and she shoved the single window open, allowing cool air inside the cabin.

With no time to lose, Jenny sprang into action. The cabin, fortunately, was well-stocked. She rushed to the earthen stove, lit the wood beneath it, and set a kettle to boil. Moving quickly back to Caleb, she carefully removed his boots and loosened his pants to inspect the bite. The site was swollen, the skin around it a deep, angry purple, oozing blood slowly.

Her next steps were critical. Jenny grabbed a blade from the kitchen and heated it in the fire until it glowed. She quickly searched the small cupboard, sobbing her relief when she found a flask with whisky. She doused her blade in brandy to sterilize it. Returning to Caleb's side, she took a deep breath to steady her shaking hands. With utmost care, she made a small incision over each puncture mark to encourage the blood to flow, hoping to draw out some of the venom.

Then, with grim determination, Jenny bent down and began to suck at the wound, spitting the blood and venom through the small side window. She repeated the process several times, each moment filled with the terrifying uncertainty of whether she was too late. Yet, she continued, driven by the desperate hope that her actions might save him.

Jenny dashed outside, her eyes scanning the ground frantically for the herb known locally as rattlesnake weed, reputed for its medicinal properties against snake bites. Her heart was racing, each second stretching unbearably long. Finally, she spotted the familiar green leaves and small, bright flowers near a cluster of rocks. Relief washed over her in sobs as she hastily gathered as much of the plant as possible.

Rushing back inside, Jenny set to work. She placed the rattlesnake weed in a small pot and crushed it vigorously to release its healing juices. Knowing time was of the essence, she removed her shirt and tore off a sizeable piece of fabric to create a poultice. She spread the crushed weed over the fabric, its pungent aroma filling the air.

Carefully, she applied the poultice to Caleb's swollen, discolored thigh, pressing it gently but firmly against the wound. She then tore more strips from her shirt and wrapped them around his thigh, securing the poultice in place. Her hands were steady, driven by a focus born of desperation.

Jenny realized she needed to clean his sweat-drenched body. She fetched a bucket

and hurried to the spring behind the cabin. With a full bucket, she returned and found a clean washcloth in the cupboard. Gently, Jenny wiped down Caleb's forehead, neck, and arms, trying to cool him and cleanse the sweat that had accumulated from his ordeal. Each pass of the cloth was careful and deliberate, her movements tender as she worked to soothe him in any small way she could.

The cabin was filled with the sound of her soft, reassuring whispers, "You will be well, Caleb. Rest and heal. I am here, and I swear if those men make it here, I will not allow them to harm you or me."

She boiled some of the rattlesnake weed to make a medicinal tea. Once it was ready, she soaked another piece of her shirt in the warm liquid, gently parted his lips with her finger and squeezed the soaked cloth, allowing the healing liquid to drip into his mouth. She repeated this process for a few minutes, watching intently for improvement. Gradually, Caleb's breathing shifted from labored and uneven to the steady rhythm of deep sleep.

With Caleb stable, Jenny stepped outside to take care of the horse that had carried them so faithfully. She led the animal to the small barn at the back of the cabin. As she secured the horse, thunder rumbled overhead. She looked upward, noting the lowering of the sun and the sky painted in the deep vermillion hue of sunset. Against the pale evening sky, the trees etched themselves in sharp silhouettes.

A light rain started to fall, and more thunder rumbled ominously overhead. Relief scythed through her. The rain would help cover their tracks, washing away any signs of their escape and making it harder for the pursuers to track them. Despite this small mercy from nature, the threat of the gang finding them was still very real. She climbed a small incline behind the cabin to scan the distant horizon for any movement. Standing there, Jenny became acutely aware of her shirt, tattered from making poultices and bandages, clung to her skin, soaked by the rain. It barely offered any protection.

She hurried back inside the cabin. Caleb mentioned a Winchester. Given his brother's absence, it might not be here, but she searched the cabin for any additional means of defense. Her efforts were rewarded when she discovered a Winchester rifle hidden beneath a small trap door. It was loaded. Another wave of relief washed over her as she hefted the familiar weight of the rifle in her hands. She placed it on the small rustic table near the window, where she could easily reach it. Settling into a chair, she kept watch over the sleeping Caleb and the rain-drenched landscape outside, ready to defend their refuge against any threat that might still be lurking out there.

CHAPTER 7

Caleb's eyes fluttered open, a dull ache pulsing through his thigh and a dryness clinging to his throat. As he stirred, he became aware of the slender form nestled against his side, her presence a comforting weight. The faint honeysuckle and peach scent mingled with the sharp tang of herbs filled his nostrils.

Jenny .

Flashes from the events in Bravo flickered through his mind—the brutal fight, the chase, and the damn snake bite. Relief washed over him as he realized he was still very much alive, largely thanks to her.

Careful not to disturb her, he studied Jenny's peaceful face. Her hair spilled over the pillow and onto his chest, a dark cascade that glinted in the dim light filtering through the window. Noticing the exposed shoulder peeking out from under the blanket, he surmised she was likely unclothed beneath it. She had probably used the same blanket to cover them both in a rush to keep warm after possibly treating her wounds or washing up.

With a gentle touch, Caleb eased himself away from her, ensuring every movement was silent and smooth. Once free, he sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, gathering his strength. The room was pitch black, the moon and stars obscured by heavy, bloated clouds that promised rain. The small window was opened, so inside the cabin was chilled, and he could smell the dampness of the earth, which informed him it must have been raining.

His stomach rumbled—a stark reminder that he hadn't eaten in what felt like days.

Caleb stood and froze, the room spinning for several beats. He waited until the feeling passed before cautiously going to the kitchen area, where he noticed two skinned and herb-rubbed rabbits on the counter. A frown creased his brow as he wondered how long he had been unconscious. Searching the cabin, Caleb found some dental powder. Familiar with the layout from previous visits, he grabbed the container and a bar of soap from the cupboard, then slipped outside to the spring. The night air was cool against his skin as he stripped off his clothes and stepped into the water. The shock of the cold was bracing, instantly washing away the lingering stickiness from his skin.

He vigorously cleaned his mouth with dental powder, scrubbed his hair, and washed his body with soap. Noticing the similar scent on his skin that he'd caught on Jenny, he realized she must have dipped in the spring at some point. Feeling refreshed but weak, Caleb dressed only in his torn trousers and returned inside.

Jenny was still asleep as Caleb moved silently around the cabin. He gently stoked the earthen oven, feeding it logs before setting the rabbits onto the built-in spit. His movements were careful, his senses acutely attuned to the sleeping figure nearby. He glanced at the table, noting Jenny's Colt and Winchester neatly arranged beside his hunting knife, now clean of blood and dirt.

The men had possibly given up their search or had not discovered this secluded spot. Still, he jammed one of the two chairs in the cabin underneath the door latch. As the rabbits began to roast, their savory scent filled the cabin. Jenny stirred, her body tensing as she woke. She gasped, her eyes flying open as she sat up quickly, her gaze darting around the room. When her eyes met his, a look of relief flooded her face.

"You're awake," she said softly, her voice carrying a weight of emotions that caused her lips to tremble briefly before she steadied them.

“Yes,” Caleb responded gruffly, rising from the chair. “How long was I out?”

“This is the fourth night,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bloody hell . “Did anyone find us here?”

“No. Rain has been falling. Given the uproar in town, I am almost certain that Noah and Joshua are looking for me. Our families must be sick with worry, but I did not leave. Those men...they would not dare remain in Bravo now.”

