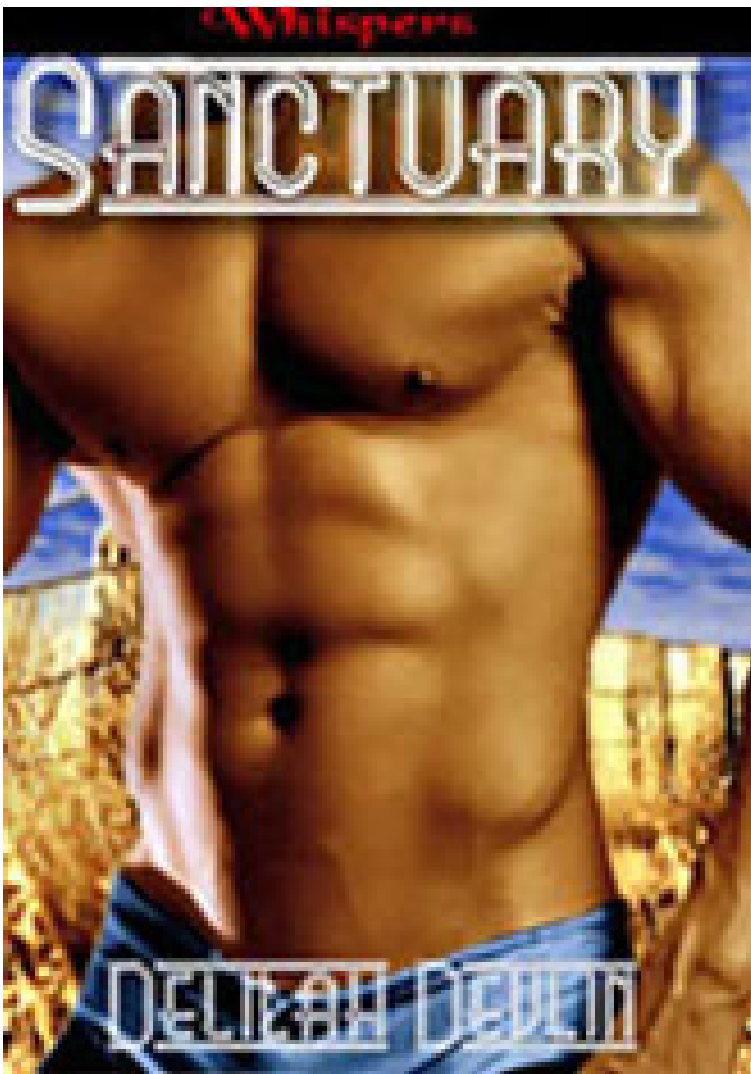


Whispers

SANCTUARY



DELICIA DEVLIN

Delilah Devlin

Sanctuary

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Sanctuary

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language. This material is meant for mature audiences!



Delilah Devlin

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Chapter One

Kate McKinnon pulled up the collar of her old leather duster to ward off the chill wind that bit the back of her neck. One glance at the darkening sky reminded her of the passage of time. Daylight was a-wastin'. Soon, she'd have to head back to the safety of the ranch house.

She cinched her "stampede" string tighter under her chin to prevent her hat from flying away and nudged her horse forward to follow the fence line, looking for any breaks that might indicate trouble.

She wasn't worried that cattle might have slipped through a hole in the fence. Most of the herd she'd run roughshod over was gone. More worrisome was what might have come inside. The dense cloud cover above hadn't allowed even a glimpse of sunlight to peek through all day.

Perfect conditions for the monsters to come out and play.

Any one of her men could have been assigned this duty, but Kate liked being on her own. Every once in a while, she needed to ride the fence to harken back to a time when the worst thing she might find was a cow mired in the mud or a calf circled by buzzards. On the open range with only herself to argue with, she found some peace. Not that she could ever really escape her problems.

The radio squawked where she'd clipped it to the bridle of her horse. "The southwest corner's

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clear, boss,” said Sam Culpepper, her ranch foreman. “I’m headin’ back to the ranch.”

She unclipped the mike and held it to her mouth. “I’ll turn back at Wasp Creek. Almost there, now.”

“Hope you found somethin’ for Cass’s stew pot. I didn’t see sign of deer or rabbit.”

Kate grimaced and pressed the talk switch. “Well, I found a bird.”

“Turkey?” he asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

She glanced at the black-feathered carcass hanging upside down from a string tied to her saddle horn. “You got that half right.”

“Shit.”

That was when she spied slackened barbwire and knew they had a problem. “Sam, we have a break.”

“I’m right behind you. Wait for me,” he rasped.

“Wait? Yeah, right,” Kate replied, knowing any delay in catching the varmint was unacceptable. The creature could wipe out the rest of their meager herd as well as endanger the lives of those living at the ranch. What pissed her off most was Sam wouldn’t have issued that order to any other ranch hand. At times like these, she regretted ever asking him into her bed.

“Goddammit, Kate, I’m on your ass! Wait!”

Kate grinned and spurred her horse into a canter. When the troubles began, Sam had appointed himself her guardian. Since “caution” didn’t appear anywhere in her vocabulary, she’d

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made it her mission in life to make his job as onerous as possible.

Not that she was foolhardy. She followed the fence and kept her gaze alert to any movement in the brush around her, and her horse didn't appear nervous in the slightest—Kate had learned to trust Lucy Lu's instincts.

The break, when she found it, was small and low—the creature had crawled in on all fours. Prints leading into the brush indicated one animal, but she wasn't ready to celebrate just yet.

