

Towards Sunset

By Della Street

Part 1

Jess ran her hands through her long, black hair, thinking about tying it up for a while to let her neck breathe. It was the time of year when nights were brisk but the temperature rose quickly with the emergence of the morning sun. Looked like it would be another hot one today.

She stepped through thick foliage to the edge of the wide pool and knelt on the grass, dipping a rag into the clear water and applying it efficiently to her face, torso, and limbs. After her bath, she lay back, positioning herself where she would receive the sun's rays through branches of the trees that would conceal her from prying eyes.

Motion registered from the corner of her eye and Jess tensed, relaxing again when she saw that the moving object was a young woman, slight of stature, reddish blonde hair resting carelessly on her shoulders. Jess eyed the woman as she picked her way through the large boulders, using one hand to balance herself, clutching a basket in the other.

Only mildly curious about this non-threat, Jess watched through half-closed eyes as the woman settled herself on one of the flatter boulders. Her interest level rose sharply a moment later when the woman reached for the buttons on her frilly blouse. Jess's eyebrow arched, a habit so natural to her that it almost seemed inborn, and the blue of her eyes warmed as the woman peeled off the white cloth to reveal smooth, light skin.

A corner of Jess's mouth turned up as she took in the pleasant surprise unknowingly being conferred upon her by the young woman. The smile broadened as the blonde's long skirt was carefully folded and laid atop her blouse.

Jess adjusted the angle of her head slightly to obtain the full benefit of the show. The woman stood still for a moment on the rock, and with the sun reflecting off her fair hair and skin, she reminded Jess of the painting of an angel Jess had seen once in church a long time ago. A very long time ago.

Suddenly, the woman uttered a shrill, joyous shout, and leapt energetically into the depths of the pool. Jess grinned, teeth bared, as the blonde beauty frolicked in the water, strong, confident strokes intermixed with occasional playful bounces and flips.

It was too much. Jess heard the warning voice -- *No trouble* -- but a woman couldn't be blamed for wanting a closer look. No harm in looking.

Jess drew a corner of the ground cover over her six-shooter, and slipped into the water. With easy strokes, she meandered in the direction of the splashing, relying on her hearing to tell her when she was drawing near. She pressed her lips together, concealing a smile, when she heard a high-pitched gasp. Jess brought herself upright, and turned to face the startled swimmer.

"Sorry. Did I scare you?" she purred.

Mattie blinked, her heart pounding wildly. Just a woman, she told herself, but still a shock. She had been coming to this swimming hole for years without ever encountering another soul.

Finally, she remembered her manners. "No. Well, yes," she admitted. "I didn't know anyone else was here."

"Neither did I," Jess said. Her gaze drifted slowly down the woman's face, to the alabaster swells of skin below. *Hands off*, she reminded herself.

Mattie felt herself blushing, for no accountable reason. Why was she so nervous? "Um . . . I don't believe I know you," she said.

"I'm passing through." The stranger looked at her with shockingly clear blue eyes. "I'll be staying around Myersville for a while."

Mattie's face lit up. "Really? I teach school here. What brings you to our town?"

"My horse took a bad fall," Jess said. "She needs to heal up."

Mattie's eyes swept across the banks. "Are you by yourself?" At Jess's nod, the teacher's eyes widened. "Really? On the road by yourself? Don't you worry?"

Jess smiled. "No."

Not much of a talker, Mattie decided. "I'm Mattie. Mattie Brunson." She edged forward in the water and awkwardly extended a hand.

Jess answered with her own, smiling slightly at the quaint gesture. *Sheltered*, she decided, noting the young woman's careful efforts to keep her eyes from straying anywhere inappropriate. Jess straightened, bringing more of her torso into view, and bit back a laugh when the woman involuntarily lowered her gaze for an instant, her face flushing red.

"Mattie, huh? Is that short for something?"

The schoolteacher nodded, grateful for the distraction. "Martha America Gabrielle Brunson."

"Quite a mouthful."

Mattie laughed. "Martha for my grandmother, America for-- well, I guess that's obvious, isn't it?" She rolled her eyes. "And Gabrielle for too many people to name. There's always been a Gabrielle in my mother's line, as long as anyone can remember." Mattie blushed. This woman couldn't possibly care about her family history. Why was she blathering on like this?

Jess regarded the little schoolteacher with amusement. *Candy from a baby*, she thought wistfully. Damn her timing. "I'd better go," she said, turning away.

"Hey -- what's your name?" Mattie called. But the woman had ducked under the water, swimming efficiently toward the far bank, and didn't answer.

"We don't want your kind here." Winston's angry voice carried across the hotel dining room to where the young schoolteacher and her dinner companion were seated.

Mattie frowned, and tried to concentrate on the greens on her plate. She hated public confrontations, but she was only human, and after holding out as long as she could, she joined the other patrons in turning to gawk at the object of their mayor's wrath.

She froze, her breath catching in her throat, then quickly jerked her head back around, hoping against hope that the woman hadn't seen her.

It was her. Not the strange but friendly woman she had met at the pool, but a gunfighter, decked out in a plaid shirt tucked into dark breeches, belt and holster resting on her right hip. The woman was leaning back in her chair, her dark boots crossed at the ankles on the table in front of her, not seeming to care whether her kind was wanted in Myersville or not.

"Mattie?"

She stared, unseeing, at the partially uncovered floral design on her plate, her muscles paralyzed.

"Miss Mattie?"

She drew her head up to meet Mr. Thacker's concerned gaze. Absently, she tried to focus on his expensive spectacles and short brown hair, slicked back where he had removed his hat upon greeting her. "Mattie, are you all right? You've gone white."

She swallowed, still finding it difficult to breathe. "I'm . . . I'm just concerned about . . . that." She gestured toward the corner.

"Don't worry. With all of us here, she can't hurt you."

Mattie wasn't worried about that. The woman would not hurt her. No, Mattie was more worried about her kinsmen's reaction if they learned that she had conversed with a gunslinger, had been in an intimate setting with her. Mattie's face went from ashen to maroon, and she closed her eyes.

"Miss Mattie?"

She smiled weakly. "All this excitement," she said.

"We know what you did at Medicine Lodge, Chambers," Winston's angry discourse resumed.

Chambers? Mattie jumped to her feet, knocking her plate off the table, all eyes drawn to the sound of shattering porcelain. She swung her arm back around and caught a drinking glass, sending it too into a dozen pieces.

Involuntarily, she glanced toward the corner, and saw the woman's amused gaze on her. Mattie put a hand over her heart, trying to calm the pounding in her chest. The hotelkeeper approached their table, and Mattie reached out a hand apologetically. "I'm sorry, Henry. I don't know what happened."

He smiled and patted her shoulder. "It's no problem, Miss Mattie. I'll bring you another setting."

Mattie dropped back into her seat, head bent, as the proprietor went to retrieve a new dinner service. All eyes were still on her, and she felt the heat rising to her cheeks. A thought suddenly occurred to her. She could just leave now. Everyone would think it was from embarrassment at breaking the dishes. No one would think--

"I wasn't at Medicine Lodge," a calm voice said, steering the other customers' attention away from the mortified schoolmistress.

The mayor's head swung back around to the dark-haired woman. "You can't lie your way out of it, Hellrider," he spat.

"Since you seem to know who I am, I would advise you to choose your words more carefully. The last man who called me a liar has a third eye now."

Mattie tensed. The hair on the back of her neck was standing on end.

"I wasn't at Medicine Lodge," the outlaw repeated calmly, "and if you'll ask your sheriff--" She looked around with exaggerated curiosity. "Hmm. Where is the sheriff?"

Mattie pressed her lips together. The woman obviously knew the town did not have its own lawman.

"Marshal Evans is just over at La Junta," Winston replied angrily. "It's only a day's ride."

"Ask him, then. You'll find no outstanding charges against me." Jess's lips quirked.

"Because anyone who tries to testify against Jess Chambers ends up dead."

Jess shrugged, and took another draught of whiskey. "A mystery to me." She was growing tired of this familiar dialogue, and her eyes scanned the room for something to interest her, coming to rest on the attractive schoolteacher's stiff back.

Mattie held her breath. They had all heard what Hellrider did to honest citizens who tried to bring her to justice. Three years ago, she recalled, the people of Locust Grove had refused to release one of Jess Chambers' men from their jail. Mattie had been chilled to the bone to hear a survivor describe how the improvised militia stood, shoulder to shoulder, blocking access to the jail, until they realized with horror that flames had erupted all around them. They scattered, fighting through the fire to save their families and possessions, and Chambers and her band had simply ridden in, killed the few townsmen who remained at their posts, and reclaimed her man.

The welcoming committee currently standing before Jess Chambers looked questioningly at each other. Plan A hadn't worked; did anyone have a Plan B?

"I'll tell you what." Jess unexpectedly broke the silence. She took another leisurely sip, keeping them in their misery a while longer. "I'm a reasonable person. My horse needs to heal up, and then I'll move on. You leave me alone for a fortnight, and I'll leave you alone."

Mattie shuddered. The woman's words were not unfriendly on their face, but the tone of her voice conveyed a clear message: The townspeople were getting the better end of the bargain.

The delegates conferred for a moment as if they had another option, and Jess took the opportunity to return her gaze to her acquaintance of this morning. Their eyes met briefly, and the teacher spun back around. Jess smiled to herself.

"All right," Winston said. "Two weeks. You leave the people of this town alone, and we leave you alone. Your word?"

Jess tipped her mug at the spokesman, then drained the rest of her liquor. Suddenly she leaned forward, the legs of her chair landing on the ground with a loud thud, and the men jumped back. Jess smirked again -- did she find everything amusing? Mattie wondered -- and got to her feet.

Mattie felt her heart pounding. This was it. The woman was approaching the entrance now, and would pass directly by her. *Please don't say anything*, she prayed. *Please don't*.

All heads turned to follow the notorious criminal as she strode arrogantly toward the door. Against her better judgment, Mattie found herself looking up and into those striking blue eyes again. In a motion so quick that Mattie wondered if she had imagined it, the outlaw raised an eyebrow at her, then passed on through the swinging doors without a word.

Mattie exhaled slowly, and then her eyes widened. Had Jess Chambers just said 'hi' to her?

"Well, I'll be damned."

The blonde woman appeared on the rocks at dawn. This time, apparently aware that she might have an audience, she undressed quickly and slipped into the cool water without fanfare.

Jess wasn't in the mood for a swim, but she was in the mood for a certain schoolteacher A frustrated growl emerged from her throat. She had to keep her hands off. The last one of her men to break that rule had paid the price at the end of her whip, and Jess had learned long ago that a leader couldn't effectively discipline her men if she didn't live up to the same standards she imposed on them.

She glanced out at the bobbing figure in the water. Still . . . no harm in a little conversation with a view.

Jess stepped agilely across the rocky terrain until she reached the boulder across which lay a thin green blanket. Moments later, a wet blonde head popped out of the water near the bank, a small start the only sign of surprise at her guest's arrival.

"I'm surprised you came back here," Jess drawled, "what with a dangerous criminal in the vicinity."

"This is my spot," Mattie said, her words clipped.

"Oh. You were here first, is that it?"

There was no reply, but nervous defiance was written across the schoolteacher's face.

"And I'm not welcome." Jess finished the thought.

The young woman blinked. Apparently she hadn't thought of it like that. "I guess it's not for me to say," she said finally. "You do have a gun."

"Yes, I do," Jess said. "Do you think I'd use it on you?"

"I wouldn't know."

Jess propped a foot on the edge of the rock, and rested a hand on her thigh. "Some would, you know. Some would see you there in the water, naked, and decide to have their way with you."

Mattie's mouth fell open.

"They might even think you look so scrumptious, they'd go in there after you."

The color was rising fast, making quick progress past Mattie's throat to her face. She couldn't believe what this woman was saying to her.

"I don't believe this is a proper subject for ladies to be discussing," she said.

"Oh, I'm no lady."

Mattie frowned, flustered. "Well, nonetheless, I would prefer to change the subject."

"Fine," Jess said. "What would you rather talk about?"

That wasn't what she meant. Mattie didn't want to talk about anything with her. Although she was kind of curious . . . She shook her head. "Nothing. I just want to bathe, and be on my way."

"Don't you have a bathtub?"

"Of course I do," Mattie said. "But I like to come out here. It's usually private."

Jess laughed at the not-so-subtle reminder that she was a trespasser. Neither woman spoke for a moment, and suddenly Mattie realized that she was staring. Pursing her lips primly, she ducked under the water again to put some distance between her and the stranger. Jess sat on the boulder and leaned back, fingers laced around a bent knee, following the moving figure with her eyes, taking in occasional glimpses of light skin breaking through the surface.

After sufficient time to give the impression that she was not interested in an outlaw's company, the swimmer surfaced again near the bank. Treading water a few yards from the bank, she glanced uncertainly at her clothing.

"Do you want me to turn around?" Jess asked.

Mattie studied the woman for signs that she was being mocked. "Yes, thank you," she finally replied.

Jess swung away from her, and Mattie glanced at the other woman's back as she climbed out of the water and reached down for a towel, feeling a little guilty. "It's not that . . . I just don't know you, that's all."

"Of course."

Mattie jerked her head around. She couldn't see the other woman's face, but she could swear she was laughing at her.

"OK." Mattie was dressed now.

Jess swiveled around again. "You're a good swimmer."

Mattie's eyes narrowed, but there didn't appear to be any malice in the woman's expression. "Thank you. I like to swim."

"Is that what you do for fun around here?"

"There are a lot of things to do for fun around here," Mattie said defensively.

Jess raised her hands. "Hey, just wondering what you like to do, that's all."

Mattie just knew she was being made fun of, but she couldn't prove it. Finally, she said reluctantly, "I like to read."

"Oh." Jess nodded.

"Do you like to read?"

The gunfighter's lips quirked in that maddening expression that Mattie was becoming all too familiar with. "Yeah," she whispered, leaning toward Mattie with a serious expression. "Wanted posters."