Caleb nodded, wanting to drag her into his arms so badly he had to clench his fists at his side. “Are you well, Jenny?”

A soft smile touched her mouth, and her green eyes gleamed. “I am.”

“Thank you for taking care of me,” he said gruffly. “It must have been difficult.”

“No thanks are needed between friends and family,” she said softly.

She slid off the bed, clutching the blanket around her body like a toga. The material clung far too enticingly to her curves, and he felt a dart of desire. A heavy silence fell, thick with unspoken words, as they stared at each other. Caleb felt another surge of complex emotions—relief, longing, and a deep-seated protectiveness. They had faced death together, and in that harrowing moment when he had heard her scream, he knew he would lay down his life for Jenny Kincaid without hesitation.

The need to touch her was painful.

As if compelled by the same intense connection, her lips parted, and before he could voice his thoughts, she closed the distance between them. With a swift movement, she hurled herself into his arms.

“I thought you would never wake up,” she cried. “I thought you would have died .”

Caleb caught her tightly. “I am sorry I worried you.”

A sharp tremor shook her body. His heart pounded with a fierce desire to protect and reassure her, to confirm with his own embrace that she was indeed safe.

Caleb’s hands instinctively went to her hair, his fingers threading through the silken strands. With a gentle yet firm grip, he tilted her head back and lowered his lips to hers. He enjoyed the almost unbearable sweetness of her lips, his cock aching. He nipped at her bottom lip, and after a soft moan, she parted her lips. The kiss was deep and intimate, his tongue moving against hers.

Jenny responded with equal passion, her arms tightening around his neck, pulling him closer. Caleb was acutely aware of how alive she felt in his arms—how soft and inviting her body was against his. The sensations overwhelmed him, igniting a fierce desire that had been simmering for years. A violent feeling of hunger leaped through him, and heat raced through his body and settled at the base of his cock in a wicked pulse of desire. The warmth of her body, the taste of her lips, and the scent of her hair enveloped him, making him feel as if he wanted to consume her.

The blanket slithered from her body to the ground, and her naked chest pressed against his, her beaded nipples stabbing at his chest. Caleb groaned, darting his mouth from her lips down the arched curve of her throat where he kissed the madly fluttering pulse. He eased her from him, desperate to see her.

Jenny was sensually and exquisitely formed. Her breast was the right handful, shaping to his palm as if God had specially made her for him. Her nipples were drawn into tight, rosy buds that made his mouth water. Caleb sat on the chair, drawing her between his splayed thighs. The wound throbbed and ached, but it was a distant hum against the burning lust rushing through his body.

He could not stop touching and kissing her. Knowing he might never see her again drove his hunger. He was so hard he thought he might explode. Slowly, savoring the texture of her skin, he stroked his fingers from her breast down to her quivering belly and around to her lush derriere.

He trailed his fingers around to her sex, kissing and swallowing her moans as he eased one finger into her startlingly tight sheath. Her soft, wondering gasp whispered across his skin like a touch.

Her sharp fingernails sank into his shoulders, and her muscles tightened over his fingers.

She was so damn wet. Jenny pulled her mouth from his, burying her face into his throat when he started to move his fingers inside her sex, preparing her for when he took her. She was beautifully responsive to his every touch, her hips moving, her back arching, hot little cries breaking from her lips.

Caleb slammed his eyes closed, trying to fight the temptation beating at him. The woman in his arms deserved everything, and he would be a damn scoundrel to take what she so sweetly and passionately offered, knowing he would eventually walk away. “Jenny—”

“I will shoot you, Caleb Callahan, if you stop!”

“Do you understand that I will be leaving soon?”

Her lower lip trembled, and she quickly controlled it.

“I do. For this reason, I am willing to walk into your arms now so I never look back and feel regret about what I might have experienced with you.

An indecipherable emotion flickered in Caleb's eyes, and he drew in a long, controlled breath. She desperately wanted to live in this moment with him. "I want this memory of you...me...us," Jenny murmured, clasping his shoulders to lift onto her toes so she could tenderly brush her mouth against his.

A muscle ticked at his jaw, and this close, she saw the rapid tattoo of the pulse at his throat. An unbearable tension wound around her heart, for she sensed he would push her away. "Caleb—"

"I feel as if you have bloody bewitched me," he hissed, his fingers tightening in her hair. "I do not like it. Good sense and honor demand that I step away from you, but by God, I want you more than I have ever wanted anything in my damn life."

Yearning struck her in the stomach, thick and undeniable. She wanted so much more than a moment, but if this were the only memory she would have of Caleb, Jenny would claim it.

"I do not wish to be haunted by regret, and I know I will feel it most keenly if you do not kiss me...make love with me."

Caleb caught her mouth with his in a passionate kiss. Jenny slipped her hands around his nape, kissing him back with chaotic desire pulsing through her. Her breasts felt heavy and ached, and she arched into him, pressing against the thick length in his trousers. A low, possessive sound vibrated deep in his throat, and she swallowed it. He tightened his arms around her, lifted her and walked with her to the bed.

He lowered her, then stepped back and removed his trousers.

Oh, he is so beautiful . Caleb's body was corded with such beautiful muscles. His manhood was ruddy and thick, far thicker than she anticipated. The bed dipped as he came over her, staring at her naked form.

“You are so damn lovely, Jenny Kincaid,” he said raggedly, dipping to kiss the flesh right above her navel.

Her belly quivered when he trailed his mouth down, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. He hoisted each leg onto his shoulders, opening her thighs to stare at her most intimate place. The position left her open and vulnerable. A blush covered Jenny’s entire body, and her fingers tightened on the sheet beside her.

Caleb lowered himself more, kissing along the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh. The hot glide of his tongue against her sex made her whimper. He did it again, this time using a finger to part her folds before he licked her.

“Caleb,” she gasped, reaching down to clutch his shoulders.

This was far too wicked...yet it felt so good. A hungry moan broke from her throat as he repeated the caress. He pushed a finger inside of her sheath...then another, and she gasped at the bite of pain. His tongue curled over her clitoris, and something raw and primal tightened inside of Jenny, and she arched her spine, pressing her sex more onto his mouth.

Her entire body felt sensitive and desperate. She moaned, the sound low and desperate as sensations coiled low in her belly. Her body was drawn so tight she felt as if she would snap in two. The pleasure surged, contracting into a ball of need low in her belly.

He started to move his fingers, and the pleasure almost shattered her. The fierce pressure, the rasp of his tongue and teeth, sent pure fire racing through her. Jenny wildly arched in his arms, crying out, and her hands clenched in his hair to hold his head in place.

Caleb released her from the tormenting pleasure of his mouth and moved on top of

her, his hard thighs pushing between hers and spreading them. He reached between their bodies and pressed his cock at the tender entrance of her sex. Caleb leaned forward, kissed her, and started to penetrate her body.

Jenny's heart shook with nerves when she felt the burning, stretching pain. A whimper escaped her, and he swallowed it, but he did not slow his steady invasion. Somehow, she had thought he would simply slip into her. She bit his lip when the pain flared brighter, and a sob hitched inside her chest.

He broke their kiss, pressing soothing kisses over her cheek, chin, and lips again.

"I promise the pain will be over soon," he murmured.

Jenny wanted to pinch him for that lie; it felt like something was splitting her apart. Clutching his shoulders, she held on to him as he forged deeper inside her body. Despite her wetness, short whimpers came from her, but he did not stop until he was deep inside her.

"It hurts," she gasped.