The thunder of hooves, more than she'd expected, came from north along the fence line. She drew her rifle from its scabbard and turned it sideways to double check her load. Mentally, she counted off her earlier shots—three rounds were all she had left.

Sam pulled to halt beside her, his expression promising retribution. Danny's horse ground to a halt behind him, his two pit bulls close on his buckskin's hooves. The dogs whined, and their tails wagged frenetically. They'd already picked up the scent, but they'd wait until Danny gave the order to track.

“Don't you have a lick o'sense?” Sam ground out.

Kate smirked. “You only live once. Sometimes.”

Sam shook his head, his gaze narrowing. “We'll talk about this later.” Then he took the lead, following paw prints in the dry dirt until they entered an arroyo.

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He nodded to Danny, and the ranch hand swept out his arm, index finger extended, giving the command to the dogs to follow the creature into the ravine.

Sam slipped off his horse and grabbed his rifle. “You stay put. Watch the horses. Danny, follow me.”

Kate tamped down her impatience at Sam’s overprotective streak and dismounted. So she was stuck watching horses again. She settled her rifle barrel on her shoulder, kicked the dirt, and listened to the radio as the men talked between themselves while they tracked the animal.

The wind shifted. A subtle turn that blew west then east, like a lazy wag. Lucy Lu whinnied, and Kate felt the prickles that always preceded the feeling she needed to get the hell out of Dodge. It raised the fine hairs on the back of her neck.

The radio squawked. “Kate, he’s doubled back! Get the fuck out of there!”

“Get out, my ass,” she whispered. She had three horses to protect and her daddy’s old rifle in her arms.

Resisting the urge to check her chamber one more time, she waited while the horses whinnied nervously and pulled at the reins tied to a scrubby live oak, causing it to creak and obliterating any possibility she might actually hear the beast’s approach.

Instead, she took her cues from the horses’ actions—the direction their ears pricked, which way they instinctively pulled against their reins. She

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faced the mouth of the arroyo.

When it burst, snarling, from beneath the cover of brush, she was ready. She slammed the stock of her rifle into her shoulder and fired off a shot, then cocked the lever down and up to load the next cartridge into the chamber, and fired a second round.

Still it came—launching into the air toward her, teeth bared, its long ears flattened to its skull.

Too close to get off another round, she turned the gun and grabbed the barrel, swinging it like a baseball bat. She slammed the rifle against the creature's head, knocking it to the side, and then braced herself for the next attack.

Only the wolf never regained its feet. It twisted in agony on the ground as the silver load finally did its work. Poison gripped its body, causing it to convulse and forcing red-tinged foam to spill from its lips.

When it relaxed, expelling a final labored breath, the body transformed, shifting in a dark, blurred instant into a man.

The dogs burst into the clearing and circled the dead werewolf, whining and snapping, but never actually biting. Then Sam barreled out of the brush, coming to a halt as his gaze took in the scene in one sweeping glance. He bent double and rested his hands above his knees as he dragged deep breaths into his lungs. "Goddammit, Kate. When I tell you to run..."

She shrugged and pretended her own heart wasn't racing like a thoroughbred's.

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“Well, he’s dead, ain’t he?”

He shot her a glare. “You know, Kate, you are one stubborn cuss.”

She grinned and lifted a single eyebrow.

His gaze swept down her body. “Did he bite you?”

“Not so much as a nibble.”

Danny raced up the arroyo and called off the dogs. “So do we bury him?” he asked, once he had them under control.

Kate shook her head and looked away. “The buzzards have to eat, too.”

* * *

Kate scraped the dirt off her boots on the edge of the stoop before entering Cass’s kitchen. She gave a nod to the older woman who stood covered in flour up to her elbows, cutting biscuits from flattened dough. She held up the bird by its feet. “What do you want me to do with this?”

Cass grimaced. “Stick him in the pot. Gotta blanch that buzzard before I pull its feathers.”

A large stock pot filled with boiling water rattled in the old gas range. Kate lifted the lid and dunked the turkey buzzard, feathers and all, into the pot. “If anybody asks—“

Cass held up her hand. “I know. It was an old damn turkey. Coffee’s in the thermos. Help yourself.”

Kate poured a steaming cup and flashed a smile, then tromped through the house to her office, avoiding the living room. She knew she was being a little cowardly, but she didn’t think she

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could bear sitting in the living room with the families' quiet chatter surrounding her. Now that the ranch hand's bunk house had been subdivided into living quarters for the three families, she'd hoped for a little more privacy, but their noise and the sight of their haunted faces spilled over into her home as well.

So she'd settle down to her meal when it was ready in her office. The large dining room table would be crowded enough with everyone eating in shifts. Not that there'd be much reason for anyone to linger. Food was scarce. Their meals meager. Soon, they'd be forced to make another run for supplies. She'd been waiting for sunshine, but the unrelenting black sky kept them trapped inside the boundaries of the ranch.

At times, the weight of her responsibilities crushed her, making her feel overwhelmed and a little scared when she thought about so many people—especially the families—arriving at the gates. She feared she couldn't feed them, wouldn't be able to save them in the end. To protect her heart and her sanity, she avoided knowing them too well.

So Kate took her coffee at her daddy's big roll-top desk and eyed the silent radio, knowing she shouldn't turn it on and waste precious electricity. But dammit, this was her ranch house—her blood. Her men protected the people within Sanctuary.

Besides, this was their only link with the outside world.

She turned it on and let the old-fashioned

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transistors heat up, then turned the dial to tune into the band where she knew he'd be waiting. "This is KN5GST calling. The name is Kate. Anyone listening? Over."

A moment later, the whine from an engine sounded over the air. "This is AA3TZ. How are you, Kate?" he said, dropping the ham lingo.