Mattie rose stiffly, her jaw set, and began gathering her things together.

Jess opened her mouth, then shut it again abruptly when she realized she was about to apologize. She jumped to her feet, and before Mattie had even finished folding her blanket, she was gone.

The tall stranger ambled down wide town roads, rolling her tongue around the inside of her cheek. She was bored. Certifiably, mind-numbingly bored. She had amused herself for a while menacing assorted townfolk with her eyebrow, occasionally throwing in a curled lip, but now she was restless again.

The town posed no challenge to her. Mild-mannered, terrorized by the mere presence of a gunfighter in their midst, loose-tongued to a fault, the citizens of Myersville offered very little entertainment value. Personality had seemingly been sacrificed in the town's rather impressive accumulation of wealth in recent years. This region had been safely insulated during the late War, Jess knew, and its prosperity had not suffered the ill effects which still lingered in other parts of the country.

A fortnight in Myersville was beginning to seem like a very long time. From what Jess had seen, she suspected that she had already met most of its less pathetic residents. Suddenly she halted her stride, recognizing a voice through the window of a plain wooden structure. Checking to make sure she would not be observed, Jess slipped behind the building.

"Ben? Can you read it for us?"

The light tone was followed by a hesitant male voice. "He . . . handed . . . her . . . the . . . booket . . ."

"It's bouquet." Jess listened to the schoolteacher's soothing words. "It's a French word. Do you remember when we talked about France?"

Silence; Jess pictured eager little heads bobbing up and down.

"They don't pronounce the 't.' Sometimes words have letters in them that we don't pronounce."

"How do we know if they're supposed to be pronounced or not?"

Sounded like a fair question to Jess.

"Well, we'll learn some rules that will help. But sometimes you can't, and you just have to learn them. You'll start to recognize some of them." The instructor's voice was sweetly reassuring. "Go ahead, Ben."

"He handed her the . . . bouquet . . . of . . . flowers."

"That's very good."

Jess peered around the window frame.

"Alice, why don't you--" Startled green eyes met hers. After a moment, the schoolteacher continued haltingly, "work on writing out the words. I'll be right back."

Jess retreated from the window and leaned back against the wall. Quick footsteps crunched toward her, and a hot-tempered blonde soon rounded the corner, hands at her sides.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought I might learn something," Jess replied.

"You agreed to leave the people of this town alone. I heard you."

A mask fell over the dark woman's features. "What's your point?"

"Stay away from my children."

"Don't worry," Jess said coldly, "I'm not interested in hanging around with children." She strode purposefully away.

Mattie put her clothing back on and looked around, then picked up her basket and headed into the thicket to the east of her swimming hole. She tramped through the dense undergrowth, her head moving from side to side.

After a few minutes, she heard a noise, and whirled around to see Jess Chambers standing behind her.

"Are you lost?"

"No. I" Mattie hesitated. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry."

"Save it. I couldn't care less what you think of me."

"Well, I care."

"Don't bother. You know my reputation."

"Yes, I do," Mattie said. "I also know that it's not all true."

"Most of it is."

"Well, it doesn't matter." Mattie reached into the basket and pulled out a small cake, thrusting it at Jess. "I brought you this," she said, then turned and made her way back to the rocks and up the worn path that led to town.

Jess stared after her, glancing curiously at the soft pastry in her hand. She brought it to her lips and took a generous bite, her eyes returning to the teacher's retreating back.

Tasty indeed, she mused.

Mattie ran her hands through her damp hair, wringing out the excess water. Her gaze swept casually to her left, then her right, then-- There she was, off a ways, dark hair periodically emerging from beneath the surface of the water. Too far away to speak to, but that was fine. Mattie didn't want to talk to her or anything; she had only vaguely wondered if she was around.

She watched for a few more minutes, but the outlaw stayed off in the distance. Finally, Mattie glanced up at the sun with a frown; she needed to get going or she'd be late. She cast one

more indifferent glance toward the other woman, who didn't seem to have noticed her, and crawled out of the water.

"And now, the first prize." Henry held up his hands. "Donated by yours truly." He grinned, waiting until the friendly jeers died down, and announced the trophy: "A private dinner with our own Miss Mattie Brunson."

An excited masculine buzz passed through the crowd. Tradition had told them it would be an eligible female in town, but not *the* eligible female.

"So, Alice, let's see who our lucky bidder is." The master of ceremonies and his helper fished through the secret bids box. "Here's a five dollar," he said, waving a bid. Suddenly, the girl squeaked, and handed something up to her father. "Good lord," Henry boomed. "We have a bid here for twenty dollars!"

Mattie's mouth fell open, and she gaped at the bid. Well, not really a bid - just a twenty dollar gold piece taped to the slip of paper. It had to be Mr. Thacker. She smiled uncertainly. Twenty dollars. He would be expecting more personal attention from her now.

"For God's sake," Henry muttered. "The nerve"

"What's wrong?" Mattie whispered.

"Nevermind. The bid is invalid," he said.

Mattie grabbed his arm. "Wait! That's twenty dollars!"

"Blood money," he growled, handing her the piece of paper. She peered down at it, and her eyes widened. Something that arguably read "Chambers" was scrawled across the back.

The teacher lowered her gaze, her thoughts scrambled. The school needed that money, but

"We'll not take blood money," Henry reiterated.

Mattie's eyes roamed distractedly through the crowd, unexpectedly landing on the source of their dilemma, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere near the back of the room, her eyes meeting the teacher's in a subtle challenge.

"I'll tell her," Mattie said impulsively. She grabbed the bid from the startled hotelkeeper, and made her way through the assembly. "I'm sorry. We can't accept this," she said, tendering the paper to the infamous bidder.

"And why is that?" Jess paused to direct a general glare at nearby onlookers, who hastily backed out of listening range, then turned her attention back to the schoolteacher.

"It's" Mattie licked her lips. "You're Didn't you steal this?"

Jess laughed. "Yeah." She tapped a finger thoughtfully against her chin. "I don't remember if it was from the convent or the orphanage, though."

Mattie clamped her lips together. "I'm glad you find it so amusing." She pivoted and started away.

"No."

Mattie turned back around. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't steal it," Jess said. "I sold some skins."

"Really?" Jess arched an eyebrow, and Mattie grimaced. "Sorry. I just assumed . . ."

"I know what you assumed." Jess leaned toward her. "And you'd usually be right."

Torn, Mattie chewed on her lip for a moment, then turned and headed back up to the platform.

Jess hid a smile. Quite a romantic dinner: Just the luscious young schoolmistress, Hellrider, and a dozen hostile locals lined up along the bar, not bothering to stare anywhere but at the twosome seated in the center of the room. Miss Mattie's royal guard.

"The damage from the storm was quite extensive," the teacher was saying. Mattie glanced up, but it was apparent that the dark-haired woman wasn't listening. Mattie stared down at her plate. And why should she? Mattie had nothing to say that would be of interest to this woman. She began to rearrange the noodles on her plate into the shape of the American flag.

"Practically took the roof off, I hear."

Mattie looked up at her.

"And the head of the little schoolmarm who went out in it to look for her student's dog."

"How do you know about that?"

"You hear a lot of things if you're in the right place at the right time," Jess said, ". . . like what the secret prize in the school raffle is." She smirked at the blonde woman's surprised expression. Had she really thought that Jess Chambers gave a damn about a new roof for the school? "And why it was considered such a prize," she continued.

Mattie shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her instincts telling her she should change the subject, but she was temporarily at a loss for words again. It only happened to her around this woman, she had noticed.

"Seems the pretty schoolteacher doesn't get out much. She's friendly enough, and everyone loves her, but she keeps to herself of an evening." Jess could sense the heat rising in the young woman's cheeks, but whether from anger or embarrassment she wasn't sure. "Miss Mattie won't come out and play."

"You don't know me," Mattie said through her teeth, staring down at her plate.

Jess drew back, surprised at the vehement response to a little teasing. A sore spot, huh? Well, she never could resist one of those. "Oh, I think I do." She waited until the other woman raised her eyes. "You've lived here most of your life, but you want something more, something exciting. You read books about other people, and other places, and you wonder if you'll ever--"

"That's enough," Mattie interrupted, outrage overriding her fear. "You are--" She couldn't articulate her thoughts. "If you were a man, I'd slap your face."

"If I were a man, my boots would be under your bed tonight."

Mattie stared at her in disbelief, then rose and threw down her napkin. A couple of men lowered themselves from their barstools. Something was happening.

"I will not be subjected to that kind of language," she said angrily.

"Sit down."

"No." Mattie started from the table, but a strong hand reached out and grabbed her forearm.

From the corner of her eye, Jess could see that all of the men were on their feet now, but she wasn't concerned about them at the moment. She may have gone too far in tormenting the young schoolteacher. "I haven't gotten my twenty dollars' worth," she said.

Mattie glared silently down at the offending hand, and Jess loosened her grip.

"I'd think a double eagle should buy me an entire meal." Still no reply, and Jess released her arm. "All right; I'm sorry."

Mattie blinked, then slowly lowered herself back into her seat, staring at the woman across the table. "What do you want with me?" she asked quietly.

"The same thing you want: A break from the boredom until I clear out of here. Nothing more." The women continued to stare at each other until the standoff was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Henry, ostensibly to take their dessert order.

It was almost amusing, Jess thought; the hotelkeeper's creative use of facial muscles, alternating between an affectionate smile for the town's beloved schoolmistress and something just shy of a snarl for the Lucifer reincarnate whose every breath tarnished the saint.

"Thank you, Henry." Mattie handed the unread menu back to him with a smile. "I'll have the usual." A bright smile from the hotelkeeper.

"What's your usual?" Snarl.

"Rhubarb pie." Another smile.

Well, since old Henry was going to have to come up with another snarl anyway "What the hell is that?"

Mattie gawked at her. "You're kidding."

"No, I'm not," Jess said. "It sounds disgusting."

Mattie reached out excitedly to Jess's hand. "You've got to try it. It's a little tangy, but" She stuck out her tongue at the gunfighter. "That shouldn't bother you."

Neither Henry nor Jess could quite believe what they had just seen. Jess lowered her gaze to the menu, then quickly slapped it into Henry's hand. "Give me some cherry pie."

"We don't serve that. You mean apple pie?"

"Yeah. Whatever."

Mattie rolled her eyes -- "Boring!" -- and Jess gaped at her. Somehow she had lost control of this encounter.

Henry was back with amazing speed, tendering the desserts to his customers with varying degrees of pleasure. Mattie dug in enthusiastically, closing her eyes as her tongue licked stray filling from her lips. Watching the young woman enjoy her dessert, Jess felt her temperature rising, and hurriedly took a bite of her own pie. Suddenly she felt a hand on her arm, and looked up to see a fork floating through the air toward her, a bit of . . . stuff . . . on the end of it.

"Try just one bite." For God's sake; she wasn't going to be fed like a baby in front of half the town. Jess started to shake her head, but found herself looking into sparkling green eyes. It was amazing; this woman had simply put their argument behind her, no resentments, no conditions. Unthinkingly, Jess opened her mouth and accepted the offering.

"Whoa!" She chuckled. "That's got a bite to it."

Mattie grinned. "Told you." She sank the fork back into her pie, and had another nibble. "That's why I like it."

Smooth waves were sliced into the water's surface as a long, muscular body swam toward her.

"Hi!" Mattie waved as Jess drew near.

"Hi."

Mattie lowered her head; why couldn't she get this stupid grin off her face? After a minute, she looked up again. "I'm glad you--" But the other woman had disappeared, only to emerge a few seconds later, water dripping down the side of her face. Jess ran a hand through her hair, molding the wet mass back against her scalp.

Mattie smiled again. My God, this woman was beautiful. She wished--

"Do you have any sisters?" she blurted.

"No."

Mattie studied her, trying to determine if it was a "No, and I don't really want to talk," or a "No, and I'm not very good at making conversation." It was the latter, she decided.

"Do you have any brothers?"

"One."

Another pause, then, "Do you have parents? Alive, I mean."

"My mother."

"And . . .?"

Jess raised her eyebrows.

"Annnd . . .?" Mattie repeated. *Good grief.* "What's her name? Where does she live? Do you ever see her?"

Jess glanced at the far bank, calculating how fast she could swim over there. Oh, hell; after last night, she probably owed the kid something. "Her name's Emma, and she lives in Texas," she said. "I don't see her very often. She's not exactly bursting with motherly pride these days."

"Oh." Mattie winced. "So, what does your brother do?"

"He's a U. S. Marshal. I believe he spends a lot of time trying to hang me."

"Uhh" Mattie caught her lower lip between her teeth. This wasn't going very well.

Jess ran her tongue around the inside of her cheek. She really ought to lighten up, but this was too much fun.

"My, uh, parents moved to Lamar to live with my sister and her family," Mattie stammered, as if Jess Chambers had one iota of interest in Brunson family doings, but she couldn't seem to find any safe ground.

"Why didn't you go with them?"

"My duties were here."

"Lamar's a good sized town. You could have found a position there," Jess persisted, sensing she was on the verge of something interesting.

"Well, um, I couldn't be sure."

"And you wanted to be on your own," Jess said offhandedly.

Mattie nodded, then froze.

Jess kept her face carefully expressionless. *Thought so.* She raised herself onto the rocky bank and offered Mattie a hand, and for the next while the two women lay quietly on the blanket while the sun dried their skin.

"I had a good time at dinner last night," Mattie said.

"Mmm."

A moment later, Mattie chuckled, and Jess moved her head lazily. "What's so funny?"

"Well" Mattie laughed again. "When I saw that twenty dollars, I thought it was from Mr. Thacker."

"Mr. Thacker?"

"Our banker."

"Oh."