"I will make it better," he said, tenderly kissing her mouth.

Caleb reached between them and glided his fingers over her nub. He stroked her clitoris with his fingers over and over until she was a trembling mess. She forgot about the pain, needing more. "Caleb," she cried, tugging his neck and passionately kissing him.

He started to move, and it felt as if the sweetest agony pierced low in her belly. Caleb loved her with long, deep strokes, stoking her pleasure higher until she trembled under the excruciating ecstasy. A desperate ache coiled low in her stomach, drawing tighter as the piercing sensations intensified. She wrenched her mouth from his and

buried her face into his throat, kissing his skin.

The bed jerked under the passionate rhythm of their coupling, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. Something wild rose within her, and Jenny instantly rolled her hips. A low groan rumbled from his chest, and he snapped his deeper. She cried out as the coil burst, and pleasure swept through her in a hot, unrelenting rush. With a ragged groan, he thrust deep once before pulling out to release on her quivering belly.

“That was...” Jenny breathed raggedly and then laughed. “That was glorious.”

He chuckled and tenderly brushed his mouth over the bridge of her nose and cheek, bringing a lump to her throat. He padded toward the cupboard, withdrew a washrag and brought it over. She blushed as he gently cleaned her, but she did not protest his ministrations; she liked that he took care of her.

He rejoined her on the bed and tugged the blanket over their bodies. She turned instinctively into his arms and felt them close around her. Her head settled into the hollow of his shoulder, and her hand rested on his chest, then she closed her eyes and fell into contented slumber.

CHAPTER 8

Caleb lay in the darkness, staring at the log cabin ceiling, the comforting weight of Jenny nestled against his side. He had taken her innocence, but thank God he'd had the presence of mind to protect her from pregnancy. He had never known loving could be this intense and pleasurable. Caleb suspected the taste and feel of Jenny would forever haunt him. Even now, her presence filled a void in him, a hollow feeling that had greeted him each morning for years now unexpectedly filled. She was asleep, her head resting on his shoulder, her breaths a gentle sigh against his chest, bringing him a sense of peace he hadn't known he was missing.

The savory aroma of roasted rabbit permeated the cabin, and he heard Jenny's stomach rumble softly in her sleep. Smiling, Caleb carefully extricated himself from the bed, pulled on his trousers, and padded over to the stove. He carefully lifted the rabbits from the earthen oven, setting them on a cutting board to carve them into smaller pieces. He found a couple of tins of baked beans in the cupboard, which he opened and set to warm over the flames.

Caleb chuckled softly, imagining the shock his friends and family back in England would express if they could see him now. Living with his grandfather in this rugged land had taught him a level of responsibility and resilience he'd never grasped during his pampered years back home. The memory of the men he had possibly killed during their escape lingered in his mind, and he felt no sense of regret.

Turning back to Jenny, he walked over to the bed and gently shook her shoulder.

"Jenny, wake up. You need to eat."

She mumbled incoherently and rolled onto her side, her eyelashes fluttering as she slowly opened her eyes. Her gaze was soft and sleepy yet filled with warmth as she focused on him. Jenny's entire body blushed, and he grinned, lowering his head to kiss the bridge of her nose.

“Now is not the time to go shy on me, where you were a wildcat only an hour ago.”

She gasped and lightly laughed, slapping him with the small mound that barely passed as a pillow. With a nod to the small, rustic table, Caleb helped her to sit up, grinning as she blushed when he helped her wrap the blanket around her body like a toga. He guided her to the table where he had laid out their simple meal. As they settled down to eat, the soft patter of rain against the window provided a soothing ambiance to their simple dinner.

Jenny took a bite of the rabbit, her delight evident. “This is too delicious,” she purred.

“What did you manage to eat while I was out?”

Jenny smiled. “Your brother had some tinned biscuits stashed away, and I found several berry bushes near the creek at the back. I felt lucky when I caught these rabbits.”

She reached for the bottle of whisky Caleb had discovered hidden in his brother's pantry, pouring each a glass. Taking a tentative sip, she winced slightly. “This is very strong.”

“There is a good chance Sam brewed it himself,” Caleb said with a wry smile.

“Are you close with him?” Jenny asked, curiosity in her voice.

Caleb pondered their relationship. “I did not know about Sam until my grandfather

introduced us. I never knew I had another brother living away from us. Our grandfather told him about his three siblings in London and even showed him a portrait, but our mother never mentioned the child she left behind in America.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe it. Why would she do that?”

He chewed thoughtfully on a mouthful of beans. “My mother was to be married to Sam’s father, but he died before they could exchange vows. The grief overwhelmed her, so my grandfather sent her abroad with his sister to heal and to also escape the scrutiny of being an unwed mother. She never returned. She married an earl, had three more children, and never visited Sam. My grandfather raised him like a son, even naming him a Colton, and only when he was much older explained everything about our mother.”

“That’s... terrible ,” Jenny murmured. “Sam must have missed having her in his life.”

“I think so, though he did not say it. He is very.... reserved. We spent one night here talking for hours. He never asked about her, but I volunteered what I knew. He listened intently and didn’t stop me.”

“I cannot imagine being separated from my family like that,” Jenny confessed. “It would devastate me.”

Caleb felt a pang as he realized how deeply family meant to Jenny, knowing her loyalty was something fierce. He brushed aside the bittersweet thought, focusing on the meal. They continued to eat, sharing satisfied sounds of enjoyment and exchanging smiles.

Jenny licked her fingers with a theatrical moan of delight.

“Minx,” Caleb said fondly, chuckling.

She got up to wash her hands in a water basin, then returned to her chair, lifting the whisky to her lips again for a deeper swallow, gasping at the burn.

“I know why you’re returning to England, but I never asked why you left,” she said, looking at him intently.

Caleb grabbed the brandy bottle and took several deep gulps. Setting it down, he said, “A bounder tried to take advantage of my sister. She rejected his advances, but he cornered her at a ball, forced a kiss on her, tore her dress, and slapped her when she bit him. Luckily, a noise interrupted him, and she managed to escape. I couldn’t stand by; I confronted him, and we fought. I punched him repeatedly. His father is a powerful duke, and with the threat of retaliation and scandal, my mother pleaded with me to leave England. George, my brother, urged the same.”

“Your brother should have killed him for such dishonor,” Jenny said sharply, her eyes blazing with fury.

Caleb smiled gently and reached out to caress her cheek. “You are quite the bloodthirsty hellion.”

Her eyes widened, and then she chuckled softly. “But you like me just as I am.”

“I do, very much so,” he said.

The soft hitch in her breathing whispered through his heart.

“What did you mean when you mentioned you were taken once?”

A fine tremor went through her slender frame, and a shadow moved through her eyes. “I was fourteen when a band of Comancheros rode into Bravo. They were ruthless, thinking they could take whatever—and whoever—they wanted. I was abducted

along with a few other women. They had vile intentions. I was terrified, not knowing if my father lived. He was shot a few times because he fought when they took me. I knew my father and brothers would come for me. I only needed to endure until they found me. Joshua tracked me down and killed nine men to rescue me.”

Caleb felt a chill run through him. “Were you hurt?”

Her stark expression softened. “No. My brother came for me before they got a chance. On the return journey home, he started teaching me how to handle a knife and a gun. Then all my brothers took turns teaching me how to defend myself.”

“You healed from your experience,” he said gruffly.

“My Pa said it made me tougher.” A shadow flickered in her eyes. “Are you wondering if your sister has healed?”