Her hands clamped around the microphone as she held it, and she closed her eyes as his voice surround her like a soft, warm blanket. "Been better."

"Any breaches?"

"One got through today. I killed it."

"I'm sorry about that," he said softly.

She blinked—not because tears gathered in her eyes. Just dust. "It's okay," she said swiftly. "He was just another monster." She'd try to forget how young and vulnerable he'd looked, lying naked and bleeding into the dry dirt.

"Still carrying that antique gun?"

Kate's lips curved into a grin. What was it with men? Sometimes, Ty sounded a lot like Sam. "It did the trick."

"How many shots did you manage to squeeze off?"

"Two." She shivered, remembering just how close the wolf had come.

"Goddamn, Kate, what's it going to take to get you to be more careful?"

"I know what I'm doing."

"You give any thought to what we talked about before?"

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Kate shifted in her seat, uncomfortable with the direction he was going to take the conversation. “I have, but I don’t know how we’d manage it. ‘Sides, we have most everything we need here, at least for a while.”

“Honey, you can’t hold out forever. They can. Soon, you won’t find enough gas pumps with gas in them or cars to siphon off to run your generator. Your propane won’t last long with as many mouths as you’re feeding now. What happens when you can’t scavenge enough food to hold off starvation?”

Every word he said was true. Eventually, they’d all have to leave Sanctuary. But not now. She wasn’t ready to let go just yet.

“Kate, the wolves are getting hungry enough to risk facing your armed men inside the game fence. When they’re inside, you’ll be the one who’s corralled.”

Kate knew in her gut he was right. But how could she abandon a hundred years of tradition—of McKinnons on Sanctuary ranch? “I don’t have enough big trucks or men to protect a convoy for any distance.”

“I’ve been thinking about that problem, and I might have a solution for you. Let me get back to you.”

“All right.” Her hands squeezed tighter on the mike. He’d pestered her about leaving, harangued her about her recklessness. Now, he’d say goodbye. Just like always. “You doing okay?” she asked, wanting to extend the conversation.

“I’m fine. Stay put tomorrow. I’ll talk to you

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tomorrow night. Out.”

She listened to the hum until it cut off, then turned off her radio, and sat back in her chair.

Ty Bennett. For the thousandth time, she wondered what he looked like. She already had a picture in her mind—tall, dark—shoulders wide enough to cry on.

She wished she could ask him, “What color are your eyes? Your hair?” However, while she’d poured out her worries over the air waves countless nights, he’d been reticent about giving her details about himself.

How she wished she could give his deep, rumbling voice a face. So she’d know him if ever they met.

But she’d never asked him personal questions. Never tried to let him know her interest. She wasn’t very good with men. That part of her life had been stunted by “The Apocalypse” as everyone had started to call the last set of wars which colored the skies black and painted the weather cold.

Sam had been the only man around to hold her when she’d cried over her daddy’s death. He’d also been her first and only lover, although a reluctant one. Older than her by more than ten years, he’d always felt guilty about taking her innocence, but she’d pretty much insisted.

Now, they occasionally came together out of need. While Sam held out hope that eventually she’d lean on him a little more, she wasn’t in love with him, and he knew it. But she thought she

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might be falling on love with Ty—or maybe, the idea of him. Although they'd never met, her heart soared at just the sound of his brusque voice.

As always happened when the shadows outside lengthened and the long night stretched like an endless road, she wondered how different her life might have been.

The ignition of a dirty bomb in D.C. started the last war. The enemy hadn't needed airplanes or to break into congress while it was in session. They'd sipped coffee in a Starbucks a block away from the capital when they'd detonated the explosive loaded with enough Russian plutonium to blow up a couple city blocks. U.S. retribution had been swift and a thousand times more deadly.

Winter hadn't come to them overnight. And at first, other than the devastation in D.C., the rest of the country went back to business as usual, occasionally glancing at the ever-darkening sky—not admitting the changes to the patterns of the winds or lack of rainfall. Crops failed. Potable water supplies dried up. Global warming became a non-issue as temperatures around the world cooled.

But if the initial fallout hadn't been enough to contend with, creatures that had lived millennia in the shadows were freed to roam at will by a permanently overcast sky.

Sam knocked against the open door, pulling her from her memories. He strode inside and sat down in the chair beside her desk, raking a hand through his short blonde hair. "Any news?"

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She shook her head. “Same ole.”

“He still tryin’ to talk you into leaving?”

She kept no secrets from Sam. He knew about her obsession with the voice that waited in the darkness for her call. “Yeah.”

“Maybe you ought to think about it,” he said quietly.

Surprised, she gave him a sharp glance. It was the first time she’d heard that from Sam. Sanctuary was as much his home as hers.

“Want company tonight?” His brown eyes betrayed not a hint of hunger. But she knew he ached.

She was tempted. Sam was an attractive man with lean, strong body, but Ty’s voice still reverberated around her mind, so she shook her head and glanced away.

His lips thinned, but he nodded his understanding, no trace of disappointment in his expression.

Feeling tense and little sick to her stomach, she almost wished he’d give her some hint of what he really thought. Sometimes, she even wished he’d insist on having sex, because she was hot for it. However, afterward he’d leave her bed with a haunted look in his gaze, and she’d cry into her pillow.

They were both unhappy and holding onto to something that didn’t really exist. Loneliness was dealing their lifelong friendship a slow death.

Kate cleared her throat. “Who’s on watch tonight?” she asked.

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“Danny and Mr. Bates.”

She lifted an eyebrow at the name of one of the refugees who’d arrived at the gates in recent weeks. “Does he know which end of a gun to aim?”