Mattie grinned. "I was really almost . . . well, almost kind of glad it was you." She blushed. Even with her eyes closed, she could sense the other woman waiting for elaboration. "Mr. Thacker has been very generous with the school," she said, "and when he's in town, I . . . he often asks me for dinner."

"And how often is that?" Jess asked.

"He comes in from Syracuse every Tuesday."

"Every Tuesday, huh? Wonder what brings him here so often."

"Um . . . well, this is just his first stop. He catches the stage here for Elkhart, and makes stops at the towns in between. So it's not like he's just coming here or anything."

"Not like he's coming here to get his hands on his sweetheart or anything."

"I'm not his sweetheart!" Mattie exclaimed. "And he doesn't get his hands on me. Mr. Thacker is a gentleman." She paused, then added softly, "for the most part."

Jess rolled over onto her side. "Has he done anything . . .?"

"No, no, not really." Mattie scrunched up her face. "Let's just say that a twenty dollar donation would have been awkward for me."

Jess inhaled slowly, surprised at the irritation she was experiencing. What did she care if someone was trying to exploit the little teacher's dedication in order to get into her bed? Jess had more important things to concern herself with. She took another deep breath.

"You weren't worried that I'd try to get my hands on you?" she asked, taking advantage of Mattie's closed eyes to conduct a lingering study of the young woman's body.

Mattie laughed, then sighed contentedly. She couldn't remember the last time she had enjoyed herself so much.

Jess glanced up again from her gun, but it was just some furry creature scuttling down the path. "You're lucky," she told it. She had just spent the past hour perched on the flat boulder, cleaning the weapon until it glistened as though it had never been fired. Jess grinned at that notion, then glided the rag over the barrel again, in case any stray residue had landed on it in the last few seconds.

She was glad the little teacher hadn't shown up today. She had started to become a distraction, a waste of Jess's time and energy. Last night, Jess had dreamed of reddish gold hair spread out on a soft blanket, a fiery body writhing under hers

Jess ran a hand through her dark mane, feeling the sun's rays deep within it. Where was she, anyway? Decided she'd spent enough time with the criminal element, probably.

Suddenly she heard the loud chime of a bell, followed by another, and Jess smiled as the echoes faded. Of course. Church. Miss Mattie Brunson was sitting on a pew somewhere, trussed up in some frilly white smock to reflect the purity of her soul. And body, Jess speculated.

She sat a while longer, tapping her fingers absently on her thigh, idly scanning the wooded area. *Floor-length or knee-length?* she wondered, picturing the fair-skinned teacher in an assortment of prissy frocks. Jess could always sneak up behind the church for a look, if she cared enough. Which she didn't.

Jess ran the rag over the gun handle again. A few minutes later, she got to her feet, replacing the weapon in its holster, and wandered toward town.

"Tell me you're joking." The schoolmistress's distressed voice rose to an unusually high pitch. "Louise"

"I'm sorry, honey." A pleasingly plump woman, her shoulder-length dark hair peppered with gray, pointed at the cast covering the lower half of her leg. "I can't even walk on it."

Mattie ground her teeth. Things had gone from bad to worse today. She took a deep breath, well aware that she was feeling a bit testy, had been ever since the Johnsons had brought over their children for tending last night. Of course, Mattie didn't mind helping out, especially with Rachel Johnson under the weather, but she had found it rather annoying that she couldn't go for her bath the second morning in a row.

"Well, we'll just have to reschedule," she said calmly.

"You can take us, Miss Mattie," a little voice squeaked. "You know what to do, don't you?"

"Ah. Well."

"You said everyone should know how."

"Yes, I did." A pause. "Of course I know what to do. It's just that Louise here is better at it. We can wait a couple of weeks--"

Louise shook her head.

"Months?"

She nodded, and Mattie's shoulders sagged.

"It'll be winter by then, Miss Mattie. We want to go!"

Mattie closed her eyes. "OK." She grabbed her friend and started to pull her away from the children, but the other woman lost her balance, nearly taking them both to the ground. "OK, get into your groups," Mattie instructed over her shoulder. "Let's see who can write out today's spelling words the fastest." Enthusiastic students poured over to the blackboard, and the teacher leaned into her friend. "Louise, by Thursday night, you're going to teach me everything you know about surviving in the woods."

"Sure, honey. I'll try to stop by tomorrow evening."

"Good. You--Oh, wait, I can't tomorrow," Mattie said.

"Why not? Oh!" Louise laid a hand on her cheek. "My word, how could I forget?"

"It's not funny, Louise."

"No, it's not, Mattie. An opportunity of a lifetime is presenting itself to you, and you're just letting it blow by."

"Louise." Mattie was in teacher-mode now, trying to explain something for the fifth time to an uncomprehending pupil. "If this were the opportunity of a lifetime, I would jump at it. But it's not."

"Then what the hell is?"

"Louise!" Mattie peeked over at the busily scribbling children to see if they had overheard the epithet. "I don't know. But I know this isn't it." She held up a hand to forestall whatever her friend was going to say next. "I don't want to talk about it any more. Just tell me you'll be over to show me some stuff by Thursday."

"You know, if you had just come along with Abijah and me one of those times we asked, you wouldn't--"

Mattie's eyes narrowed.

"Nevermind."

Outside the building, a tall figure leaned against the wall, braced on one knee. Jess smiled, then moved quietly away as she heard the words which signalled an end to the school day.

Mattie poured another cup of tea for her guests. "No, no, I'm always glad for the company. I'd probably just be reading or something if you hadn't stopped by." She started to sit down, then snapped her fingers. "Oh, Henrietta, I forgot. You wanted to see that cross stitching. Just a minute."

She walked down the hallway and opened her bedroom door, then slammed it shut again.

"You know, I just remembered I'm exhausted. Can't keep my eyes open." She urged her guests to their feet and ushered them toward the door. "Goodnight."

Wagging her fingers at the befuddled visitors, Mattie shut the door firmly behind them and leaned against it for a moment. Steeling herself, she returned to the bedroom door and yanked it open. Yes, there she was, lying on the bed as if she owned the place, her legs crossed at the ankle.

"Excuse me," Mattie said calmly. "May I ask what you're doing here?"

In a languid motion, Jess raised herself off the bed and reached for a stuffed saddle bag. "Have you ever built a fire?"

"What?"

"Have you ever built a fire?"

Mattie squirmed. "Well, not personally."

"I can show you how."

"Why?"

Jess shrugged. "Just thought you might want to know."

"Well, actually--" Mattie's brow furrowed. "How did-- Have you been spying on me?"

The smile left Jess's face. "You think a lot of yourself," she said. "Why would I waste my time spying on a small town nothing like you?"

Mattie turned her head, feeling as though she had been struck.

Jess frowned. "Look, you didn't come for your bath yesterday or today. I just came to see if--" Oh, hell, that sounded even worse than the truth, which was that she *was* spying on her. Jess closed the drawstring on the bag and turned toward the window. "Forget it. I'm just bored out of my skull in this one-horse town."

"Wait!" Mattie reached out to her. "I'm sorry. It's just that I've never met anyone like you." She ran a hand through her hair. "I mean, after years of people telling you not to trust someone--"

"Don't," Jess interrupted.

"What?"

"Don't trust me, Mattie. You'll get hurt. I'm not who you think I am."

Mattie studied her. Jess didn't mean it. She wouldn't have come to check on her if she didn't care at least a little. "OK. I won't trust you," she said. "But I've got a big problem on Friday if I don't learn some things about surviving in the woods." She smiled hopefully. "I'd really appreciate it."

Jess reached for her saddle bag, and glanced at her pupil. "It would make more sense to go outside."

Mattie marched to her dresser and bent to pull out a drawer. "Fine by me." She drew out a thick blanket and started to close the drawer, but a quick hand darted in and plucked something out.

"What's this?"

Oh, God. Mattie swallowed. "Nothing."

Jess reached further back into the drawer and pulled out a stack of thick booklets. "Wellll, Miss Mattie Brunson."

This would be a good time to take me, God.

"I do believe I'm holding a fine collection of what a fancy schoolteacher would call dime store rags."

The blonde woman plopped down on the bed, three fingers pressed to her heated forehead.

"You know, some of these drawings don't do us justice." Jess grinned at her joke, peering at the cover of a booklet in her hand. "Is that supposed to be blood?"

Mattie had never fainted before, but she was pretty sure this was it.

"Don't recognize him . . .," Jess remarked absently, tossing a booklet over her shoulder, not entirely oblivious to the effect she was having on the young schoolteacher. "I think I killed him . . .," she continued. "Hey!" She held out a pamphlet. "Is this about me?"

Mattie looked up at it, and closed her eyes in resignation. "Well, what does it say?" She shifted her gaze in time to catch the other woman's expression as Jess threw the pamphlet onto the bedspread with the others. Mattie's eyes widened. "Oh. I'm sorry, Jess; I didn't realize."

"Forget it." Jess lay her body across the bed, crossing her ankles. "I can tell a silver dollar from a double eagle, and I can sign my name to a ransom note. That's all I need to know."

Mattie reached over and picked up the book. "It is about you. It's called Hellrider at Harper's Town." She flipped through the pages, then threw the book disgustedly on the floor. "But this isn't you."

"It probably is. Let me guess: I killed twenty men for getting dust on my boot." Jess stretched her muscles, the extension of her arms and legs making the rangy body seem impossibly longer. "And probably did it without reloading my six-shooter."

Mattie frowned. "No, you robbed the bank and took the teller hostage."

Jess rolled her eyes. "Never happened." She winked at Mattie. "Not at Harper's Town, anyway."

Mattie pursed her lips, torn between giving a disapproving look and smiling at the joke.

"So, did I kill him?"

"Who?"

"The teller."

"Oh. Actually, it's not a him," Mattie said. "It's a her. And no, you didn't. You did kill a man who sought to force his attentions on her, though."

"Why? He wouldn't pay?"

Mattie stared at her. "No"

"Or did I have evil plans for the maiden myself?" Jess leered exaggeratedly at the woman sitting beside her on the bed.

Mattie blushed. "Well, no, I mean, there's nothing like that either."

"Oh. Left out the part where I had my way with her in the barn, did they?"

Mattie's mouth opened.

Jess leaned toward her. "Twice," she whispered.

The teacher's jaw was working, but no sounds were emerging. Jess finally took pity on her, and picked up one of the books. "This stuff is pure garbage, Mattie. Most of it's made up, and the parts that aren't are so distorted that I probably wouldn't even recognize things I actually did."

"Well, it's just supposed to be entertainment," Mattie replied defensively, stacking the books up to redeposit them in their hiding place.

"Oh, yeah. It's real entertaining when every lowlife from here to the Mississippi wants to blow your head off because they've read about your itchy trigger finger in one of these rags."

"It's not because of these," Mattie said. "You were a . . . famous person before these were written."

Jess nodded. "Yeah, but I wouldn't have someone calling me out every other day if these things hadn't built me up into some kind of superhuman." She sat up. "Come on. Let's go build a fire."

"Is this what it's like for you? I mean, is this how you live?"

Jess shrugged. "Sometimes."

"It's kind of fun," Mattie said.

"Sometimes."

"Is there someone you travel with?"

"Sometimes."

Once again, Mattie found herself in the familiar position of waiting for elaboration that wasn't forthcoming. "Um . . . anyone in particular?"

"No."

"Do you ever get lonely?"

"Sometimes."

Mattie grunted. "Gee, let me get a word in, will you?"

"You manage."

Mattie met her companion's eyes, looking for insult, but finding a warm gaze instead. She grinned at Jess, who looked a lot more like a woman tonight than a cold-blooded killer.

"What made you start killing?" The words were out before Mattie even realized it. It was too late now; it would be even more awkward to try to withdraw them.

Jess pointed toward the fire.

"What? Oh. Got it." Mattie scooted over and moved a containment rock back into place, then leaned back on her calves and waited.

"You want the whole story?" Jess asked.

Mattie nodded. Was she kidding?

"We lived on a farm, and one day we went into town for supplies." Jess inspected the cylinder of her gun. "Wilburn Johnson's gang rode into town to rob it. He killed my father and some of the others who were stupid enough to resist." She examined each chamber closely, her inflection as flat as if she were exchanging a recipe. "One of Johnson's men found us in the livery and attacked my mother. I pulled his gun out of his holster and blew his head off."

Mattie stared at her. "And then . . .?"

"And then I went after Johnson." Jess smiled humorlessly. "My brother and I didn't see eye to eye on how to handle the situation. My way was a lot faster."

"And then . . .?"

Jess glanced at her, warning the teacher not to push too far. But she wasn't there yet, Mattie sensed, and she waited.

"And then, after I'd put a barrel in Johnson's ear --" Jess looked pointedly at the younger woman -- "I found myself on the wrong side of his men, and I used the money to hide out for a while." She shrugged. "And then I needed a little more . . ." She grinned. "I finally convinced his men they'd be better off working for me than competing with me."

"You don't need any more money now, do you?"

"No. Now I do it because I like it."

Mattie frowned.

"It gets my juices going."

The frown deepened.

"You don't like to hear the truth, Mattie, but that's it."

"I'm sorry; I just don't think you're . . ."

"What, evil? Yes, I am, Mattie. Remember that."

"Why would you be here" -- Mattie swept her hands across the campsite -- "with me, helping me, if you're such a rotten person?"

"Because I'm bored, and I find you amusing." Jess held out her palm. "Interesting," she amended.

"Oh, right," Mattie said. "Is it because of the fascinating life I've led, or the constant danger and excitement I face? I mean, one day I did stub my toe *twice*."

Jess laughed. "I'm not sure which," she said. "So, you don't come out in the woods much?" she asked, changing the subject.

Mattie shook her head, and picked up a small stick to pitch into the fire. "No. Most nights I prefer to read, or write."

"Write what?"

Another twig landed on the flames. "Oh, stories, poems, songs. I wrote a hymn once."

"Let's hear it."

Mattie looked up. "Hear what?"

"The hymn," Jess replied. "Or a story, poem, song, whatever. You choose."