“Yes.” He took another long swallow of brandy. “I left London a week after everything, and she was a shadow of herself. She no longer wanted to attend any balls or the frivolities of the ton . It gutted me.”

Jenny dropped her chin to her knees. “My mother always said it is silly to look back on the past with worry, pain, or sadness when the future awaits us, and we have the present to contend with. I still had nightmares, and I often reminded myself of my mother’s words. The better I got at shooting, riding astride, and throwing my knife, my fear also receded. Perhaps upon your return, you could teach your sister to defend herself from rakes and libertines.”

A rough sound chuffed from him. “My mother would possibly collapse at the very thought. However, if Lydia is willing, I will teach her as much as possible.”

“Is it scandalous for a woman to know how to stand up for herself?”

“Hmm.”

Her green eyes sparkled with that inner fire he loved. “How absurd ! Should I ever visit your country, I would do so wearing my trousers and my guns on my hips.”

He gave a low, rough laugh. “Ah, Jenny, I will miss you so much.”

One of her shoulders lifted in an elegant shrug. “Then don’t leave,” she said.

The words hung in the air, weaving a thread of tension between them.

“Or you could come with me,” he suggested softly, watching her reaction closely.

She laughed, the sound tinged with a strain that didn’t escape him. “I could never leave the Triple K. You must return and tend to your responsibilities. It’s nice to dream about impossible things, though.”

Her wistful sigh struck him deeply, like an arrow finding its mark. Unable to bear the hint of sadness in her eyes, Caleb stood and gently pulled her to her feet. Placing one hand on her waist and taking her hand with the other, he led her in a slow, graceful dance across the room.

“What are we dancing?” Jenny asked, a spark of curiosity lighting her eyes as she placed her other hand on his shoulder.

Caleb leaned in, his lips brushing against hers as he whispered, “The waltz. It’s a dance we often enjoy in the ballrooms back home. It was once considered quite scandalous.”

“I can see why,” she replied in a husky voice, her gaze locked with his. “Just being this close, in your arms, makes my heart race and fills my head with...rather wicked

thoughts of you kissing me and doing so much more.”

Ignoring the hunger darting through his body, he showed her the moves and how to follow his rhythm. They bumbled a few times, and her laughter traveled deep inside him where he hoarded the sound, hoping he would recall this moment when the months got lonely in London. As they moved together, Caleb was acutely aware of every point their bodies touched. Each step they took was a bittersweet reminder of what he was about to leave behind. He realized then, with a clarity that startled him, just how deeply he wanted this woman in his life.

They practiced the turns and the fluid motions, and with each step, Caleb felt the heaviness of regret. Why had he not pursued her more ruthlessly? He loved being with her, loved how she looked up at him with trust and a touch of mischief and loved how naturally she fit against him.

Her eyes widened when he tugged, and the blanket slithered to her feet. Caleb lifted her into his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, her slim arms wrapping around his shoulders. He kissed her with violent tenderness, palming her lush buttocks and lifting her slightly.

“Grab my cock and put it at your pussy,” he said against her mouth, desire coiling hotly in his gut.

She reached between the tight fit of their bodies, opened the flap of his trousers, clasped his cock and tucked it at her entrance. Caleb groaned, pressing her against the wall of the cabin, and he pushed deep into the tight, wet welcoming of her pussy.

“Caleb,” she gasped, her nails sinking into his shoulders.

His breath hissed through his teeth. She felt so damn perfect. Caleb started moving, slowly feeding her his cock, for she felt so damn tight. Her soft moans rippled over

his skin like a physical caress, and she kissed the flesh of his shoulders as he started to thrust deeper and harder into her clenching wetness.

Sensation built unbearably, and he thrust upward, hard. Her wild cry echoed in the small cabin as she convulsed in his arms, her nails raking his sweat-slicked shoulders.

“All night,” he groaned, “I am going to keep you on my cock for the night, and you’ll come for me over and over.”

Caleb spun with her, still deeply impaled on his cock, and took her to bed. He withdrew only long enough to lower her to the mattress, turned her onto her belly and then tugged Jenny onto her knees. He groaned, his cock aching at her lush provocativeness. He kissed the small indent above her derriere. A needy moan hissed from her lips and traveled straight to his balls, tightening them. Caleb gripped her hips, arched her and slowly sank his cock deep.

“Caleb,” she gasped, her fingers tightening on the sheet.

He snaked his hand from her hip and delved between her curls, finding her clitoris and rubbing it until she trembled, pushing back on him in a silent demand for more. Only then did he start to ride her hard and deep. Her hips jerked in time to his hard, deep thrust as he sank into her over and over. A distant part of him tried to be gentle, given her inexperience, but Jenny rolled her hips back on him, taking his passion, meeting him thrust for thrust. She cried out, shaking as pleasure overwhelmed her. Her pussy clamped so tightly onto his cock that it was hard to drag from her flesh. He brought her to climax two more times until, with a deep groan, he attained his release.

Caleb withdrew from her, and Jenny collapsed onto her belly, panting. Then she laughed, the sound sweet and delighted. His release was so powerful that he couldn’t speak or think. Caleb sank weakly to the blanket beside her, still holding her to him with fierce possessiveness.

Bloody hell .

He had overdone it. His heart raced, and his head felt light. There was no doubt that damn snake bite still affected him, and he had made love to Jenny twice. The room spun, and he closed his eyes, thinking if he had to die, at least he would die happy.

She sighed, closed her eyes, and fell asleep. He stared at her face for several beats before he forced himself to look away and inhaled deeply to steady himself. Jenny Kincaid had bewitched him, body and heart, it seemed. It gutted Caleb that he had to leave this country and her. It hovered on his tongue to ask her to wait for him, even as he recognized the selfish and foolish nature of the request.

How long would he be in England? A year or two, perhaps five years. He felt as if he had taken a huge blow to the chest, robbing him of breath. How could he ask her to wait? He pinched the bridge of his nose, for it was hard to imagine life without her in it.

As he closed his eyes, an awareness had him stiffening.

“What is it?” she murmured sleepily, reacting to the tension seeping through his body.

“I did not pull out just now. I could have gotten you with a child just now.”

She shifted, draping her body across his. “A baby ?”

His heart was a war drum in his ear. “Yes.”

Jenny fell silent and softly said, “There is no sense in worrying about the unknown, Caleb.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, silently cursing. “Jenny—”

“I will write to you and let you know if I am. There is no need for you to worry.”

“Good.”

They stayed silent, each breathing deeply. Caleb knew she was awake, for her heart raced frantically against his, and he could feel every beat.

“What if you are—”

She bit his chest, then kissed the spot when he hissed.

“I do not wish to worry about something that might not come true,” she whispered.

“I like to plan ahead.”

“I did say I would write to you,” she said pertly.

“A letter will take six weeks or more to reach London.”

“I know.”

He placed a finger under her chin and urged her gaze to meet his. “If you are with child, Jenny, you will have to come to me in England and we—”

“Or you come to me here,” she said through narrowed eyes. “When I have a child, I want to be surrounded by my mother and family.”

Bloody hell . “I will not be able to return so soon.”

“I know,” she said, lowering her cheek to his chest. “That is why I do not wish to worry about a situation that does not exist now.”

“We will head back to the Tripple K in the morning,” he said gruffly. “Your family must be frantic with fear.”

“They know I am with you,” she murmured. “They know you will protect me.”

Caleb wrapped his arms around her, hating the thought that one of the best things in his life would soon be out of his reach.

What I wouldn't give to call you mine, Jenny Kincaid .