Sam’s lips curled at one corner. “He wants to pull his own weight. He’s been practicing.”

“Don’t give him any silver shot—can’t afford to waste it in the dirt.”

“We’ve got one more problem.”

She drew in a deep breath, not liking the dread she saw in Sam’s expression. “What now?”

“We need to make a gas run.”

Kate felt her jaw tense and her spine stiffen hard as steel. “We can’t wait for sunshine?”

He shook his head. “We have enough fuel left to run the generator for maybe a day. I’ll take a posse into town in the morning.”

Kate shook her head. “I’m going. I need you here, checking fences.”

“Kate, now’s not the time—“

“I’m going. Get a list from Cass of everything she needs. We’ll make a run on the grocery store while we’re at it. I’ll be back by nighttime.”

“Kate, you can’t keep everyone safe.”

“I’m a better shot than you. But the men, especially the new ones, listen to you. I need you here. I’ll take Danny and Shep.”

He stood and unbuckled his gun belt. “Take my pistol and leave that old antique with me in the morning.”

Not wanting another argument, she held out her hand for the gun belt.

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He dropped it onto her palm and dipped his head. "I'll see you in the morning."

Kate didn't watch him leave. She was already reaching for the kit in the bottom drawer of her desk. As everyone else hunkered down for a restless night of sleep, she pulled apart the pistol to clean the bolt, the chamber, and all its mechanisms.

The greatest gift John McKinnon had given his little girl was he'd taught her how to kill.

Chapter Two

Kate mashed her foot against the gas pedal, sending gravel spraying as she rounded the corner.

Danny, who stood behind the cab in the truck bed, pounded on the roof.

Beside her on the bench seat, Shep, her oldest hand and her dad's best friend, hadn't loosened his grip on the door handle since they'd entered the city limits. "Tryin' to lose that boy, Kate?" he asked, his voice deadpanned and his expression wry.

Kate grinned. "You know damn well street corners are dangerous places. We don't want to get ourselves a hitchhiker." She didn't worry too much about Danny or Shep. They all enjoyed the rough and raucous ride—a chance to shake the dust off their boots after weeks of confinement to the ranch.

It kept their minds off the sights they passed—the empty, windowless houses with their gaping front doors, the gutted shop fronts with their contents emptied onto the streets. What had once been a thriving little west Texas community had become a ghost town. No one but the criminals and the monsters lived in Tierney any more.

The grocery store loomed ahead. "Get ready to roll," she yelled out the window to Danny. "Got the grocery list?" she asked Shep.

The old man patted his shirt pocket. "Think

Cass'd let me through the door without it?"

"Good. Danny gets the cart—he's fastest. I'll guard the door." She pulled up next to the front doors of the grocery store, slid from the seat to the pavement, and pocketed the keys.

Danny leapt from the truck bed and ran for the door with Shep on his heels.

While the men shouted to each other from deep inside the store, Kate glanced at the sky. Once again, God hadn't relented. The cloud cover was deep—angry, gray clouds slid quickly across the sky with the wind pushing them clear to the Gulf before they could drop rain. Worse, the cover permitted no sunlight to scare the nighttime critters into going to ground.

Kate pushed back the edge of her duster and tucked it behind the holster hanging from the gun belt she wore strapped to her waist at Sam's insistence. She walked into the store and straight up to the cashier's desk, doing her best to ignore the overpowering stench of rotting food coming from the produce section. She reached into the shelf above the station, rooting for a pack of cigarettes, but found none and cursed.

So she returned her attention to the front doors and kept track of the men's progress which she could judge because Shep stood at the end of each row as Danny ran down the aisles to fill one squeaking cart after another according to Shep's shouted instructions.

She glanced at her watch—fifteen minutes. Too long. "Time to wrap it up. We have to go, guys,"

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she shouted. It really shouldn't take this long. There wasn't much left on the shelves. She glanced down and kicked a cockroach off her boot and squashed it with her heel.

When the men moved into the storage area at the back of the building, she tensed, listening for any signs of trouble in the back, any signs of ambush. Not until she heard the whirring of the cart wheels coming down the aisle again did she let out a relieved breath.

She ran through the entrance to stand guard over the truck while Shep and Danny emptied the contents of the carts into the truck bed—mostly canned goods and paper products. Everything else had been eaten by bugs and mice or was too rotten for human consumption.

“Any place else we need to stop?” Shep asked.

“Just need to get the gas.”

The stacked five gallon cans in the truck bed represented their hope they'd find enough fuel to run the generator and give them precious light for a few more weeks.

“We'll head to the Exxon station,” she said. “It's more open.”

At the gas station, she pulled out the key to the underground storage tank Mr. Jeffers had left her when he migrated east, and while Shep lowered a garden hose into the well to siphon gas into the canisters, she again kept watch.

When he was filling the last of the cans, she heard the sounds she'd dreaded—vehicles coming down the road at a fast clip. “Load up, guys. We're

done.”

Shep pulled up the hose and quickly locked the cap to the well, then bounded into the cab of the truck with the energy of a man much younger than his sixty years. Adrenaline could do that to a man.

Kate peeled out of the parking lot, heading back the way to Sanctuary, but as she'd feared, vehicles turned sideways in the road blocked their exit. She spun the steering wheel, running up over the curb to double back the way they'd come. “Don't you dare fire on them,” she shouted to Danny. “If they shoot back, they could hit that gas. Let's find us a place where we can stand off.”

The First Baptist Church was just around the corner and not a likely place for monsters to hide.