"I'd rather not."

"Come on." Jess raised an eyebrow in encouragement.

"No."

"Just--"

"Look, you said not to trust you. I don't trust you not to make fun of something that's important to me, all right?"

Jess turned her attention to her gun again, but there was really nothing more she could do with it. She reached into her boot and drew out a knife, examining it in the firelight. "I said not to trust me," she said quietly, "and I meant it, but I'm not making fun of you. I'd like to hear something you wrote."

Mattie swallowed, and wiped her hands on her cotton skirt. After a moment, she nervously recited a short poem she had written a few weeks ago about the changing of summer to autumn.

"I liked that," Jess said. "Tell me another one."

Mattie smiled, and the fire burned low to the sound of her soothing voice.

Mattie rolled over and stretched luxuriously, then opened her eyes. "Oh, Lord!" The sun was a quarter of its way up the sky.

She jumped up, still half asleep, and reached for her blanket. "Damn! What's the matter with this!" The blanket wouldn't budge.

Jess jerked awake, even more surprised than the teacher at the lateness of the hour. She looked over to see her panicked campmate standing on her blanket, trying unsuccessfully to pull it out from under her own feet. She climbed out of her bedroll and circled Mattie's waist with her arm, lifting her off the ground and yanking the blanket up at the same time.

"Oh. Thanks." Mattie leaned against Jess's shoulder for a moment, until she realized what she was doing. "I overslept," she mumbled.

"Yeah, me too. Sorry."

"Hey, it's not your fault. I knew better than to stay up so late. I'm not always the easiest person to wake in the morning." Mattie rolled up her blanket and smoothed her skirt. "How does my hair look?"

"Like you spent the night in the woods with a wanton criminal."

"I was afraid of that." Mattie rose up on her tiptoes and kissed the taller woman on the cheek. "Thanks. I'll see you later."

Jess stared after her, her fingers absently touching the side of her face.

Mattie crept silently toward her house. Only a few more steps

"Mattie!"

Oh, yes, great. The mayor. Three kids, second and third rows.

"Mattie--" Winston stopped short. "Well, good Lord, girl, you look a fright. Where've you been?"

"I spent the night in the woods with a wanton criminal."

He chuckled. "Right, darlin'. Gettin' a little practice in for your big campout, I take it."

"Yes, as a matter of fact." That big-mouthed Louise

"Well, you oughta tell someone before you run off in the woods by yourself, girl. We were pretty worried when you didn't show up for school this morning."

Mattie reached out to touch his arm. "I'm sorry, Winston. I overslept."

"Well, that's all right. The kids don't mind a day off once in a while." He winked broadly at her. "And it'll give you more time to get ready for the big event."

"The big event?"

"A certain gentleman who, rumor has it, might be arriving this afternoon with a certain item from a jeweler in New York City."

Mattie gritted her teeth. Louise

An hour later, the schoolteacher selected a volume from one of the stacked shelves in her parlor and lay back on the comfortable couch. An unexpected day off. This wasn't so bad. It reminded her of lying in the sun with Jess a few days ago, and she smiled.

Mattie opened the book and looked at the illustration inside the cover.

What did Jess do all day, anyway?

She shrugged, and returned her attention to the book in her hands. A new romance, ordered from a dealer in Chicago with some of the money she had made from selling her story last spring. Mattie frowned, and crisply flipped over the title page, bringing her eyes down to the opening paragraph.

Would Jess be out at the pool today?

She turned her attention back to the page. After a few minutes, she set the book down and slipped into her walking shoes.

Mattie glanced into the trees to her right. They had been following her since she left the town limits. She had noticed them almost immediately, which had kept her on the main road instead of the short cut to the swimming hole where she had hoped to run into her new friend.

She heard a slight rustle and glanced over again, a corner of her mouth turned up. She jerked her head around, her hands at her sides. "Is someone out there?" she shouted.

Delighted giggles from the surrounding woods conveniently failed to reach the schoolteacher's ears, and she resumed her leisurely jaunt.

Through the fork of a tree, a pair of bright blue eyes tracked Mattie's progress. Jess grinned. The schoolmistress had apparently gone for a stroll, and was being 'stalked' by three young boys. Jess caught another brief flash of red, brown, and, further over to the left, rather bright yellow. Great camouflage.

"Who's there?"

Jess smiled again at the schoolteacher, who was making a great show of demanding to know the source of the noise, affecting a sufficiently perplexed expression to keep the boys snickering happily.

Mattie rounded a bend in the road, walking backward so that she could peer conspicuously into the trees, and suddenly bumped into something. Startled, she turned around to discover three decidedly more intimidating males in the road ahead of her.

"I'm sorry." She started to walk around them, only to find her path blocked. "Excuse me," she tried again, her mind alert enough to pray that the boys would remain still.

"What are you doing out here on your own, sweet thing?"

"I went for a walk, but I'm late for a town meeting now," Mattie said. "My brother will be looking for me."

"Uh huh." The oldest of the men, not much taller than Mr. Thacker but possessing an amazingly thick neck, ran his eyes down her body. "Well, if you're already late, another little while won't matter, will it?"

Mattie stepped back. "My brother will be . . ." She gave it up; it was obvious they didn't believe her. "Please let me pass," she said quietly.

"Now, that wouldn't be much fun, would it?" The dark sideburns trailing nearly the length of the man's face shifted with his repulsive grin.

Would the boys know to run for town? Mattie hoped so. She took a deep breath, then suddenly hitched up her skirt and bolted, running as fast as she could the other way.

The quickest of her attackers tackled her a dozen yards down the dirt road. He turned her over onto her back and clamped his hand around her neck, waiting for his colleagues to close in on them.

"Let's get her off the road. Keep her quiet."

Mattie didn't know who had said it; she was busy kicking and scratching and biting with every ounce of energy she possessed. Suddenly, the hand left her throat as the first man's weight was lifted from her, and Mattie saw his head jerk back sharply, Jess's fist connecting solidly with his jaw. With such amazing speed that it seemed almost a single motion, Jess backhanded another of her attackers and swung an elbow viciously into the forehead of the third, then turned her attention back to the man who had thrown Mattie to the ground and mauled her.

She yanked him to his feet by the front of his shirt, his mouth open in obvious terror but unable to form any words. Without warning, Jess backhanded him across the face, blood spurting from a cut lip, and brought her knee up hard between his legs. As he started to fall, Jess reached out and caught his throat, squeezing her fingers together, her face an inch from his. "I ought to cut your heart out," she snarled.

Mattie stared, entranced, at the scene. The man appeared to be losing consciousness, but Jess was still choking him. Finally, Jess closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Her lip curled with the effort to bring herself under control, and she reluctantly released her captive. He slid to his knees, a hand to his throat, gasping for air.

"Get out of here," Jess said, watching the men scramble onto their mounts and take off down the road. As they passed from sight, Jess knelt and laid a hand gently on Mattie's shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Mattie ran her palms across her forehead. "Yeah. I guess. That was . . ."

Jess helped her to her feet, and Mattie looked down, still dazed, at her filthy and torn dress.

"Miss Mattie!" Winston and a half dozen other rescuers were barreling down the road toward the women, Mattie's three little stalkers doing their best to keep up with much shorter legs.

At the sight of Jess Chambers, hands bloodied, standing beside their disheveled schoolmistress, the two men who were armed pulled their guns. Mattie stepped in front of Jess, and reached a hand out behind her. She wasn't sure what part of Jess's body she was touching, but she needed to still what she imagined the fighter's instinctive reaction would be to drawn weapons.

"Miss Chambers came to my assistance," she said. "She drove the men off."

Winston looked begrudgingly at the tall woman, wrestling with himself. "Thanks," he finally said. "You can move on now; we'll take care of her from here."

Mattie stiffened at the insult to this woman who had just saved her from a dreadful experience. "Winston,--"

"That's fine," Jess interrupted. She stepped off the road toward the woods.

"Wait!" Mattie could barely resist reaching out to touch her. "Um . . . Thank you. I" Damn Winston and the others for standing so near, she thought. "I think I need a bath now," she finally said, meeting her protector's gaze.

"Yeah, looks like you do," Jess said, then disappeared into the trees.

Mattie had had more than enough fussing for now. She looked at the solicitous matrons seated around her parlor who were determined to console her in spite of her repeated assurances that she was all right, and tried not to fidget. She didn't have time for this.

Long minutes later, Mattie laced her fingers together to keep them from drumming holes in the arms of her chair. She could tell them she needed a rest. *Hmm*. The schoolteacher considered the option. Yes, they would certainly understand that. But then if she got caught sneaking off . . .

Mattie stifled another sigh.

"Well, it's about time."

Jess stripped off her shirt and pants and dove into the pool, confident strokes taking her nearly all the way to the other bank before she turned around and headed back in. Mattie laughed, swiftly removing her own clothing, and slipped into the water. She wondered for a moment why Jess had kept her undergarments on, and then it occurred to her. "You know, I could wash those for you," she offered.

Jess paddled over to her. "Nah, this works fine." As Jess made her way back to the shallow area, the surface of the water receded gradually so that Mattie could clearly see the undershirt

clinging to the other woman's breasts. Mattie's eyes travelled downward, and saw that very little was left to the imagination there, either.

"You sure you're OK?" Jess asked, noticing the schoolteacher's flushed face. She forced down her rising anger again. She would take care of those three bastards later.

"I'm fine. I" Mattie glanced up again, and gulped. "Thanks for" She shrugged, unable to meet Jess's gaze, but finding it unwise to look anywhere else. Why was she feeling so uncomfortable because of some stupid undergarments? After all, she had seen Jess with no clothing on at all

The image flooded Mattie's already overworked brain, and her breath caught. Suddenly feeling modest, she turned around and reached for her camisole. "Maybe I'll wash this, too." She slipped it over her head, then lowered herself back down to the water. Something tugged at the cloth, and Mattie tried to look over her shoulder. What--?

"You're caught."

"What?"

"Don't move, or you'll tear it." To the schoolteacher's dismay, Jess was heading straight for her in that adherent undershirt. Mattie tried to keep her eyes on the trees lining the bank, or the rippling water, but

She looked up and directly into two large breasts outlined by the thin material, taut nipples jutting through the wet cloth. Mattie's eyes widened, watching in horror as the woman leaned closer to untangle the slip from whatever it was caught on. Mattie's mouth opened, and she unconsciously ran her tongue across her upper lip.

"Just another second" Jess glanced down, and heat rose within her body as she immediately took in the situation. She paused. She could lean in just another inch, and she would feel the schoolteacher's lips curl around her nipple, she was certain. She closed her eyes. She could raise her shirt, and force her whole breast into the woman's mouth, fingers tangled in blonde hair as she parted the woman's thighs with her other hand

Mattie was having a hard time breathing. She bit down on her lower lip and closed her eyes, but opened them again almost immediately, unable to turn away from the incredible mounds that were just beyond her reach. Unless she moved her head forward

"There you go." Jess let the white material slide from her fingers and backed away. "I've got to be somewhere," she said abruptly, and swam away with powerful strokes.

"I heard about what happened."

Mattie glanced up at the bespectacled young man sitting across her dining room table. She didn't really want to discuss it with him.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," he continued.

"I don't think you could have done anything about it," Mattie said.

"Well, you wouldn't have been on your own then."

Mattie waved her fork around. "I wanted to be on my own. I was on a walk."

"Those filthy ruffians, and then Jess Chambers." He shook his head. "Hard to know which is worse."

"I'd say that being raped would have been worse," Mattie said stiffly.

Thacker blinked at the schoolteacher's directness. "Of course, Mattie, I didn't mean to suggest otherwise. I just meant that it must have been quite a day for you."

An idea formed in Mattie's brain. "Yes, Mr. Thacker,--"

He reached a hand out to hers. "Please call me David. After all, we have been seeing each other for some time, now."

Mattie smiled nervously. What did he mean by seeing each other? "OK, David. Um, it has been quite a day, and I'm really rather--"

She looked down in alarm at his hand, which was petting the smooth skin on the back of her own.

"Mattie."

The bastard wasn't even listening to her, Jess fumed, hadn't been since his arrival, worrying more about hiding his damned suitcase than courting the woman he was about to propose to, if rumor had it correctly. Reclining on the window well, Jess listened from the darkness as the drama unfolded before her.

"I'm really rather--"

"Mattie, you know how I feel about you."

"David, I'd rather not--"

"Please, Mattie, just hear me out."

One more interruption and she would not be responsible for her actions, Jess decided. She smirked. Hell, she wasn't responsible for her actions anyway.

"Mattie, I feel that we are well suited to each other."

Well suited to each other? What the hell does that mean? That isn't what Mattie Brunson would want to hear, you idiot. She'd want to hear something romantic.

"You're a very pleasant person."

Very pleasant person? Jesus, get off the saddle and let a woman lead, Jess thought. Why don't you try telling her she's wonderful? Moron.

"I think you're wonderful, Mattie."

Jess's lip curled.

"And I'd be honored if you would be my wife."

Yeah, you'd be honored.

The gunfighter waited, then peered cautiously around the edge of the window to see Mattie wrestling with her reply. Jesus, surely she wasn't considering marrying this loser. Jess leaned her head against the wall. From what she'd seen, though, there wasn't much else available in this town. Nothing really suitable for this woman.

"That's a wonderful offer, David"

Jess's head jerked up.

". . . but I don't want to give up my responsibilities at the school. And you know I could no longer teach if I were married."

"Now, Mattie, I thought you'd say something like that. We all know how much you love your kids. And I want you to know that, if you became my wife, you would be free to spend however much you desired on the school."

So, he was upping the ante. To her dismay, Jess realized that she was holding her breath, waiting to hear the response. *Jesus*, she thought, disgusted with herself. What was she doing, sitting here, eavesdropping on the jabbering of a schoolteacher and her lovesick beau? She was losing her grip. Jess climbed down from the ledge and, both hands balled into fists, headed for camp.