CHAPTER 9

Jenny clung to Caleb as his stallion carried them steadily toward her family's ranch. The horse's rhythmic movement was soothing, but her muscles ached from the long hours on the saddle. She remained silent, her discomfort a small price to pay for the reassurance she needed to provide her family—that she was safe. She had been missing for seven days now. Jenny closed her eyes, heart-wrenched at how frantic her Ma must be.

Despite their plans to leave the cabin the following morning, a raging tempest had rushed down the mountains and the rain had kept them indoors for another day and night. Caleb had made love to her five times that last day in that cabin, and now, two days later, she still felt tender, and her sex ached. He had taught her to dance the waltz, they had laughed and read the dime novel his brother left, and they had talked long into the nights while they watched the moon's beauty on the small log by the creek. She could scarcely believe that she'd made love with Caleb Callahan or that she might never see him again.

"You will be leaving in about a week," she whispered, her throat hot and aching.

His arms tightened around her waist.

"Yes."

A lump tightened her throat.

"I will write to you, Jenny."

It wasn't a promise or anything, yet her heart leaped with a secret thrill. She swallowed tightly, confused by the chaotic emotions writhing inside her heart. As the sprawling silhouette of her family's ranch came into view, relief swept through her. Her heart raced with anticipation and anxiety about their reception—especially in her current state, wearing Caleb's oversized shirt, which dwarfed her petite frame. Her own clothes had been left in tatters, unsuitable for wear, and Caleb, now in one of his brother's shirts, appeared cool and composed.

Their approach was heralded by a scream of relief from Bethany, who was walking her son in her arms. Her sister-in-law darted back inside, presumably to gather the rest of the family. Moments later, the front door burst open, and her family spilled out, their faces a mixture of concern and joy.

Jenny's nervousness about her appearance melted away under their warm gazes. She was home. She noticed the absence of her brothers Joshua and Noah and wondered briefly where they might be. They had not encountered them on the trail down from the cabin. The thought was quickly overshadowed by the rush of her family toward her.

Caleb slowed the horse and carefully helped Jenny down. The moment her feet touched the ground, her mother enveloped her in a fierce embrace, tears of relief mingling with soft cries. Her father, August Kincaid, was close behind. He pulled Caleb into a hearty hug, clapping him on the shoulder with a gruff, heartfelt, "Good job. Seems my boy was right about you."

Caleb frowned. "Sir?"

Her father smiled. "Everyone in town's talking about how you rushed in to save my Jenny, and when you rode away, you placed her in front of you to keep her safe. Joshua said that alone told him you'd die before letting anything happen to her. That assurance helped her ma sleep at night. Now, I'm damn grateful, but where have you

been with my daughter?”

“Pa,” Jenny protested, blushing. “A rattler bit Caleb and he was unconscious for several days. We came down from the cabin as soon as he regained consciousness.”

Gasps of concern erupted, and Caleb looked bemused as her mother began fussing over him. She took Jenny by one arm and Caleb by the other, gently pulling them toward the house.

“Let’s get you both inside. You must be starving,” her mother said, releasing Caleb briefly to wipe her tears as she led them toward the home. “August, please send a ranch hand to let Jeremiah know his grandson is alive and well.”

As they entered, the warmth of the family home embraced them, and the rich aroma of a home-cooked meal filled the air.

“Ma, I should wash up and make myself more presentable.”

Her mother cupped her cheeks, tears glistening in her eyes. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Then we shall eat first; after, you can worry about looking pretty for Caleb Callahan.”

“Ma,” she gasped.

Her mother laughed and tugged her into the large dining room. Caleb joined them at the table, and as they settled in, Jenny’s stomach rumbled audibly. Their cook bustled in with heaping platters, filling the table with roasted chicken, thick-cut steaks seared to perfection, baked potatoes dripping with butter, tender green beans, and freshly

baked cinnamon bread, its aroma rich and warm. A bowl of creamy corn chowder and a side of collard greens sat nearby, completing the spread.

“Miss Jenny, somehow I knew you’d be home today,” the cook announced with a smile. “I baked an apple pie just for you.”

Jenny grinned, misty-eyed, and murmured her thanks. The golden pie, with its delicate lattice crust and scent of spiced apples, sat waiting to be enjoyed. She knew it had been made with extra care.

They laughed and ate, passing around platters and helping themselves to generous portions. Caleb watched them all with a quiet, contemplative gaze, his eyes lingering on Jenny perhaps a touch longer than necessary. Her mother noticed and gave a soft, approving smile, but her father’s brows furrowed slightly. When Jenny raised her chin toward her father, Caleb smiled and averted his gaze.

“Forgive me if it’s indelicate to ask while we dine, but do we know who those men were?” Caleb asked.

Her father took a sip of his coffee, his face thoughtful. “The sheriff believes they were bank robbers. With the railway expanding, there’s been plenty of talk about payroll shipments carrying a handsome sum—temptation enough for men like them.”

August paused, glancing at Caleb before continuing, “When news of your disappearance reached us, Noah and Joshua left to track your trail. They’re damn fine hunters, those boys, and I figured if anyone could pick up your trail, it’d be them. I had hoped they’d bring Jenny home safely.” He cast a proud glance at Jenny. “They sent word that first night to say the rain muddied the tracks, but they will keep at it. They should return soon. We have ranch hands posted at every two miles to relay news. It is already spreading that you are both home and well. I owe you—”

“You owe me nothing, sir,” he said. “Miss Kincaid is...she is my friend.”

“When a man puts a woman’s life before his, that woman is more than a friend,” her father said, pinning Caleb with a hard glare.

He nodded once. “I agree.”

Oh! Emotions rushed through Jenny, and that awful ache returned to her throat. “Caleb is leaving soon,” she blurted before her father got any ideas.

“Leaving?” her mother gasped. “Permanently?”

Caleb cleared his throat. “I have to return to assume the duties and responsibilities of the earldom. I shall visit once again, but it might be a few years before I do so.”

“I see,” her mother said, sympathy glowing in her eyes.

Caleb nodded, a quiet understanding passing between him and her father. Jenny frowned, not understanding their silent communication. Her father’s stern expression softened as he studied Caleb.

“I’m grateful for what you did for my daughter, son. You rode hard to bring her home, even after everything you’d been through. That doesn’t go unnoticed.”

He deftly changed the conversation to ranching, the circus, and even with news from Boston. As they ate, laughter and stories flowed easily around the table. Sitting among her family, with Caleb by her side, Jenny felt a happiness she wished never to leave.

If only you belonged here, Caleb .

A couple of nights after escorting Jenny home, Caleb lay in the darkness of his room, hands laced behind his head, staring into the shadowed ceiling. The quiet of the night wrapped around him, yet his mind remained restless. He would leave Bravo in precisely four days. Just as he felt himself drift, a familiar, mouthwatering scent—ripe as sun-warmed peaches—drifted into the room.

He stiffened, his heart pounding, as he recognized Jenny's unmistakable presence. She moved like a shadow, her steps light and careful, but he felt every inch of her approach as if she'd called his name. His chest tightened when she eased onto the bed, the mattress dipping beneath her slight weight. She crawled over his body, her movements languid and deliberate, and lowered her mouth to his. The warmth of her breath stirred his senses.

“How long are you here for?” he murmured raggedly against her mouth.

“Only for an hour,” she whispered, her hair falling over them like curtains, creating a cocoon of intimacy.