She ran up over the curb, all the way up to the front steps of the church, and everyone piled out of the truck and dove for the front doors as vehicles careened into the parking lot behind them.

“Shep, you check the back entrance,” she shouted as she broke out a stained-glass window with her pistol grip. “Danny you get up into the choir loft and keep watch from the upstairs windows.”

They waited while vehicles circled the parking lot, effectively ringing the building. Whooping shouts rang in the air.

“How much ammo you got on you, girl?” Shep shouted from the opposite end of the church.

She patted her duster pockets. “Enough. I don't miss much.”

“Don't look like we need silver load.”

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He was right. What surrounded them wasn't werebeasts—it was the lowest form of human life—those who preyed on the survivors.

“Well, this will be easy pickin's,” she murmured and steeled herself for the coming confrontation.

Kate didn't wait to hear what they might say. The only thing they wanted was her—women were a scarce commodity on the frontier. She took a bead down the barrel of her pistol and squeezed off a shot through the windshield of a pickup, pleased at the splash of red that exploded against the glass.

Cool as ice, she chose another target, unwilling to let even a tremor of fear or regret ruin her shot—doing like her daddy taught her, pretending the men ducking behind their vehicles were just the paper targets she'd practiced on.

One. Two. Three down. Then Shep's shotgun exploded with a roar, catching a cry closer than she'd expected. Were they sneaking up on them?

“What do you see, Danny?” she shouted as she flattened her back against the wall next to the window.

“We've got maybe twenty of the bastards out there,” Danny's excited voice echoed from above. “But they seem to be holding back now.”

“Hello in there,” a tinny voice said over a loudspeaker. “We don't mean you any harm. You had no call to fire on us. We were just...seeing if you needed help.”

Kate gave Shep a skeptical glance. She edged closer to the window to shout outside. “Well, we

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don't. Why don't you move along?"

"Thought I saw a woman in there," the man said, the tone of his voice sly. "Honey, we can offer you better protection than an old man and a boy."

Kate's upper lip curled in a snarl. "Thanks for the offer, but we won't be stayin' in town long."

Laughter sounded outside, low and not especially amused. It had a dirty edge to it and made her skin crawl.

With the lull, she ejected her magazine and inserted a full clip into her pistol.

"It's gonna be nighttime soon," the voice outside said. "You really should find shelter. We have a nice place. Plenty to eat."

A sick knot formed in the pit of her stomach, knowing what the trade would be. However, she'd run up against their sort before and prevailed. The trick was to keep her wits about her.

If she could just get a shot at the guy behind the mike...

A long silence followed. She darted a glance around the window sill and realized the attention of the men surrounding the building was on something in the distance. Then she heard it—engines, big ones, roaring their way.

Being the cowards they were, the gang bolted into their vehicles as quickly as they could and departed. Right behind them appeared a convoy of green camouflaged military vehicles. Hummers and large, canvas-topped transport vehicles with machine-gun turrets mounted on top.

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Kate kept to the shadows while watching the long column of trucks come into view. “Shep, you see that?”

“Didn’t know they were operating this far into the frontier,” he said, coming up behind her to peek out the window. “Better stay inside ‘til we know whose side they’re on.”

She expected the convoy to continue on past, but one by one they pulled into the church parking lot.

Kate held her breath, her heartbeat racing—the first suffocating wash of true fear pouring down her spine in an icy fall.

From the lead vehicle, a door opened, and a man dressed in blue jeans and a black leather jacket jumped from the cab to the hard pavement below.

Her first sight of him told her instinctively here was bigger trouble than she’d already faced. This wasn’t the stupid scum she’d squared off with. He was a hundred times more intimidating.

For one, he was a big man. Taller even than Sam, his wide shoulders and muscled thighs bespoke of years of physical training. In close quarters, he’d be impossible to beat. She squeezed the grip of her weapon harder, already thinking where she’d have to place the first shot to bring him down quick.

The closer he strode, the greater her unease. Not only did he have the size to make her heart leap to the back of her throat, he moved with a rangy grace that said he’d be fast on his feet. His

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face with its square jaw and sharp cheekbones completed the portrait of an unstoppable man once he'd set his eyes on a target.

Now, she just hoped that dark, hard gaze never rested on her.

While she drew deep breaths to calm her racing heart and the tremor of her hands, an uninvited thought crossed her mind. If she weren't battling for her life in the middle of an Apocalypse, this would be the sort of man she'd want. Dangerous, brutal—sexy as hell.

But he was dressed in civilian clothes and riding in a military vehicle. Was he just the leader of a smarter band of criminals?

He stopped about twenty paces from the church doors and put his hands on his hips. "Kate McKinnon, are you in there?"

She jerked at the familiar deep tones of his voice. Her startled glance found Shep's.

His eyes were narrowed in his lined face, and he shook his head. "You know him? Might be some kind a trick."

"This is Ty Bennett."

Kate closed her eyes and sank against the wall, feeling like her whole world was spinning out of control. How could this be?

"Kate, the cavalry's here, sweetheart."

* * *

Ty held his breath as the slender figure descended the church steps. Although she was garbed in a long duster and wearing a cowboy hat that cast shadows over her face, he could tell a lot

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about the woman he'd come half the state away to rescue. Her slender shoulders were square, her chin held high.

The smart-mouthed woman he'd talked to endless nights looked brave—and brittle as glass.

The closer she came, the more his body tightened.

"She's prettier than I expected," Diego murmured as he stepped behind him.

Ty didn't bother to say he'd noticed, too. He'd already been fighting an unexplainable attraction to the sassy voice on the radio, but he thought she'd be older. The woman walking toward him was shaping up to be a delicious surprise.