"This is good. Thanks." Jess bit into a drumstick. The teacher had shown up this morning with a colorful picnic basket, packed with well-cooked chicken and something Jess strongly suspected was rhubarb pie. She shook her head slightly. It just didn't seem to occur to this woman that she shouldn't be having a picnic with a ruthless killer.

A smile lit up Mattie's face. "Thanks."

"Is this from your dinner last night?"

The smile faded. "Yeah."

"So how'd it go?" Jess asked between bites.

"How'd what go?"

Hmm. If Jess didn't know better, she'd say the schoolteacher was trying to avoid the subject.

"The dinner."

"The dinner?"

Jess pursed her lips. "I thought last night was your weekly dinner with banker man."

"Oh. Yeah, it was."

Jess ran her tongue under her upper lip. *So are you going to marry him or not?* she wondered, but it was none of her concern.

"He offered to, uh, make a sizable donation to the school."

"Annnd . . .?" Jess prompted, borrowing one of the teacher's favorite forms of interrogation.

"I told him I'd think about it. I'd really rather not accept it," Mattie said, more to herself than to her breakfast companion.

"Then don't."

Mattie sighed. "It's not that easy. It may be the best offer that I'll--that the school will get."

"Does the school need it?"

Mattie moved her shoulders up and down. "I don't know. Everyone says we do." She stared, unseeing, at the picnic basket. "What else is there?"

Jess remained silent, reminding herself that this was none of her business. She would be gone in a few days, and the schoolteacher would be glad to see the last of her. *Just a break from the boredom*, Jess reminded herself, and that boredom would end in four days. She set the thought aside.

"I won't be by tomorrow morning," Mattie said. Jess looked up at her. "Campout tonight."

"Oh." Jess sucked in her cheeks, working at maintaining a straight face.

"You . . ." Mattie examined her fingernails. ". . . wouldn't want to come or anything, would you?"

Jess stared at her. "On an outing in the woods with the town's children."

Mattie nodded.

"I didn't want to tell you this, Mattie, but there are a couple of people in town who don't like me."

The teacher laughed.

"Not one of your better ideas," Jess said gently.

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking." Mattie drew a vague pattern in the dirt. "It's not the kind of thing you'd be interested in anyway."

Not interested in spending another evening around a fire with the lovely blonde woman, sharing a small tent with her? Jess didn't reply.

The schoolmistress had done a pretty good job of bluffing her way through the evening's activities, Jess had to admit. A decent fire crackled, and happy little stomachs were full of makeshift stew and wild berries. She had been less successful at convincing the little brats to go to bed, but finally they had hit on a compromise: In exchange for a story, the kids would voluntarily hit the sack.

Of course, that was four stories ago. Mattie seemed to have a knack for it, and at the conclusion of one tale, her young audience would beg her for just one more . . .

The stories were kind of interesting, Jess conceded; not like any she had ever heard before. Of course, it wasn't like she had heard that many stories, at least not ones you could tell a bunch of kids.

". . . and that's how Zeus got the lightning bolts."

Jess smiled; it had been a good choice. Adoring pupils chattered on excitedly about the lightning storm of last year, about the tree in Mr. DeGraffenreid's back yard that had been split and now grew in two directions, and -- surprise -- insisted on another lightning story.

Mattie paused, then smiled sweetly. "OK. I only know one other story, and then that's it for tonight." Reluctant nods; they knew she meant it this time. The teacher closed her eyes. She had read the story once at a bookseller's before they left St. Louis and begged her parents to buy the book, but the trip west would be arduous and there was no room for luxuries. Still, somehow the words had come back to her many times over the years, as clearly as if she had the volume open before her.

"Once a long time ago, all humans had four legs and two heads," she began, gazing fondly at her young listeners as they tried to picture it. "Then the gods threw down thunderbolts and split everyone into two. Each half now had two legs and one head. But the separation left both halves with a desperate yearning to be reunited with each other because they still shared the same soul. Ever since then, all people spend their lives searching for the other half of their soul."

Hidden safely in the dark, Jess watched the rapt face of the schoolteacher as she spoke, and wondered if she had written it. It was obvious that the story meant something special to her. It meant nothing to Jess; she didn't have a soul.

Reclining on the bed, Jess watched Mattie change from her Sabbath dress to something plainer.

"I didn't hear any cries for help the other night," she said.

"Hmm?" Mattie looked over at her. "Oh, the campout. I managed not to burn anything down, and no one ate anything poisonous."

"What more could you ask for?"

Mattie smiled.

"How'd you keep the little rats entertained?" Jess asked casually.

"Just goofing around, telling stories."

Jess nodded. "Your own?"

"Hmm?"

"Were they stories you wrote?"

"Some of them," Mattie said. "But I didn't take my book, so I could only tell the ones I remembered well enough."

"Your book?"

"I write my stories in a journal." She gestured toward her nightstand.

Jess reached over and opened the top drawer, drawing out a notebook. She held it out toward Mattie. "Read me something."

Mattie looked down at the gunfighter's hands and blanched. "That's the wrong one," she said. "It's the one sitting on top."

Jess opened to the first page. "This isn't your writing?"

"It's my writing, but it's not--it's not the right one," she said again, reaching for it.

"Well, go ahead and read me something," Jess said, handing her the book. "I don't care what it is."

"Then let me get the right one," Mattie insisted. "You wouldn't want to hear anything in this." She started toward the nightstand, but a strong hand clamped around her forearm.

Jess studied her for a moment. "Read it to me," she said evenly.

Mattie stared down at the page, the silence growing longer and more telling. She closed her eyes.

"Read it."

Mattie opened her eyes, tears already forming in them, making it difficult to focus on the writing. She began, haltingly, to speak the words out loud.

"They called her Hellrider for a reason: When Jess Chambers and her gang rode into a town, it was as if the Furies of Satan had been loosed upon its defenseless citizens." Mattie paused, wishing Jess would tell her to stop. "It is said that Hellrider once had a heart, but if she still retained that particular item in her possession, it was buried among the stolen hopes and dreams of hundreds of her faceless victims."

Mattie lowered the notebook to her lap and closed her eyes, a painful lump in her throat. "Jess"

Jess's eyes narrowed, and she raised herself off the bed and walked to the dresser, yanking the bottom drawer open and pulling out the stack of novellettes. Sorting through them until she came to one with a woman on the cover, she held it up. "Who wrote this?"

Mattie didn't need to look. "Mark Bronson."

Their eyes locked, and Mattie reached out a hand. "Please, Jess, listen to me. I wrote those a long time ago, before I met you."

Jess picked up her holster from the center table and fastened it to her belt. "Well, you'll have some new material now," she said. "Some first-hand knowledge." She laughed at some unexpressed thought and shook her head, as if her mind were suddenly clearer. "You've reminded me of who I am, and what I'm supposed to be doing. Time for me to move on," she said, stepping toward the window. As she started to lean over the window sill, she turned for a final look at the dejected schoolteacher. "Remember what I said."

Mattie stared dully at the outlaw's back as it disappeared into blinding sunlight, and buried her face in her pillow.

Part 2

Most of the residents of Myersville heard the steadily growing rumble, but neither the mayor, nor the hotelkeeper, nor the puzzled schoolteacher recognized the sound in time to do anything about it. An hour before the sun would be directly overhead, horses carrying two dozen armed men descended on the town.

Mattie stepped over to the doorway of the schoolhouse. Even in the midst of men and horses, she spotted Jess instantly, and a smile spread across her face.

"Over there!" Jess pointed toward the building. "Take the school!"

Mattie froze. What . . . ? Moments later, she struggled with a rough bearded man who had pinned her arms behind her back, helpless to comfort the frightened children herded into the corner by two others.

Her head jerked up at the sound of a shot, and she heard Jess's voice ring out. "Listen up, people. I've got your children. Carter!"

Suddenly Mattie was being dragged toward the doorway. "No! I'm not leaving them," she said. "No!" Mattie screamed her frustration, and managed to twist free from her captor's hold for an instant. "No!"

Everyone in the street heard the schoolteacher's screams. Jess stared at the entrance to the building, waiting for the pair to appear, the knuckles of her fingers straining against her skin as she gripped the reins.

Mattie kicked backward with her leg, simultaneously clawing at the doorway. She caught hold of a beam and wrapped her fingers around it.

"Damn it, girl! I'll bust your fingers," Carter growled. He finally loosened her hold, and, hauling her up against his chest, dragged the resistant woman outside and into the street, forcing her to her knees in front of the riders.

"Tell them what we've got in there," Jess instructed her mildly.

Mattie stared up at her, and Carter slapped his palm against the side of her head.

"I'll decide how to run this," Jess hissed at him, then turned her attention back to the pale woman kneeling before her. "Tell them who we've got, and how we've got them," she said.

Hatred was a new experience for Mattie, and it was overpowering. Bile rose in her throat, and she was afraid she was going to be sick.

"Tell them who we've got, schoolteacher, or I'll find another way of conveying that information."

Mattie coughed. "They've got all of them," she said hoarsely.

"I said who," Jess ordered. "And louder."

Mattie swallowed, and raised her head. "Ben," she said, looking at the boy's father. "Harvey . . . Alice . . . Jeb . . ." With each name, she met the eyes of a mother, or a father, feeling their pain cut through her.

Jess watched as the teacher recited the names of their hostages, and felt an odd sense of pride. There would be no blubbing, no begging for mercy from this one. Even these louts she rode with would be able to see the strength and quality of Myersville's schoolmistress.

Silence fell as she continued to stare at Mattie, who had finished her painful monologue.

"You told us you'd leave us be, Hellrider." Winston's words barely registered with Mattie, who was fighting another onslaught of nausea.

"Yeah, I said a fortnight. And I left you alone for a fortnight."

"No, you didn't." Mattie shook her head, dazed. "You didn't," she said again.

Jess dismounted and walked over to her, leaning down so that only Mattie could hear her next words. "You wanted to know what the outside world is like. Now you know."

Tear-filled eyes looked up at her. "Please don't do this," Mattie said. "I trusted you."

"That was your mistake," Jess said harshly. "Be grateful this is all I took from you."

Mattie stared out ahead of her, struggling for each intake of air into her lungs.

Jess cast her eyes across the assembled crowd, checking her men's progress as they emerged from the hotel, the cloth shop, the hardware store, various items of value stuffed into thick-hide satchels. A broad-shouldered man approached her. "We searched the rooms. You sure it's here?"

Mattie looked up and saw the bruised features of one of the men who had attacked her on the road. From the repulsive grin on his face, it was clear that he recognized her, too.

"Oh, yeah," Jess replied. "It's Tuesday." She jerked her thumb toward Mattie's house. "Check in there. Under the couch in the parlor."

Mattie watched dully as the man strolled over to her home and inside. After a few minutes, Jess's eyes narrowed and she marched over to the house, heading first for the parlor, then in the direction of indistinct noises coming from down the hall.

She crossed into Mattie's bedroom to see him rifling through dresser drawers, tossing undergarments and other clothing carelessly to the floor in his search. The banker's black suitcase lay on the teacher's bed, along with a gold candlestick Jess had noticed in the parlor on her second visit, and a few other items that would likely fetch some coin.

Jess crossed the room and grabbed his shoulder. "I told you to get the suitcase. Now get it and get out."

"You kiddin', Jess? That candlestick's worth something, and--"

"Did you hear me?" Her eyes narrowed. "Get the suitcase and clear out. Now."

Irwin had ridden with Jess Chambers long enough to know when she was angry, although he couldn't for the life of him figure out what had brought it on this time. Picking up the heavy suitcase, he made fast tracks out the door.

Jess swept her gaze over the clothing strewn about the floor. After a long moment, she bent down and picked up a pair of underwear. Carefully folding it to match those that had not been disturbed, she replaced it in the drawer, and reached down for another pair.

Townspople and gunmen alike waited restlessly for the woman in charge to emerge from the schoolteacher's house. Sympathetic residents glanced sadly at Mattie; the Lord only knew what Hellrider was doing in there.

Finally, Jess stepped over the threshold, shouting to her men without breaking stride. "Let's go." In a quick motion, she mounted her horse and took the reins in hand. A flash of white caught her eye, and Jess turned in the saddle to see her lead man hauling the schoolteacher up in front of him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"What are you talking about, Jess?" Tyson was confused. This was standard procedure: Take someone the cowards wouldn't want to see hurt, someone who wouldn't be much trouble.

Jess hesitated. To a man, her subordinates were staring at her expectantly, wondering what the problem was. She nodded, then turned to the disheartened witnesses to her latest success. "You all stay here for a couple of days, and little Teach will be fine," she announced, and with a final caution -- "My men will be watching" -- Jess turned her sorrel and led her men out of town.

The sun beat down on rider and horse alike, and after a few hours they pulled up under a cluster of shade trees. Jess tipped a canteen to her lips and wiped her mouth. That hit the spot. She started to raise the canteen again, but jerked it down abruptly. Tyson was pressing their hostage entirely too close to him, his hand wandering across her waist.

Jess nudged her horse over to them and angrily hauled the woman onto her own saddle. "Do you want some water?" Jess held up the canteen, but Mattie turned her head away. "Look, you'll need this," Jess said. "You can hate me all you want, but there's no sense in killing yourself."

No reply.

"Suit yourself." Jess turned to the assortment of men under her command. "OK, fellas, time to split up. You know where to meet." They nodded, and two-thirds of the group headed off in different directions. "Just you and me now, boys," Jess said to the remaining men, "and our little songbird here." They laughed, and Jess nodded toward the road ahead. "Let's go."

The sun set over a lively campsite that resounded with the general rumble of men enjoying themselves after a successful haul. More than one would have liked to share their good mood with their juicy little hostage, but Jess had been sitting near her most of the evening, warning off adventurous souls with a glare.