Caleb spun with her, pressing her body into the mattress with a force that was both urgent and controlled. The savage tension gripping him was almost unbearable. He jerked away from her, his hands moving with desperate precision as he pulled her belt and dragged her trousers down. They hitched on her boots, so he lifted her legs, the trousers pooling above her ankles. He rested her booted legs on his shoulders, the weight of them grounding him even as his desire sharpened. Her harsh panting seemed loud in the room, a symphony of need that matched his own.

Caleb's fingers damn well shook when he freed his cock from his trousers. He fisted it, and with unerring accuracy, he found her pussy, the slick heat of her drawing a groan from deep within him.

She moaned as he started to sink into her pussy, the sensation of her tightness around

his cock almost too much to bear. It was slow going, each inch a delicious torture, and only their ragged breathing echoed in the room, along with her whimpers and moans.

His cock sank in a couple of inches.

So damn tight .

“Caleb,” she groaned, shifting restlessly beneath him.

“Hurt?” he asked, his voice strained, his heart pounding.

“Yes,” she admitted, her voice a mix of pain and pleasure.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No!” The word was a desperate plea, her nails raking along his knees when she stretched her hands down.

He swiveled his hips, pushing in a bit deeper, the sensation of her tightness around him sending waves of pleasure through his body. That was how he fed her his cock, sinking in a bit and then withdrawing, each movement deliberate and controlled. Over and over, and with each push, she got wetter and wetter, her moans shaping into a melody of desire. It was torturous, but he loved every damn minute of it, and from her wetness and trembling legs, he knew Jenny did too.

By the time he shoved his cock to the hilt, sweat rolled down his chest, mingling with the dampness of their bodies. He could feel her inner walls clenching around him, the tightness almost unbearable. He withdrew and shoved deep in one slide, and she screamed, her body arching beneath him as she reached climax.

“Caleb, I—” she gasped, her voice breaking as when he drew back and thrust deep again.

She released a second time, her inner walls clenching around him in a rhythmic pulse. The sensation was too much. Caleb felt his climax building, the tension coiling tighter and tighter until it exploded, sending waves of pleasure through his body. He thrust into her one last time, his release spilling into her as he groaned her name, his voice raw with emotion.

He pulled from her, collapsing on the bed, and Jenny curled against him, settling her cheek on his chest as if it were the most natural place in the world to be. Caleb wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, savoring the warmth of her in his embrace. He pressed a lingering kiss to the top of her head, breathing in her scent, his chest swelling with the quiet comfort she brought.

This was madness. The restlessness had eased, and it felt like his whole world had just slid back into place. For a long moment, they lay in silence, their steady breathing the only sound in the room.

“You were watching the moon,” she said softly.

He turned his head toward the large, open windows, where the moon hung low in the sky, so close it seemed he could reach out and touch it.

“Yes,” he murmured.

“I want to see it too.”

He shifted so Jenny could peer through the open windows at the night sky. A sigh of pleasure whispered from her and glided over his senses.

“I will also think of you when I see the moon,” she said softly.

Caleb’s fingers traced gentle circles along her back, grounding himself in her closeness. He frowned. Once again, he had been so lost in her taste and felt he had not withdrawn in time. This had never happened to him before. In truth, in all his previous lovers, he used a sheepskin contraceptive sheath over his cock. A part of Caleb wondered if he was trying to find a reason to leave London and rejoin her.

He needed to clear his head. Even if Jenny were pregnant, he couldn’t abandon his duties to the realm and his family, and he knew she wouldn’t leave hers or the Triple K. Caleb resolved to keep his distance, ensuring they wouldn’t see each other again before he departed.

“Your heart is racing. What are you thinking about?”

“Things that are best left for when they occur.”

He felt the curve of her mouth against his chest as she smiled.

“I heard your brothers were back.”

“Yes.”

He felt her tense slightly, and he tightened his hold on her. “They’re home? Safe and sound?”

She nodded against him, her hair brushing his chin. “Yes, both of them. The sheriff had pulled together a posse with Noah and Joshua, and they hunted down the robbers. They caught them, Caleb.”

Jenny lifted her head to look at him, her eyes catching the faint light filtering through

the window. “Those men are being taken to Waco to stand trial. They robbed and killed there. They’ll face justice now.”

Caleb felt the weight in his chest ease, a tension he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying since that night finally releasing.

“Good,” he murmured, “Sam and I were going to his cabin tomorrow to ensure they did not find it and to see if we picked up any trail.”

Jenny rested her head on his chest, her hand tracing slow patterns along his shoulder. “I wrote you a letter. You must read it whenever...whenever you long for me,” she whispered, her voice barely a breath against his skin.

“Are you so certain I will long for you?”

“Of course.”

He chuckled and pulled her closer, his hand sliding up to cradle her face, brushing his thumb along her cheek. “How long do we have before you have to go.”

“We still have fifty-five minutes. Our...glorious tugging was only a few minutes.”

Caleb froze, and she pealed with laughter. He chuckled and kissed the laughter from her mouth for endless minutes. They laughed and chatted longer before she roused herself and began dressing. Caleb slipped on his shirt, belted his hunting knife at his hip, and took her hands in his for a moment before riding alongside her until she reached home. He leaned against his pommel, staying in the shadows of the tree line, and watched as she rode to the stables, slid off her horse, and handed the reins to a ranch hand before hurrying inside the main house.

“How long do you plan to stay there without speaking?” he drawled, sensing a

familiar presence.

A low, menacing chuckle broke the quiet as Joshua Kincaid stepped out from the trees. “I’m impressed, Callahan. Not even Elijah would have known I was following.”

Caleb grunted, unfazed. He’d sensed Joshua’s presence the moment he’d left the house with Jenny by his side. It was why he’d kept it chaste with ruthless restraint when she tried to kiss him deeply goodnight.

“You’re leaving, Callahan,” Joshua said flatly.

“Yes.”

Silence stretched between them. Caleb turned his horse toward Joshua, though he could barely make out his shape in the darkness, only a vague impression.

“You’re leaving,” Joshua repeated, “but you let her sneak into your room.”

Caleb’s gut tightened. Damn it. “No one ‘lets’ Jenny Kincaid do anything. If she decides to do something, she’ll see it done.”

Joshua sighed, his exasperation clear. “Maybe it’s best you’re leaving. She’d have you wrapped around her finger, letting her get away with anything.”

Caleb managed a faint smile, though it felt like a dagger to his chest. He’d give anything to make her his, to lay the world at her feet.

“Kincaid,” Caleb said, tipping his hat, and began to urge his horse away.

“Callahan...”

He slowed his horse. “I’m listening.”

“The next time my sister sneaks into your bedchamber, make her leave—or close the damn window.”

Caleb’s fingers clenched on the reins, the memory of Jenny’s cries of wanton delight flashing through his mind. Bloody hell . Part of him half-expected Joshua’s knife in his back. Without a word, he urged his horse into a canter along the woodland path, letting the shadows swallow him.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 2:43 pm

Jenny paused at the edge of the lake, hidden behind a cluster of trees, her breath catching at the sight of Caleb gliding through the water. His powerful strokes rippled across the lake's surface, and when he looked up and spotted her, a heat filled his gaze, sending a quiver straight through her heart. With a smile, she dismounted, dropping the reins so her horse could graze freely. She kicked off her boots and slipped out of her dress, letting it and her drawers fall at her feet. Then, with a playful shout, she leaped into the cool embrace of the lake.