When Kate stopped several feet away, he noted the edge of her jacket tucked behind her holster and the suspicion glinting in her eyes. A shotgun barrel poked out a window of the church behind her.

A smile curved one corner of his mouth. *Good girl.* Someone was watching her back.

Kate stood motionless, but her gaze swept his men as they dismounted their vehicles and waited beside them for direction. When her glance came back to him, her expression was stony. "You might have mentioned you were coming for a visit," she said, her voice tight.

Her husky inflection tugged at his cock. The game had begun.

Knowing she was easily riled, he decided to bait her. He didn't like her scared—angry, he could handle. He lifted one brow. "And I thought I told

you to stay put.”

Her gaze narrowed. “I don’t follow orders very well,” she said, her tone dead level.

Diego snorted behind him, and Ty knew his buddy was laughing his ass off.

Kate lifted her chin toward the convoy. “Now, a person might wonder how men such as you came into possession of military vehicles.”

“A person? You wondering how, Kate?” he drawled. “Maybe I’m just a resourceful kind of guy.”

Her nostrils flared, and her lips tightened. “And I’m just wondering what else you might be, Ty Bennett.”

That’s when he saw the hint of vulnerability in her gaze—and a glint of hope. This woman had lived a nightmare and needed what he offered worse than she knew. “Kate, we’re ex-military living at Fort Davis in the Davis Mountains. Before things went to hell, we were part of a border patrol outfit—light infantry.” Some of it was true. What he left out would have to wait until she knew him better.

Kate’s lips relaxed a fraction. “Why no uniforms?”

“We were mustered out of the service when the post closed.”

“They left behind functioning equipment?”

“They were in a hurry. Everything was abandoned. We’ve taken over the post.”

“Is this everyone? All your people?”

“I left men behind to guard the post.”

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Her breath gasped softly. “Only men?”

He read her panic and decided to sidestep the issue for now. Concentrate on the pluses. “There’s a sturdy fence, a mess hall, food in storage to last a large unit months, an artesian well...everything a community needs to survive. We have room for you and yours if you’ll come. If you want to go on after that to one of the coastal cities, we’ll find a way to make that happen, too.”

“There are only half a dozen women at the ranch—three are married,” she said faintly.

“We won’t take what’s not offered.” The quiet, firm tone of his voice was meant to reassure her, but he knew she’d seen too much to trust blindly. “The same deal will be offered to them—they can stay at Davis, with us, or we’ll find them safe passage to the safe zones on the coast.

The safe zones. He couldn’t imagine her giving up the wide open country for safety’s sake—living with curfews, Marshall Law, and cramped living spaces.

Her jaw flexed, and she looked away. “So how’d you know it was me in there?”

“I sent out scouts in advance of the convoy. They saw you enter town, hit the grocery store like kamikazes, and then steal gas at the station. I don’t believe another female in this area would be so brazen. We got here as quick as we could when those bastards chased you here.”

She shot him a pointed glance. “Your timing was amazing.” Again, suspicion colored her tone.

“Remember, I didn’t expect to find you here.

You were supposed to sit tight,” he said, baiting her again.

Kate snorted. “Like I said—“

His lips twitched. “Yeah, I know. You don’t follow orders well. That’s gonna change.”

Her dark eyebrows shot up.

Before she could answer the challenge he’d thrown down, he continued, “Katie, you can’t stay in Sanctuary any longer. You know it. Those men inside know it. You’re living on borrowed time until the werebeasts take down your fence.”

“It’s my ranch, my home,” she said through stiff lips.

“Maybe someday you can come back to it. For now, you need to get yourself and all those people depending on you somewhere safe. I’ve brought the trucks and the men—we can get you out of here.”

She drew a deep breath, and her hands clenched into fists. “Why, Ty? Why would you do this? You don’t even know me.”

He formed his lips into a lop-sided smile. “You won’t just let me be the Lone Ranger riding to the rescue?”

“I don’t believe in heroes anymore,” she said, her voice thickening. She blinked against the moisture filling her eyes, her sorrow and disillusionment etched in her strained features.

Ty gave her time to get herself under control but didn’t look away to give her any privacy. Every tear, every worry, every delight she held inside would be his. From this moment onward, he’d never let her hide.

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“Fair enough,” he said quietly, choosing his next words carefully. Trust would have to be built one stone at a time. “Would you believe me if I said I came for you?”

Her gaze raked him. “Are you talking a trade? Get my people out safely—for me?”

“If that’s what makes you more comfortable with the whole idea.”

“I just wanted it spelled out,” she gritted out.

“So what do you say?”

“I say, I’ll kill you if you’re lying.”

He suppressed a smile. “About the coming after you part?”

“No, about the part where you’ll get my people out.”

“Do we have a deal?” He held out his hand, knowing this was the moment when she’d have to place her trust in him and take her hand away from where it rested alongside her weapon.

Her jaw clenched, and she drew in a deep breath and slowly raised her hand.

He slid his palm along hers and let his index finger glide up to the pulse that throbbed at her wrist. It quickened the longer he held her hand, convincing him the attraction he felt was answered. “So where are we going to bed down for the night?”

Chapter Three

Kate felt the earth move beneath her feet—so shocking was the undercurrent of sensual promise in his question. She drew in a shaky breath. “We’re not stayin’ in town.”

He laid his other hand on top of hers, enveloping her in heat that radiated up her arm and to places she had no business noticing when danger was still afoot. “My men need to top off the vehicles and find that crowd of troublemakers before we head out to your ranch.”