Mattie had never seen anything like it. Most of the activities in which these barbarians engaged seemed to involve competition of some sort, she noted, everything from arm wrestling to knife-throwing to grossly exaggerated tales of their own bravery. Jess had joined in a number of these events (although not, to Mattie's relief, in any of the bodily function contests), and appeared to excel at everything.

The schoolteacher sat quietly and absorbed this new world. As the evening wore on, she realized to her dismay that the men had moved on in their braggadocio to matters of a more

personal nature. Thoroughly disgusted, Mattie nonetheless found herself listening to a few of the more torrid tales, her eyes growing wider with each anecdote. After a rather more vivid description than was necessary of one miscreant's adventures at a brothel in Park City, Mattie realized her concentration had lapsed.

"Hell, I had to," he was saying. "We'd been on a job for damn near two months, and Jess's rule just about killed me." The others laughed, and Mattie glanced over at Jess.

"I figured your own bullshit could keep you going for at least that long," Jess said good-naturedly.

The ruffian grinned back at her. "Yeah, well, what I want to know is, how come I don't get the Fort Douglas jobs?"

A number of the men laughed again, and Jess looked over at him with apparent amusement. "I didn't know you had that particular skill, Anders," she said, setting off another roar.

One of the newer members spoke up. "What happened at Fort Douglas?"

Tyson chuckled. He liked this story. "We heard there was a gold shipment being guarded at the fort, but they had practically the whole damned Army stationed there. Not that a little thing like that would bother Jess, of course."

He paused in his tale to take another swig of . . . whatever he was drinking, and Mattie glared at him. Why didn't he just get on with it?

"So Jess goes in there as Sister Mary Margaret or somethin'." He grinned at her. "One more thing she's goin' to Hell for"

Jess laughed.

". . . and ends up bedding both the commander's kids. The time comes to haul the stuff out, and they're pulling each other's hair out over which one gets to hand over the keys."

Mattie pursed her lips. It figured, Jess Chambers using her body to dupe innocent young men into trusting her. Disgusting.

"Don't remember which one got the honor, do you, Jess?"

Jess shook her head.

"I think it was the girl," Tyson recalled, chuckling. "She had a mean right hook."

Mattie stared at him, then shifted her gaze to Jess. The girl? Had Jess actually . . . 'bedded' . . . a woman? Her eyes widened. All those jokes Jess had made to her, those comments Had Jess ever thought of . . . ? Mattie shuddered. It didn't matter anyway. She'd rather die than have that woman's hands on her.

"What was her name, anyway?" Tyson asked.

Jess shrugged. She had forgotten it the next day.

Mattie's attention was diverted by one of the drones, who had climbed to his feet and appeared to be stumbling in her general direction. "Did she look as good as this little piece?" he asked. He reached a hand out to Mattie's hair but it never got there, halted in mid-air by Jess's painful grip on his wrist.

"Hands off," she snarled.

Tyson watched the confrontation with interest. Stewart had the misfortune of being very good at arm wrestling, which had earned him the liquor ration of more than one of his colleagues during the evening. This, combined with his other misfortune of being a few cards short of a deck to begin with, left the young man's judgment a little wanting. Every man here -- except Stewart, apparently -- could see that the boss had declared the blonde woman off limits, for whatever reason.

"Why?"

Uh oh. A low murmur spread throughout the camp, and most of the others decided it was a good time to lay out their bedrolls on the other side of the clearing.

"What did you say?" Icy blue eyes burned into him.

"I said why should we keep our hands off the little piece," Stewart repeated. "The job's over, so it can't mess it up. Why's it different with her?"

"Because I said so," Jess replied, her voice low. Tyson exchanged glances with a couple of other veterans of the Chambers gang. They were about to lose one of their number. The lead man eyed Stewart's boots from a distance. They looked about his size.

"You keeping her for yourself?"

Jess's fingers constricted, and Stewart sank to his knees with a gasp as the bones in his wrist snapped.

"I don't answer to you," Jess said coldly. "You got that?" She had already tolerated more disrespect than she should, and she drew a knife from her boot. A soft gasp reached her ears, and she glanced down to see a look of horror on the schoolteacher's face. Jess hesitated, then gave Stewart's wrist a final, painful twist and shoved him away with her boot. "Go sleep it off," she growled, "and be thankful I'm in a good mood."

Tyson blinked. That was a first.

Returning to her seat on the log, Jess reached for some pheasant. She held a piece out to Mattie, but the stubborn woman refused to look at it, or at her. Jess tore into the flesh with her teeth, making exaggerated noises of culinary pleasure for her hungry hostage's benefit.

"You'll get to go home tomorrow, if you're a good girl," she said, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. "And if your people behave themselves."

No response.

"In the meantime, I can't have you running off," Jess continued. "So, here's your choice: We tie you to that tree, or you go over there with me." She pointed at a dark blanket laid out apart from the rest.

Mattie rose and sat in front of the tree.

Hours later, Jess glanced over at the young woman whose entire body shivered with the cold. Sliding out from beneath her blanket, Jess walked quietly over to the tree and reached down to cut through the ropes binding Mattie's body, then circled her waist with her arm and led her, unresisting, to her blanket. Jess tucked it carefully over the both of them, and pressed her warm body against Mattie's back.

"Damn, is she ever going to get up?"

The gang leader and her second in command gazed down at the young woman still huddled under Jess's blanket. "She's hard to wake up when she doesn't get enough sleep," Jess said.

Tyson smirked. "You bed her?"

"No."

"Come on, Jess."

Jess turned to face him. "I don't violate my own rules. What's your problem?"

"Hell, Jess, you just about killed Irwin when he had a go at her, and beat the shit out of the others. I figured--"

"They broke the rules, and almost blew the job," she snapped. "They're lucky I didn't kill them."

Mattie groaned in her sleep, and rolled over onto her back.

Tyson's eyes flashed. "Mm. If you don't want her, Jess, I got a few ideas."

"Keep 'em in your pants. There'll be plenty of that in Laramie."

Jess reached down and nudged the young woman. "Come on, Teach," she said quietly. "Up and at 'em."

Mattie stretched leisurely, uttering a noise that was a little too close to other sounds from the outlaw's imagination, and Jess grunted; she needed to get to Laramie herself pretty soon.

Sleepily opening her eyes, Mattie suddenly remembered where she was, and why, and a cold expression snapped into place across her face. She rose without a word, and stepped discreetly into the bushes.

With the last of their gear stowed, the outlaws prepared to part ways with their garrulous hostage. "Up you go." Jess's strong hands boosted Mattie up into the saddle of the bay horse they had stolen from the town's blacksmith.

"I don't like to ride," Mattie protested.

She speaks! Jess thought. "Tough. Hit the road."

Mattie glared at her. No warmth in those eyes any more, Jess noticed. She swatted the horse lightly, and it started down the path with its angry passenger. A moment later, Jess mounted her own horse and turned to face her companions. "You know where to meet me." They nodded, and spurred their mounts.

Mattie stood rigidly, arms at her sides, and tried to figure out where she was. This was a nightmare. She didn't know how to find her way back. She could be lost for days, not that Jess Chambers would care.

"Lying, manipulative witch!" she cursed, for the tenth time. She squeezed her eyes shut in frustration, then opened them again when her pony suddenly bolted, thundering down one of the three paths she thought she had detected leading into the brush.

"Hey! Wait!" Mattie chased after the animal.

"I trusted you!"

Jess's eyes flew open. *Not again!* she wanted to shout. Every night since she had rejoined her men, Jess's slumber had been interrupted by the increasingly annoying schoolteacher, red hair or green eyes or soft hands flashing into her consciousness without warning.

She dragged herself to her feet, eyes scanning the sleeping forms around her. She wondered if hauling one of the less repulsive ones into the trees with her would drive the image of tear-filled eyes from her fevered brain.

Jess had warned her--hell, had practically come out and told her what was going to happen, if the girl had just listened instead of being so ridiculously naive, unwilling to see the bad in anyone, even Jess Chambers, until she was slapped in the face with it.

Stupid girl.

Jess paced silently in the dark. Her eyes roamed the campsite again, inevitably landing on the half dozen satchels still stuffed with their profitable haul. *"With the stolen hopes and dreams of faceless victims . . ."*

Above all people, the woman who wrote those words should have expected this.

"But that's not you. . . . I trusted you."

Why would she trust someone who lied, and cheated, and robbed, and killed indiscriminately? Jess had never denied her crimes to Mattie, had never pretended to be anything other than what she was. But the woman had blindly accepted her anyway, had shown her caring, affection . . . forgiveness . . .

Jess halted mid-stride. Long minutes passed, but she remained motionless, staring at nothing in the darkness. Finally, Jess's eyes narrowed into an expression her men would have recognized, and she unfastened the cover of her holster.

Mattie rolled onto her back, her eyelids easing apart slightly. They began to drift shut again, but . . . something wasn't right. She opened her eyes cautiously, and gasped. There, standing beside her bed, stood a tall, unmistakable figure.

"Quiet."

"What are you doing here?"

"I said quiet."

"What do you want?"

To Mattie's surprise, the other woman broke eye contact, and began pacing back and forth across the floor. Mattie's head was clear enough to wonder how this woman could traverse the wooden floor, right over the loose board, without making a sound.

The silence grew longer, but still Jess Chambers did not say anything. Mattie could sense that something was wrong, but she didn't care -- couldn't care after what Jess had done. Hellrider, she reminded herself.

Finally, Jess spoke. "I don't need the stuff from this place."

Mattie stared at her.

"I have plans that are going to keep me on the road a while, and it's not convenient to haul it around."

Mattie remained silent. What was going on here?

"Do you want your stuff back? Their stuff?" Jess waved a hand toward the wall, apparently indicating the town.

Mattie's heart sprang to her throat and she nodded, hoping her eyes weren't as big as they felt. "Oh, God. Yes, please."

Jess turned away again with a slight nod.

"What's going on, Jess?" The outlaw resumed her uneasy pacing. Maybe she would get a response to an easier question, Mattie thought. "Did you bring . . . the things with you?"

A small smile crossed Jess's face. Even now, the schoolteacher was trying to be delicate, to spare the criminal who robbed them any unnecessary awkwardness. She nodded. "It's outside of town. I didn't know"

Mattie's brow crinkled. Didn't know what? Didn't know if she'd want it back? That didn't make much sense. Jess absently ran her hand through her hair, a nervous gesture that seemed odd coming from the normally cool woman.

"What are you doing here, Jess?"

"Don't worry; I'm not staying."

"That wasn't my question," Mattie said, emboldened by the gunfighter's sudden vulnerability.

"It doesn't matter." Jess turned away. "The bags'll be here in the morning." She took a step toward the window, then turned back around. "I"

Mattie held her breath while Jess struggled with whatever she was trying to say.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you."

Mattie's eyes widened. My God--Jess Chambers was apologizing for Mattie frowned. What, exactly? She needed to know.

"Sorry for what?" she asked. "For using me? Or for robbing us?"

Jess closed her eyes. She knew she should have just let it be. This was too hard. "I don't know. Both, I guess."

Mattie didn't know what to say, and finally she asked the question that mattered more than anything. "Why are you doing this?"

"I told you. It's not convenient for me--"

"I know you think I'm stupid, Jess, but--"

"No! Not stupid! Just . . . innocent," Jess said. "You put your faith in someone who doesn't care about anybody but herself, and it could have gotten you killed."

Mattie stared at her. A week ago, she would have agreed with every word. She wasn't so sure any more. "Maybe," she said. "But you're here now, aren't you?"

Jess didn't reply. What *was* she doing here? Jess knew the answer, even as she tried to deny it. She desperately wanted to see this woman smile at her just one more time. She had never known someone who looked beyond what she was now and saw what she could have been. How long had it been since someone's eyes had lit up when they saw her? But Jess had seen those eyes filled with tears, clouded with fear and betrayal. It was too late.

"I'm here now," she agreed quietly.

"What are you thinking, Jess?"

Jess laughed. What had she been thinking about every minute since she left this damned town? "I find it best not to think sometimes," she said, and stepped toward the window.

"Wait!" Mattie was out of bed with surprising quickness, grasping her arm. "Don't go." Jess looked at her, baffled, and Mattie stammered, "I mean, where are you going? It's cold outside. I know you've got a blanket, but . . . it's . . . warmer in here," she finished, shyly gesturing toward the bed.

Jess paused. She felt exhausted, emotionally and physically, and a warm bed seemed almost irresistible at the moment. The constant assaults in her head had driven away any temptation she might ordinarily have felt in the young woman's bed. She could just lie there, near this woman who was offering her temporary comfort even though she could only despise her, and sink into welcome oblivion.

"You sure you want an outlaw in your bed?" she asked, half-joking.

Mattie nodded.

The beginning of a smile crossed Jess's face. "What about that stellar reputation of yours?" she teased.

"I don't care," Mattie replied seriously.

I think you would, Jess thought, but kept her thoughts to herself. This woman could not be as forgiving as she seemed. "Thanks. I could use the rest. I'll be out before the sun comes up."

Mattie slid back under the covers and watched as an amazingly well-defined body emerged from beneath plaid shirt and jeans. Jess left on her undershirt, and got in the other side of the bed.

Mattie's mind raced. She wanted . . . she wasn't sure what she wanted. The woman lying next to her was not the woman who had stolen from them. This was the Jess Chambers she had known all along. The real Jess Chambers. Mattie gazed at her, barely inches away.

"Jess?"

The other woman turned onto her side to face Mattie. "Hm?"

A pause, and then, "Nothing."

Jess regarded her for a moment, then tucked an arm under her head and closed her eyes. Realizing that Jess was preparing to go to sleep, Mattie's thoughts became more frantic. This would be her only chance. For the rest of her life, long after she was married, long after her teaching days were behind her, she would wonder what it would have been like. She couldn't take it.

What was the worst that could happen? Jess wouldn't be interested, might even laugh at her, but that would be the end of it. No one would know, except the two of them, and then she'd never see Jess Chambers again.