Caleb laughed as she surfaced, his laughter rich and warm. He swam over to her, gathering her close. Their lips met in a tender, lingering kiss, and she felt the world fade away. They floated together, circling each other lazily in the water, the silence between them filled only with the soft sounds of their breathing and the gentle lapping of the lake.

"I snuck into your room just now," she whispered, her voice catching. "I left a letter for you on your pillow."

Caleb's gaze softened, and a flicker of sorrow touched his eyes. Her throat tightened, and the reality of his imminent departure struck her with a sharp ache.

"You're leaving tomorrow," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yes," he replied, his tone heavy.

"Today...today might be the last day I'll ever see you."

Without a word, he wrapped her tightly against his chest, his embrace firm and

unyielding. She laughed, squirming as he held her so fiercely she could scarcely breathe. “Caleb, you’re squeezing the life out of me!”

He grunted softly but didn’t loosen his hold. Instead, he pulled her closer, his voice gruff. “Could you ever see yourself in England, Jenny? Even for a few months?”

Her heart skipped, her body trembling within the warmth of his arms. She pressed her forehead against his, her fingers brushing his cheek as she whispered, “No...I couldn’t bear to leave my family behind.”

A look of understanding crossed his face, the tension easing from his hold. “I understand,” he murmured, though his eyes held a sadness that cut into her.

Then, without another word, he captured her lips in a kiss so deep and fierce it stole her breath. She melted into him, her hands slipping around his neck as she returned his kiss, pouring all her unspoken emotions into it. Tears mingled with the water droplets on her cheeks, slipping silently down her face, blending with the lake and the warmth of his touch.

As they held each other, entwined in the lake’s quiet embrace, Jenny wished this moment could last forever, even as she knew it was slipping away.

Silly , she whispered to herself. I am really falling in love with you, Caleb Callahan .

Two months later ...

Grosvenor Square, London.

Caleb shifted restlessly, gazing out over the illuminated gardens from the terrace of his godmother’s townhouse in Grosvenor Square. The soft strains of music and laughter floated through the open doors, a stark contrast to the silence and vast, open skies of America that still haunted his thoughts. He allowed his gaze to drift to the

flickering gas lamps in the garden, their light casting an amber glow over the trimmed hedges and topiaries.

It had been two months since he left Jenny and the rough landscape of the West behind him and two weeks since he disembarked the ship. Since his return to England's shores, he'd been engulfed in a whirlwind of responsibility. His mother's dearest friend and Caleb's godmother, Lady Greystone, had planned this ball in his honor as soon as she heard of his arrival, sparing no expense in gathering the *crème de la crème* of London society.

Laughter and dancing filled the grand ballroom, the warm glow of chandeliers casting a golden light over the polished marble floors and walls. Women in jewel-toned gowns twirled, their skirts sweeping gracefully as they laughed, while gentlemen led them through intricate dances. The air was alive with lively music, laughter and facile chatter, with the scent of roses and perfume redolent in the air.

Caleb lingered in the shadows on the terrace, content to remain an observer, watching the swirl of gaiety from a distance. He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to attend these society balls—the finely honed etiquette, the polished glances exchanged behind fans, the practiced smiles and subtle glances of courtship. Everything was meticulous, every movement measured, a carefully orchestrated display of charm and elegance.

He found a peculiar comfort in the detachment, standing away from the crowd yet close enough to absorb the energy and music. It was as if he were watching a play, each guest an actor in a perfectly rehearsed drama of refined manners and whispered intrigue. From his vantage point, he could observe the beauty and splendor of it all, feeling both a part of it and somehow apart from it, his mind drifting to memories of a life less polished but infinitely more real.

Jenny Kincaid .

Caleb remembered every little detail about being with her. Sitting on that log watching the moon, her smiles, the pleasure of hearing her laughter, and making love with her. He slammed his eyes closed. The feel of how pushing into her, the hot, soft tightness of her body as he sheathed himself inside her, haunted his sleep. She had felt so delicate and soft beneath him, her smaller body dominated by his size, yet she had trusted him with her pleasure.

He scrubbed a hand over his face and blew out a harsh breath.

By God, when will I stop thinking about you ?

He had many duties to occupy his thoughts, and he ruthlessly wrenched his mind away from Jenny. Though the earldom burdens had been thrust upon him, Caleb found himself challenged and energized by it all. Lawyers, solicitors, members of Parliament, estate stewards—every day was filled with matters needing his attention, matters that gave him purpose. Yet, with his family still mourning his brother, the contrast between his duties and grief felt bitter. His sister and mother were not in attendance tonight because they were in mourning. How odd that society expected so little outward display of sorrow from men. Somehow, they were to endure silently while life went on.

Caleb lifted his champagne flute and emptied it in a single swallow. He'd been at the ball for two hours—long enough, he believed, to show his appreciation for his godmother's efforts. Just as he prepared to exit, Lady Henrietta sauntered on the terrace.

“Oh, Lord Tallant! I've been searching for you all evening,” she said, her voice lilting with practiced charm.

Her gown, a shimmering shade of blue, gracefully hugged her figure, and her golden curls were artfully arranged. Yet, as lovely as she was, Caleb felt nothing stir within him.

“Lady Henrietta,” he said politely.

She stepped closer, her gloved hand resting lightly on his arm. “I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you returned safely. Though...you seem different, my lord. Harsher, somehow.”

“The West is a hard place,” he replied, shifting so that her touch fell from his arm.

She studied him briefly, seemingly unsatisfied with his answer, then brightened.

“Well, may I expect the honor of a dance with you tonight?”

He met her hopeful gaze with a hint of a smile.

“No,” he replied, the word slipping out before he could soften it.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped, pressing a hand to her chest. “My lord, have you forgotten all principles of gentlemanly conduct and propriety?”

Lady Henrietta half-laughed, but the pink in her cheeks suggested her offense.

Lifting a brow, he replied, “As I recall, a lady is meant to wait until a gentleman offers the dance, not to request it herself.”

Her blush deepened, and she drew back, clearly mortified. The sight might have amused him once, but now he felt only an odd sense of detachment. With a formal bow, he excused himself, leaving her on the terrace, and went back inside, easily navigating through clusters of society’s finest. He nodded and exchanged a few polite words, but his mind remained adrift, far from the bustling ballroom.

No matter how many familiar faces he saw, he couldn’t shake the feeling of dissonance. Part of him had never left the West—never left her.

Bloody hell .

His godmother's eyes widened when she saw his approach.

"You have the look of a man who is bored," she said, her gaze curious and penetrating.

"I am leaving," he said with a smile to soften his words. "I have many matters to attend. Thank you for the lovely ball."

Her gaze flickered briefly behind him. "Lady Henrietta seems mortified. I was the one who told her you were on the terrace."

Caleb lifted a brow and did not comment.

"Will you not dance with her?"

"No."

His godmother sighed. "She made a foolish mistake, Caleb. You can forgive her for it."

"I do not resent her," he said, mildly surprised. "I simply have no wish to form an attachment."

His godmother appeared to want to say more but held her tongue. Caleb kissed her cheek and left the ball, walking to his townhouse only a few minutes away. He entered his townhouse, noting its stillness and headed to the solitude of his study. Closing the door behind him, Caleb poured himself a glass of scotch, sinking into the armchair by the fireplace.

The West was gone. Bravo was miles away. And yet, as the flames flickered and

danced, he couldn't stop himself from imagining Jenny's face and the tender look in her eyes whenever she stared at him.

It was only a matter of time before he'd have to stop running from those memories, but for tonight, Caleb let himself indulge just a little longer.