“Fine,” she said, her voice clipped. “We’ll see you at the ranch tomorrow. I’ll be sure to tell the men at the gates not to shoot you on sight.”

His hands squeezed hers. “I don’t want you heading out there on your own. The sky will be pitch-black soon.”

“We’re ready for any trouble.” The only trouble she saw was standing right in front of her.

His eyes narrowed. “There’s no need to take the risk. We’re here to help. Let us do our job.”

She slowly pulled away her hand. She couldn’t think when he touched her. At least not about anything that made any sense. His broad frame and handsome face turned her brains to mush.

“Katie, you need any help out there?” Shep shouted through the window.

Still not willing to turn her back on Ty and his men, she shouted over her shoulder. “Everything’s under control,” she lied.

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“We need to talk,” Ty said.

“I agree. There’s a gazebo out back on the grass.”

“You really want to be out in the open for it?”

“Who the hell’s gonna attack with the Army in the front yard?” The intimacy of four walls around them would be too tempting. She’d fantasized about him too long.

He drew a deep breath and signaled with a wave of his hand for her to precede him into the church.

Accepting his direction meant turning her back on him and his men. But hadn’t she already surrendered when she’d left the safety of the church? What chance did she really have if things turned ugly? Deep inside, she wanted to trust him. Wanted so much more.

This man had kept the hope for a better future alive in her heart for months. He’d made no promises and told her damn little about himself—but she’d held tight to the strength in his voice when he’d admonished her for being reckless, praised her for her courage, and comforted her all those times she’d felt so overwhelmed.

She’d wanted to turn over the reins to someone stronger and more capable. Well, here he was.

His body appeared relaxed, like he had all the time in the world for her to make up her mind. She wondered what he saw and wished now she’d at least run a comb through her hair before she’d bound it in her usual ponytail.

Her dad had always said she should go with her

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gut when logic failed. Her instincts told her he was a dangerous man—and she wanted him on her side. Whatever the cost.

If her body was only too happy to surrender, she was entitled to enjoy making “payment”. She turned and led the way into the church, her heart skipping a beat when his hand settled on the small of her back. The pressure, even through her coat, thrilled her.

Shep awaited them, his rifle barrel pointing toward the ceiling. His eyebrows rose when he saw how close Ty stood.

“I know him, Shep. He’s here to help.”

He nodded and lowered his weapon as more men filed inside the chapel, but he didn’t look happy.

“I’ll have the men get the generator going and set up a perimeter defense,” Ty said.

Another load off her shoulders. She glanced above to the choir loft. “It’s okay, Danny. You can come down, now.”

Danny’s face, brimming with curiosity, peered over the balcony. “You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve been...expecting them.”

Ty nudged her back, a reminder he wanted to talk.

“I’ll be in the back,” she said to Danny and Shep. “Take a load off. Looks like we’ll be spendin’ the night here.”

She headed to the back of the church, hanging a left at the altar and striding into the corridor where the church offices stood vacant. The door

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leading to the lawn in back opened with a whine, and Kate stepped into deepening twilight with Ty right behind her.

Their boots crunched on the dry grass, adding to the crackling tension building in her shoulders and back. Ty was here. They were alone. What would happen between them? Would he insist on taking his pleasure now that the bargain had been made?

She wasn't sure whether the thought excited or appalled her. Sam had been her only lover, but not once in their years-long arrangement had she felt this sharp-edged excitement.

Mingled with anticipation was the fear she'd disappoint. Ty was so much more man than she was woman.

They climbed the steps of the gazebo, and she turned to face him. Shielded from any prying gaze by the lattice-board sides of the building and the dried vines clinging to the frame, they stared at each other for a long moment.

Now that they were alone, she felt more than a little unnerved by his dark, hooded gaze. She cleared her throat. "You said you wanted to talk."

His gaze bored into hers. "We should set some ground rules."

She nodded, her mouth suddenly dry. Rules? "For the trip?"

"For what happens between us."

A fine trembling started deep inside her. He'd shot straight past business into intimacy. "All right. Shoot."

“First, you tell me everything I want to know. No secrets.”

“Will you do the same?”

“In time.”

She snorted softly and gave him a derisive look. “I’m supposed to give you my trust, but you won’t reciprocate?”

“It’s a little complicated. There are things best left alone for now. Can you live with that?”

It was perverse, but the mystery surrounding him was a huge turn-on. “Depends.”

He lifted one eyebrow in question.

“On whether you follow through with your promise to provide safe passage to the people at the ranch.”

He canted his head and stared like he was trying to see inside her. “Don’t you want to ask anything for yourself?”

She licked her lips. “I think I’m going to get it.”

His lips curved, and his dark eyes crinkled at the corners. “I think you’re right,” he said, his voice a deep, smooth rumble—like a panther’s purr.

Her cheeks burned beneath his scrutiny. “What else?”

“I’m in charge. No questions. When I’m not there, you’ll follow my next in command.”

Her teeth ground in frustration. “Will I have any say?”

“I’ll listen. But I make the decisions.”

“Will your next in command have power over me?”

“He’ll give the orders, but you’re mine. He

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won't touch you."

The way he said it, flatly like an already recognized fact, rankled while at the same time tripping a thrill that heated her body from the inside out. She didn't know how to respond.

"Does anyone else have a claim on you?"

The deep, dark texture of his voice upped the tension building in her core. "Why?"

"Just wondered if I might have a fight on my hands."

She shook her head, ready to deny, but remembered his warning about no secrets. "My foreman, Sam...he's the only one. Sometimes. But he won't interfere."

"When was the last time you slept with him?"

She jerked at the crudeness of his question and dropped her glance, unable to hold hers steady beneath his steely gaze. "Weeks, and we don't sleep together," she muttered.