Never again.

She reached out to touch a soft shoulder. Jess's eyelids opened instantly, and she found herself gazing into warm green eyes.

"Jess . . ." Mattie whispered.

Jess's senses were suddenly very much alive. She willed herself to remain still until she knew exactly what it was that Mattie wanted.

"Jess . . ." Mattie repeated, but she couldn't form the words to follow. Her hand moved over to Jess's undershirt, and Mattie ran a tentative finger over the thin material. The other woman hadn't moved, hadn't turned away yet, and Mattie became a little bolder. She slid her index finger down Jess's shirt until it approached the swell of a firm breast, pausing. Still no rejection. Heart pounding, Mattie trailed her finger over Jess's breast, eliciting a soft moan.

She wasn't sure what to do next, but the question was answered when Jess grasped her hand and pressed it against her breast, both of them groaning from the contact. Mattie could feel the flesh harden against her palm, and she squeezed it instinctively, her excitement growing at the feel of Jess arching into her hand. Mattie blindly lowered her head and pressed her lips against the thin shirt, then urgently helped Jess tug the garment up.

Mattie felt as if she were going to faint. She took Jess's breast into her small hand and brought her lips to it, desperate to know what that flesh felt like inside her mouth.

Jess growled as Mattie sucked hungrily at her breast. Jesus, it hadn't been *that* long, but she felt barely able to restrain herself. Mattie moaned against her breast, and Jess gave up the struggle. She grabbed Mattie's shoulders and flipped her onto her back, covering the smaller body with her own, and pressed her thigh between Mattie's legs, vaguely aware of her disappointment that the schoolteacher was wearing underwear.

She leaned back and drew off her undershirt, her breath catching as desire washed over the younger woman's face. Mattie stared, wide-eyed, as Jess knelt over her, the intensity of her gaze causing Mattie's heart to pound wildly.

Jess hesitated, trying to rein herself in. She didn't want to frighten her inexperienced lover. Gently, she took Mattie's breasts into her hands, fondling the soft mounds through her nightshirt. Mattie whimpered, and Jess lost the last of her reserve. Mattie Brunson had chosen an outlaw as her first lover; she would soon learn the consequences.

Rough hands reached down and tore the nightshirt off, the sound of rent cloth nearly causing Mattie to pass out. Her underwear soon met the same fate, and then she was naked, the renegade's heated gaze raking over every inch of her body.

Jess threw herself onto the smaller woman, groping and molding every inch of skin as her tongue explored the depths of Mattie's mouth, exhilarating at petite hands clutching at her

back, the teacher's thighs pressing against her waist. She lowered her head and took a breast into her mouth.

"Oh, my God!" Mattie cried, arching her back and burying her hand in Jess's hair. Jess grinned. Blaspheming already.

"Nnnn . . ." Jess groaned and moved her stomach against Mattie's warmth, confirming what the teacher's labored breathing already told her, that her new lover was more than ready to be taken to the next level.

Jess raised herself and took possession of Mattie's mouth again, her hands continuing their assault on the young woman's smooth skin. She broke the kiss and began a controlled descent of Mattie's body, lavishing attention on Mattie's breasts, stomach, and soft golden curls, smiling at the sudden gasp as she immersed herself between Mattie's thighs.

A steady stream of inarticulate sounds emerged from the young woman's throat, her hands roaming erratically from Jess's head to the sheet beside her to her own raised thighs.

Suddenly, Mattie's noises trailed off, and Jess felt a trembling beneath her hands. "Oh, yes . . . yes . . . keep going," Mattie breathed, not really aware of what she was saying, and then the waves overtook her, and she clutched at Jess's hair through a long, delirious release, finally sinking slowly back onto the bed.

Jess drew herself up and rolled onto her back, reaching out to Mattie's waist. "Come here." She positioned the smaller woman above her, grasping Mattie's hand and placing it between her legs. "I want you to--"

She closed her eyes as Mattie moved her fingers, exploring on her own. Mattie leaned forward, her breasts pressing into Jess's own, and prepared to do what she hoped Jess would like.

Her fingers slid inside easily, and Mattie closed her eyes at the incredible sensation. Jess groaned, her hips rising of their own accord, and she reached down to show her the motion that she wanted. Within moments, she surged against Mattie's hand, long hair hanging down as her head rose off the pillow.

When the outlaw had calmed again, Mattie planted soft kisses on her neck, then withdrew her fingers and drew a sensuous trail of moisture up Jess's thigh. "I want you to do that to me," she uttered. She raised herself off Jess and lay on her back, grasping Jess's hand to slide it between her legs.

Rolling over, Jess nibbled her ear. "You'll want your first time to be with your husband," she whispered.

"You're already my first time. I want it all now."

Jess groaned at the command and the warmth enveloping her fingers. She shifted her body, gently urging Mattie's thighs further apart, and positioned herself to give Mattie what she wanted. Mattie slid her arms across her lover's strong back, their mouths together, and then

Jess was inside her, taking her to another world where no one but the two of them existed. Alone together, inside each other's minds and bodies.

Mattie moaned into Jess's throat, close now, clawing mindlessly at her back, and then Jess felt the contractions of strong muscles around her fingers. She lay on her lover while the other woman recovered, both of them struggling for breath, and then need overtook her and she straddled Mattie's thigh, every movement of the outlaw's body sending new sensations coursing through Mattie's veins.

The women clung to each other throughout the night as if it were their last on earth. Jess caressed Mattie's body lovingly with her hands and mouth, moving on top of her, sliding fingers into receptive warmth, robbing Mattie of conscious thought with her tongue, favors which Mattie eagerly returned. Jess did not stop to rest, and Mattie needed none. She couldn't get enough of Jess Chambers' lips, and tongue, and breasts, and hands, and taste, and warmth.

Finally, shortly before dawn, the women relaxed into each other under sweaty sheets. Jess pressed her lips against Mattie's shoulder. "I've got to go."

"No," Mattie mumbled into her neck, her hands running absently across Jess's back.

"It's almost morning. I've got to head out."

"No," Mattie repeated stubbornly, and Jess grinned.

"Not that I'll be able to ride," she said, and felt Mattie smile against her skin. "Or walk," she added, and felt the smile widen into a grin.

"Good," Mattie said.

"Jess Chambers, captured in Myersville by a woman who rendered her completely disabled," Jess said, quoting from an imaginary wire. "The woman refused to reveal her methods, but says she has experience in a variety of positions."

Mattie was laughing now, and Jess took advantage of the lapse in concentration to extricate herself from her lover's grasp. Her knee slid across a damp area on the sheet, and she ground her teeth together to suppress the rush of desire. She would be content to spend the rest of the day, the rest of her life, in bed with the lively schoolteacher, but she could imagine what the good people of Myersville would do if they saw her sneaking out of Mattie's house.

Jess slipped out from under the sheet and reached for her undershirt. Glancing down at the bed, she noticed that the teacher's breasts had been exposed by her movements. She'd never get out of here with that kind of distraction. Reaching down, she flipped the sheet up to Mattie's neck.

Mattie caught her gaze and slowly drew the sheet down again, baring her enticing breasts, then lower, over the flatness of her stomach, then slowly to the edge of curly golden hair, granting Jess only a hint of what lay hidden beneath.

Jesus. Jess tossed the undershirt on the floor and leapt onto the temptress. The interfering sheet joined discarded clothing on the floor, and Jess arched her body over her lover's for a final time.

Mattie dusted a spot off her pristine white shoes, then straightened to fasten the ties on her Sunday blouse, looking absently into the mirror above her dresser. She paused, sliding her fingers down her neck, reliving every touch.

It wouldn't be easy, sitting still for three hours in the cramped confines of the church, trying to keep her mind on the typically dull sermon, after the incredible night she had just shared with Jess. Mattie smiled. Church might have more meaning for her today, though; she had experienced heaven firsthand.

The first of the worshipers stepped outside and propped open the door for the others as they began to pour out of the building. The look on their faces was the same, the lay preacher's words providing little comfort in the face of their recent adversity.

Mattie stepped across the threshold, and bumped into a large man who had stopped abruptly in front of her. "Oops. What's the holdup, Frank?"

"Stay inside, Miss Mattie," he said, trying to usher her back into the safe confines of the church.

Mattie peered around him, and immediately identified the problem: Jess Chambers, dressed in the clothes she had shrugged into only a few hours before, leaning confidently against the gate. Mattie edged around her would-be protector for a better view.

Jess spotted her bed partner of last night immediately, but cast a disinterested gaze over the entire group. She didn't expect the schoolteacher to acknowledge her in public.

From the corner of her eye, she detected familiar motion, and before any of the others knew what had happened, a bullet from Jess's Colt had cleanly blown dark metal from a fool's hand.

"WAIT!" Mattie held her hands up. "Wait! Calm down! Let's see what she wants."

Jess concealed her surprise when Mattie broke out of the crowd and walked toward her, reholstering her weapon as the woman drew near. "There's a wagon behind the hotel," she said, deciding not to mention where she had obtained it.

Mattie smiled. "Thank you. I'll tell them."

"How do you feel this morning?" Jess asked.

"High as a kite. How do *you* feel?" Mattie held up a hand, laughing at herself. "Nevermind. Don't answer that. I know there's a big difference between us." She looked up at Jess. "I know

I'm one of many for you, but I want you to know that I'll always remember you and what you've done for me. Not just last night, but ever since you came here."

Mattie turned and started back toward the others, and was surprised when strong fingers grabbed her arm and spun her back around. A dozen townsmen began to converge on the pair, and Jess released her grip, raising both hands to show that she would not hurt their schoolteacher.

"That's not true."

Mattie shook her head, confused. "What's not true?"

"You're not one of many."

Mattie stared at her.

"Yes, I've been with a lot of people, but not like this." The young woman's beautiful face looked up at her expectantly, and Jess mentally cursed herself. Why couldn't she explain what she meant?

Mattie waited, but Jess didn't say anything more. She chewed on her lip for a moment, then seemed to reach some sort of decision. "Wait here," she instructed. "I'm going to get you safe passage out of town."

"Oh, you are, are you?" Jess pursed her lips playfully. "And just how are you going to do that?"

Mattie cocked her head, and Jess laughed. She had forgotten who she was talking to.

"Won't they be wondering why you're talking to me?"

"Probably." Mattie opened her closet door and selected a dress to change into. "I said I wanted to find out why you came back."

"They figure it's a trick," guessed the outlaw.

Mattie didn't reply, and Jess smirked.

"Well, I said that we should give you the benefit of the doubt until we knew otherwise."

Jess shook her head, imagining the consternation of Myersville's citizenry at their schoolteacher's unceasing naivete. "You must have given quite a performance," she said.

"It wasn't a performance," Mattie replied. "I know you. You're gentle and kind."

"No, I'm not."

Mattie unhooked the last button on her blouse, and Jess lowered her gaze to catch tantalizing glimpses of skin beneath the cloth.

"You almost learned that when I first saw you at the pool. I wanted to take you right then," Jess said, noting the sharp intake of Mattie's breath.

Her pulse rising, Mattie turned and leaned over to pick up her dress from the bedspread. Jess's eyes narrowed and she was up in a flash, an arm around Mattie's waist, throwing her face down on the bed. "Is that what you want, Mattie?" She reached a hand under the white skirt and drew off the matching undergarment, shoving the skirt up to Mattie's waist. "Do you want to be taken?"

Mattie turned her head to the side, her breathing nearly out of control, and waited to see what would happen next. A moment later, she heard a faint metallic sound, and whimpered at the image of the outlaw's hands at her belt.

Jess lowered her jeans, then lowered herself onto Mattie.

The schoolteacher felt Jess's rough thatch against the delicate skin of her hips, and groaned. She had been in a state of constant arousal all morning, increasingly vivid daydreams causing her to shift frequently in her seat. She needed this. The weight of the woman above her was pressing down on a sensitive area, and when Jess began to thrust against her, Mattie thought she would pass out at the friction from above and below.

Jess's hands covered the back of hers, clamped against the top edge of the mattress, and the bed moved in a steadily increasing rhythm. Jess's lips rested near her ear, and the sound of her passionate grunts drove Mattie to the edge. Finally, she reached her limit and cried out, bucking wildly against the woman on top of her. Jess heard it, and felt it, and drove against her lover in a sharp release.

Jess rested for a moment, hot breath warming the back of Mattie's neck, and then with a light groan, she raised herself from the bed.

Mattie rolled over and draped an arm across her forehead, watching Jess fasten her pants. "God . . .," she moaned.

"Miss Mattie?"

The schoolteacher jumped up from the bed, smoothing her skirt and hastily buttoning her blouse. She glanced down at the bed and spread the quilt over the signs of last night's and today's passion, then moved to the door and cracked it open a couple of inches. A small delegation stood uncertainly at the far end of the hallway.

"Yes, Frank?"

"Miss Mattie, are you all right? We've been waitin'"

"I'm fine, Frank."

"You're better than fine," Jess whispered in her ear, earning a swat from the harried schoolmistress.

"I'm just having a talk with Miss Chambers," Mattie called out. "I'll be right out." She closed the door and leaned back against it.

"Miss Chambers? Why, Miss Brunson, I wish you'd call me by my first name." Jess arched an eyebrow. "You did last night, as I recall."

Mattie smiled. "So, what are your plans?"

"I've split from my men," Jess said casually. "So I've got to take care of a few things, and then--"

"Wait." The gunfighter's first words were still sinking in. "You've split from your men?"

Jess shrugged, but Mattie wasn't fooled--something was going on here. *Calm*. She needed to keep calm. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to get my stash, and then . . . I don't know, do something different. I was getting bored with it."

"Take me with you."

The words hung thickly in the air, and Mattie's heart leapt. The fact that Jess hadn't immediately rejected it meant she had a chance, and she had to take it. Her life depended on it.

"Don't be ridiculous," Jess said.

"I'm not."