The next morning, Caleb sat in the quiet of his library, a ledger open before him, columns of figures demanding his attention. He leaned back, fingers idly tapping the page as he absorbed the gravity of the situation. The estates were in severe debt. Just then, the door swung open, and his mother stepped inside, a faint flush in her cheeks and an energy about her that made him set the ledger aside.

"Mother," he said, standing as a rush of emotions surged within him.

Though she was fifty, her beauty was unlined, a delicate elegance still framing her face. The years had left her with grace untouched by age. She glanced at the ledgers, a hint of exasperation in her expression.

"I hear you were less than social last night," she admonished, sitting in the armchair closest to him as she studied him with a disappointed gaze. "Not a single dance, Caleb? That won't do."

"I see godmother as already called," he said drily.

"Not only did Linnet call upon me to tell me about your reception, but the scandal sheet had much to say about it. They called you aloof and mysterious. What nonsense is this? Why did you not dance with anyone?"

Caleb arched a brow. "I may be willing to mingle, Mother, but I'll only dance with a lady I admire."

As he spoke, a familiar image flashed unbidden into his mind of Jenny laughing as he

taught her the waltz in that cabin. His heart twisted, and he forced himself to shove the memory aside.

His mother pursed her lips. “Perhaps you might consider Lady Henrietta, then. She is accomplished and lovely, and her family connections are solid. You shared a tendre once, and she is truly delightful.”

Caleb said nothing, and his mother closed her eyes with a sigh. A moment passed, and he noticed a shadow crossing her face before she looked at him steadily.

“Have you realized the full extent of the mess yet?” she asked.

The quiver in her voice informed him of his mother’s anxiety.

“Yes,” he replied, tapping the ledger. “I’ve been studying the books to see where we might trim the estate’s expenses.”

His mother gasped, clearly taken aback. “Trim expenses?”

“We currently have three estates in England and another in Scotland, all fully staffed. The house in Bath could be closed, and no one has visited the estates in Scotland or France for two years, yet they remain staffed and yield no profit from tenants or the framing lands. However, I hesitate to close them as the staff rely on their positions.”

“Daphne and I were planning a week in Bath,” his mother said faintly. “Caleb, I cannot imagine a life of such...austerity.” She leaned forward, desperation flashing in her eyes. “The only sensible solution is to marry an heiress. You must understand that.”

He stared at her before shaking his head, jaw set. “I won’t be taking a wife anytime soon, Mother.”

Her expression hardened, though worry still clouded her gaze. “You don’t yet realize how precarious our situation is. George didn’t inherit under the best conditions, and the debts far exceed yearly profits. A suitable marriage is the most certain way to save the earldom. George himself planned to select a countess this season.”

A shadow of grief crossed her face, and she took a shaky breath. “Daphne is one and twenty. She’ll need a new wardrobe and encouragement to participate in the season. Our staff are loyal, and it would be a tragedy for them to lose their income.”

“I agree,” he said, his mind churning through options. “I found a letter from Drummond’s Bank demanding a payment of twenty thousand pounds.”

His mother winced. “George took many loans over the years to bolster the estate, yet profits still fell short. There are others, and they have been knocking on our doors since his...passing.”

Caleb had already assessed that his brother had resisted modern methods, ignoring the wave of industrialization and relying solely on outdated farming and mining practices. George had missed key opportunities to invest in rail and machinery, leaving the estate underfunded and behind the times. Caleb would have to work hard to turn things around, which would take years. But many dependents needed immediate assistance, particularly tenants with leaky roofs and crumbling homes. According to the reports from his principal estate in Hertfordshire, over a hundred homes that required urgent repairs have been neglected for the past four years.

Bloody hell .

Gripping the edge of the desk, Caleb felt the weight of responsibility heavily on his shoulders. He knew his mother was right; his father had left obligations, and George had done little to address them. But the notion of choosing a wife purely for her wealth left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“Lady Henrietta—”

“Is a woman I have no affection for. She would never be a suitable wife for me.”

His mother’s shoulders sagged, her mouth forming a thin line. “Affection...” she echoed softly as if the word were unfamiliar. “You are young enough to think you can afford such luxuries. But in time, you’ll see that duty comes first. Always.”

He held her gaze, feeling the battle lines drawn between them—duty on one side and his beliefs on the other. A knock sounded on the door.

“Come.”

Daphne entered, looking as lovely as ever yet still cloaked in an air of fragility. She smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. “I see Mother is trying to convince you to marry. The horrors.”

He chuckled while their mother glared at them.

“Will you...will you seek a countess?” Daphne asked, settling on the chaise.

There was a hopeful glint in her eyes, and his gut tightened. “Why is this important to you?”

She flushed, looking away briefly before lifting her chin to meet his gaze. “I...I want to marry and find my own happiness. There is...someone I admire. He is good-natured, gentle, kind, and has a wonderful sense of humor.”

Their mother gasped, her gaze narrowing. “Are you speaking about the Honorable Andrew Tremayne?”

His sister’s blush was answer enough.

“He is the second son of a viscount! He is not suitable—”

“He is,” Daphne said, that stubborn look entering her eyes.

“I sense a ‘but,’” Caleb said softly.

His sister’s eyes glistened with tears. “My dowry...the dowry Papa set aside for me had to be used. George had plans to...”

She broke off, pressing trembling fingers to her mouth. The weight of responsibility bore down on Caleb even more heavily.

“Your brother was not in a position to replace the money from your dowry,” their mother said, sighing. “And from what I understand, financial worries also burden the viscount. His sons need to marry well.”

Daphne’s mouth trembled, her emotions barely contained. Caleb closed his eyes, leaning back against his chair.

The most sensible course now to save his family was to secure an immediate connection within the ton. A lady from a powerful family with a respectable dowry and connections would open doors that were currently closed—especially with banks and future investments.

I shall only marry a man if I love him with every emotion in me.

Jenny’s aching voice drifted through his mind like a summer breeze .

I cannot imagine leaving my family.

Caleb raked his fingers through his hair. He had to let her go. They were worlds apart, and perhaps they could have found happiness together in another life.

“I am aware of the stakes, Mother,” he said. “I know my family needs me, and I am considering finding a suitable countess.”

Fucking hell . The loss that tore through him was so raw, so visceral, that a hiss slipped from his lips.

His sister’s smile brightened, easing the dread in her eyes, while his mother’s expression softened with approval.

Caleb stood and moved to the window overlooking the garden, thoughts of Jenny filling his mind, of the life he yearned for but could never claim. His hand slipped into his pocket, retrieving her letter, and he unfolded it slowly, letting her words wash over him once more.

Dearest Caleb,

I like you. I laughed as I wrote that because it’s far more than just liking you. I’m surrounded by family who love me deeply and whom I love with my whole heart. Yet, each morning when I wake, my first thought is of you; each night, you fill my dreams. I believe I’m falling in love with you. It’s a bit frightening, but it’s also wonderful. I understand you must leave, and I admire your commitment to your family and honor. I will miss you dearly and hope you’ll write to me often. You didn’t ask me to wait, but given my stubborn nature, I’ll do so unless you tell me you’ve found happiness with a wife and children of your own. My hand trembles as I write this, but I can only allow someone else into my heart by knowing you’re truly beyond my reach. I’ll always look at the moon and remember the magic of laughing with you, our kisses, and how I welcomed everything about you into my heart. I pray for your safe journey as you return to England.

Yours in friendship,

Jenny Kincaid

Caleb closed his eyes, willing himself to sever the lingering thread that bound him to his yearning for her.