Jess tucked in her shirt. She needed to get out of here. "Yes, you are. You're better off here."

"No, I'm not." Mattie took a deep breath, preparing herself for a verbal battle. "I want to go with you."

"It's a hard life," Jess said.

"I know that. It's not that easy here, either, when you want to be somewhere else."

Jess frowned. How could she convince the woman of what should already have been obvious? "There's no shelter on the road," she said. "It's damned hot during the day and damned cold at night."

"I can handle the heat, and we can keep each other warm at night."

Jess averted her gaze. An image of keeping warm at night with the beautiful blonde flashed into her head, the words having their intended effect.

"I can rub your shoulders when you're tired," Mattie said, edging closer. "And do your washing . . . and teach you to read . . . and be there for you . . ."

Jess listened to the hypnotic words, then shook her head slightly to clear her thoughts. "You have to kill your own food," she said. "Have you ever killed anything?"

Mattie considered it. "You can kill it; I'll cook it."

"We wouldn't travel well together. We don't have anything in common."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Mattie arched an eyebrow.

Jess couldn't deny that they were extraordinarily compatible in bed. She could only imagine what it would be like as they became more familiar with each others' bodies. "Maybe I could stop by Myersville once in a while," she said tentatively, cringing as the smile disappeared from Mattie's face.

If that was all she could get of Jess Chambers, Mattie would take it. But she wasn't ready to concede the war yet. "That's it?" she said. "I get to roll around with you a couple of times a year? Your 'Myersville stop'?"

Jess reached out a hand to her shoulder. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"You need me," Mattie said. She waved her hand dismissively. "Not for that. I know you can get that anywhere."

Jess blinked, suddenly realizing that she didn't want to get 'that' anywhere else. She started to speak, but closed her mouth again. She wasn't thinking straight.

"I mean, to help you." She gazed earnestly at Jess. "We could visit your mother."

Jess stiffened. "I don't think she'd be thrilled to see me."

"I could tell her that you've changed."

The gunfighter looked skeptical, but Mattie sensed an opening and plunged in. "If it doesn't work out, you can put me on a stage back home. I won't resist."

Jess ran her tongue across her lips. Maybe it wouldn't hurt for a while . . . Oh, hell, what was she thinking? "Forget it," she said, turning away from entreating eyes. "It's not safe."

"If I wanted safe, I'd stay here. I've only been attacked once in my whole life, and it was by three of your men." Jess looked at her, and Mattie nodded. "I saw them." She cocked her head curiously. "They were on their way to meet you, weren't they?" Jess nodded, and Mattie chuckled. "It's funny; when you stopped them, I thought . . ." She laughed again. "But it was because they broke your 'rule.'"

Jess shook her head. "No, it wasn't. I wanted to kill them because they hurt you. If they hadn't been my own men, I would have."

Mattie flashed back to Jess's face as her strong hand squeezed the life from the man who had attacked her. She had no doubt that Jess was capable of it. "Besides," she said, returning to the subject at hand, "Nothing'll happen to me. I'll be with you." It was a mistake, she realized instantly.

"That's *why* something will happen to you," Jess said angrily. "They won't care if you're in the way; you'll be just an inconvenience to swat aside." *Or use against me*, Jess added mentally. "You have no idea what's out there," she said. "There are a lot of people who'll be gunning for me."

"I understand that. But the longer you go without . . . you know . . . maybe people will stop trying to challenge you."

"I'm not talking about those people, Mattie, although some day one of them may get lucky."

"What are you talking about?"

Jess marched over to Mattie's dresser, yanking open the bottom drawer and pulling out the stack of booklets. From the sketches on their covers, she selected several and lay them side by side on the bed. Finally, she took one with an image of her and placed it above the others. "This is how it works."

Mattie stared at the rough diagram, then looked up at Jess with comprehension in her eyes. "These are all your men?"

Steely blue eyes bore into her. "Yes. And everyone who rides with them. And not just these; a lot more. Everyone they've killed, everything they've taken, has been under my hand," Jess said. "Now do you understand what I was saying about not being a nice person?"

Mattie gaped down at the images, unable to meet Jess's angry gaze.

"I'm going to go get our stash, the extra money and gold we've stowed away over the years. It was supposed to set us up in Mexico when the time came, and they're going to want it back." Jess softened her tone. "Now do you see?"

The schoolteacher's ashen face gave Jess her answer. "Why not just let them have it?" Mattie asked.

"What? No way. I earned that money."

"But" Mattie held her hands out. "It's"

"Stolen? I don't give a damn. It's mine now."

"You don't need it," Mattie persisted.

"Do you just expect us to live in the woods? You don't ever want a new dress? Or a bath in a real tub? Or a new book? That's no life."

Us. Mattie heard her words, and wanted to cry out. Jess was thinking about it. She was almost there. "You could earn money some other way," she said.

Jess raised an eyebrow, inviting the schoolmistress to enlighten her.

"You could help with the harvest."

Jess pursed her lips.

"Well, you have a lot of skills, don't you? You could do something else." Mattie scrunched up her face. "Umm . . ."

Jess held her hand up. "I'm going for the stash." She looked down at the teacher's disappointed face, and sighed. "Look, maybe we can give some of it back."

Mattie brightened, visions of new schools and churches throughout the region materializing in her brain.

Jess's eyes narrowed. "*Some* of it," she repeated.

Mattie nodded, suppressing a smile. *We'll see*, she thought. "OK. When are you going to get it?"

"That's where I'm headed now," Jess said. "They'll be right behind me."

"Are you sure they'll figure out what you're doing?" Mattie asked. "They might--"

Jess placed her hands on the smaller woman's shoulders, forcing her to meet her hard gaze. "Mattie, they know it already. Do you think they just gave me the stuff to bring back here?"

Mattie's brow furrowed. "You . . .?"

"The ones who are still alive will be heading out right now to meet Ellis--" Jess pointed down at one of the books -- "and the others. There is honor among thieves, Mattie, and the punishment for betraying it is severe. I've carried it out myself." She picked up a booklet whose cover bore the image of a man with a scar on his chin, and pitched it meaningfully over her shoulder.

"You killed him?"

"Without thinking twice. And a hundred more, Mattie. Bad ones, good ones, it didn't matter to me."

"It matters to you now."

"You think so?" Jess said scornfully.

"Yes. You could have killed Jared when he drew on you in front of the church. You didn't."

"I wasn't going to--." Jess stopped. *Kill an innocent in front of you*, she had been going to say, but she wasn't ready to give that kind of power to this woman. "Think what you like," she said.

"I will," Mattie replied quietly. She knew the truth. Suddenly her eyes lit up, and she reached out a hand. "Hey! That's it!"

Jess eyed her suspiciously. "What's it?"

"These men are going to try to kill you, right?"

"Yeah"

"And some of them are wanted by the law?"

"Yeah" Jess wasn't sure she wanted to know where this was going.

"And you're better than they are."

Jess opened her mouth, but the excited woman bubbled on before she had a chance to respond.

"So--when they come after you, you conk them on the head, and we'll collect the reward money." Mattie smiled brightly at her.

Conk them on the head? Jess gaped at her. Mattie didn't seem to have a full grasp of how these things worked.

"Uh huh," she said. "And when I get to the sheriff's office for my reward, I'll just tell him to add one on for myself."

"For you? There aren't any charges pending against you."

A corner of Jess's mouth turned up. "Yeah, right."

"But . . . you told Winston--" Mattie cut short her sentence at the amused look on Jess's face. Suddenly she laughed, happy that she wasn't the only one in town who had blindly accepted Jess Chambers' word for something. "All right," she said, "I'll collect the money then."

Jess clamped her lips together, picturing the tiny schoolmistress hauling Snake Ellis's 300-pound carcass into a sheriff's office and demanding her reward. "Mattie, I don't think--"

"Miss Mattie? You comin' out?"

Mattie turned her head toward the sound, then looked back at Jess for the answer. "I'm willing to risk anything to be with you, Jess, even if it's only a short while," she said. "I won't survive otherwise."

Jess closed her eyes. This was so wrong, her head screamed, but for once she would let her heart make the decision. And when Mattie Brunson lay dead at her feet, she would never make that mistake again. "All right. For a while."

"Oh, Jess!" Mattie hugged her ecstatically, and Jess smiled in spite of herself, wrapping her arms around her lover's back. Finally, Mattie released her, and moved over to check her hair and clothing in the mirror. "Come on," she said excitedly. "We'd better get this over with."

"You're mad, girl!"

"This woman is a--" The speaker glanced nervously at Jess.

Leaning casually against the bookcase in Mattie's parlor, the outlaw swept her hand generously across the outraged delegation. "Go ahead," she invited, watching in amusement as one of the town's elders struggled to contain his explosion. Finally, he couldn't take it any more.

--a no-account, thieving, lying, murderin' criminal!"

--a ruthless cutthroat--"

--a blackhearted, lawless abomination to God--"

The schoolteacher peeked over at her lover, who shrugged. She couldn't deny any of that. Mattie frowned as four more citizens stepped into the room, whether drawn by the growing commotion or responding to the town's lightning rumor mill, she didn't know.

"Um . . . well, some of that may be true," Mattie said, quickly raising her hands to forestall additional opinions. "But she's changing her ways. I'm going to help her."

"She set us up before, Mattie."

Mattie couldn't tell who had said it, so she addressed the crowd in general. "Yes, I know. But she came back, didn't she? She brought our things back."

"You're fooling yourself, child." ". . . God-awful mistake . . ." ". . . lost your senses . . ." Mattie waited patiently while more dire warnings emanated from within the crowd.

"We can't let you do this, Miss Mattie."

The last remark caught Jess's attention, and she straightened. "No one is going to make her do anything, or keep her from doing anything," she warned in a low voice. "She's a grown woman, and if she wants to go, she'll go. If she wants to stay" -- she met Mattie's gaze -- "she can stay."

"I'm going," Mattie said.

The town's midwife, wringing her hands in distress, called out to her. "Think about your parents, girl."

"I'll stop by and see them when we leave." She glanced at Jess, silently asking if they could do that, and read her answer in a subtle change of expression. Mattie smiled her thanks. "They'll be all right, and I'll be well taken care of."

An hour later, Mattie trudged into her bedroom and frowned at her lazy lover reclining on the bed. "Well, that was fun. Nothing like forty people telling you that you're crazy."

"Forty, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. You missed the good part. After you *abandoned* me--"

Jess grinned. "You know they thought I was intimidating you out there."

--even more helpful advisers showed up. After a while, some of them started arguing among themselves -- you know, whether I'm crazy or just stupid."

"Tough choice. Which do you think?"

Destiny, Mattie thought. *We were meant to be together*. She glanced down at the woman on the bed. "Both, probably. Guess I should get packed."

"Mm hmm."

Mattie brought a thumb to her lips, trying to decide what she should take. She could use some direction, but she hated to bother Sleeping Beauty over there. Clothing, she assumed, and personal hygiene items. What else might come in handy?

Jess opened her eyes as something heavy landed on the bed, and moved her head to take in the considerable pile of personal items the young woman had gathered together. Mattie looked down at it uncertainly. "Is it too much?"

Jess bit back a remark. "Just a little." She rolled over and picked up a book from the pile. "What's this?"

"Flora and Fauna of the New Territories," Mattie said. She held up another. "Friend and Foe in the Wilds, and--"

Jess placed a hand over hers. "Mattie, we don't really have room for all that," she said gently. "I've been surviving on my own for ten years."

"Oh." Mattie reddened. "Of course."

Jess got to her feet and reached into the pile again, chucking unnecessary items in the general direction of the headboard. "One outfit. No Sunday clothes." She glanced over at Mattie. "Do you have anything practical?"

Mattie bent down and picked up the casual dress she had begun to change into earlier, when Jess had . . . distracted her. She held it out hopefully.

"That's fine." Jess turned back to the pile and rolled her eyes. "One bar of soap. A comb." The stack at the head of the bed grew steadily, until there was very little left in Mattie's pile. "That's all that will fit, Mattie."

Mattie pressed her lips together, nodding, then walked over to her pack and drew something out. She opened the top drawer of her nightstand and started to place the notebooks inside, but Jess grabbed her arm. "There's room for those."

Mattie shook her head. "It's OK. I don't need them."

"If you're sure," Jess said, and Mattie nodded, a lump forming in her throat. "Do you have any medical supplies?" Jess asked.

"Some. Do you want them?"

"Yeah, we'll probably be needing them."

Mattie frowned affectionately at her. "Gee, you always know *just* what to say."

Jess grinned, and watched Mattie leave to get the supplies from her linen closet. The outlaw quietly opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out the notebooks, then stepped over to her own pack and peered inside. Drawing out an extra shirt, she shoved it into the drawer, then slid the notebooks inside the pack.

Glancing at the dresser, a smirk formed on Jess's face and she crossed the floor, grabbing the handles of the bottom drawer. Sorting through the booklets, she picked out the three with a woman on the cover and stuffed them into her pack. She had a feeling she'd get some mileage out of those. Light footsteps sounded in the hall, and Jess lay back on the bed, crossing her arms behind her head.

Mattie entered the room with a linen bag. "How much of this do you want?"

Her eyes closed, Jess said, "Just as much as we can carry on the horse."

"The horse." Mattie frowned. "You, know, I'm not really much for riding," she said cautiously.

Jess smiled. "I know."

"That horse you made me ride back here threw me twice."

"Well, if you'd spent more time paying attention to the road, and less time thinking of unladylike names to call me, you might have had better luck."

"I--" Mattie paused. "How did you know that?"

No reply.

"You followed me," she said.

"Are you about ready? I'd like to take off sometime today, if possible."

"You made sure I got home all right," Mattie persisted.

"You've been reading too many of your own books."

Silence followed, and Jess opened her eyes to see Mattie gazing warmly down at her. "Think what you like," she growled.

I will, Mattie thought, smiling. She picked up her bags, and the two women walked outside.

The End