"Take off your hat."

His tight, roughened voice drew her nipples instantly to aching points. She closed her eyes and took off her hat slowly.

"Your hair. Let it down."

Her fingers trembled as she fought the elastic band, but finally her hair fell around her shoulders. She knew it was longer than had been fashionable, but her dad had loved her ponytail and had tweaked it often.

She gave him a quick glance to gauge his reaction. The flare of his nostrils seemed a good sign he was pleased.

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Her hand rose to smooth down the flyaway strands.

He reached out and tipped her chin upward to study her features. “Green. I thought they might be.”

“Do we still have a bargain?” she asked, trying to sound cool but knowing he heard the nervous quaver in her voice.

His response stole her breath away. He stepped so close the heat radiating from his body warmed the space between them. As she tilted back her head to hold his gaze, his head dipped, and his mouth covered hers.

Now, she’d been kissed plenty, but she’d never been devoured. He ate her lips, slanting over her mouth, sucking her lower lip between his teeth to nibble, and then sealing their mouths to thrust his tongue inside. He swept behind her teeth, stroked over her tongue, and curled his to tug and tease until she groaned.

Kate grasped the corners of his shoulders, holding on for dear life as he circled and prodded and told her without words how he’d fuck her. Hard, relentless—leaving nothing undiscovered.

She’d never known the likes of the lust that arose inside her—so strong her whole body shuddered with need. She closed the distance between them and pressed her breasts against his chest.

Ty’s hands dropped from her face and parted her coat to reach inside. He smoothed around her waist to her back, and lower, to cup her bottom

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and draw her hips close.

His erection, thick and hard as a post, ground into her belly, building a fire that swelled her pussy and drenched her panties—she was more than ready to keep the bargain. *Now!*

He lifted his head and dragged in a deep breath. “I won’t take you here.”

“Why not?” she said, and glided her lips along his firm jaw.

“It’s too open.”

“Who’s gonna watch?” God, couldn’t he tell she didn’t care? She nipped his chin.

“It’s almost dark. The moon’s rising.”

“You think werewolves need moonlight to prowl?”

“I *know* they’re more vicious when the moon rules them. We go inside.”

Kate jerked away, and his hands fell to his sides. Maybe he didn’t want her as much as she did him. Maybe he’d just been playing with her to see how far he could lead her? She drew the edges of her duster tight around her and swept her hat from the floor where she’d dropped it. She placed it on top of her loosened hair and gave him a look that anyone who knew her would say meant war.

“We still have a bargain,” he reminded her.

“I still don’t follow orders well,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Like I said, I’m gonna take care of that. Let’s get back inside. I need to check on the men.”

Kate wiped her mouth with the forearm and cursed under her breath. Her lips still throbbed.

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Anyone looking at her would know she'd been kissed. She shook her head. Since when did she care? She'd been ready to fuck him where they stood.

Her body hummed with frustration, but she put one foot in front of the other, ignoring the moist heat between her legs and the man at her back.

* * *

Ty curled his hands into fists as he followed her inside. Frustration rode his cock still crammed behind his zipper. He was grumpy and aching, and the woman was a hard ass. *Christ*, how he'd liked to have laid her on the floor of the gazebo and rode her until she hadn't the strength to open her mouth again and argue.

Diego stood just inside the door, his face expressionless, but his eyes glinting with mirth. He sniffed discreetly as Kate passed and raised an eyebrow. "That was quick," he said, soft enough for only Ty to hear.

Ty growled and stomped past. Diego's soft laughter followed him down the corridor. A hum sounded from the distance, and lights flickered into life throughout the hallway and the rooms lining either side.

A glimpse of a couch in an open doorway to his right clinched it. He grabbed Kate's arm and swung her around, lifting her off her feet and into his arms. He carried her through the doorway and kicked the door shut on Diego's laughter.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she said from between tight lips.

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A good fight or a good fuck was the only thing that would satisfy him now. That Kate would give him both only sweetened the need pooling in his groin.

He set her on her feet, knocked her hat from her head, and tore the duster down her arms. Then he stripped her gun belt from her hips and reached for the T-shirt hugging her slender curves. He pulled it from where it was tucked inside her pants and roughly shoved it up. Her arms remained at her sides, her expression sour as a bulldog's.

"We have a bargain," he reminded her.

Later, he'd tell her later he hadn't meant a word of his offer. He'd have helped her without the exchange of favors. Right now, he had to be inside her, fucking deep into her tight cunt, burying himself in warm, wet *human* woman.

She lifted her arms slowly, defiance riding the curve of her jaw. But her nipples told a different story. They sprang against the thin fabric of her bra, round hard knots he wouldn't ignore for even a moment longer.

With her arms and head trapped in her t-shirt, he ducked down and clasped one little bud between his teeth and bit softly, surprising a gasp from her. Then he sucked it through the fabric, pulling hard until it ripened further. He pulled the edge of the cup beneath her nipple to expose it and groaned. The hard, pink bud beckoned him, hardening and scraping his tongue as he circled on it.

She wriggled against him, struggling to free

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herself, and he let her nipple go to drag her shirt over her head. He broke the clasp of her bra in his haste to free her breasts.

They were small and round and tilted upward, the nipples like budding flowers seeking sunlight. He backed her to the leather couch and lay her lengthwise on it, then bent to sip at one breast while he palmed the other, squeezing.

Her legs moved restlessly, sliding sinuously on the leather, pressing together and apart. The aroma of her arousal scented the air, making it impossible for him to ignore the tightness of his jeans one minute more.

He stood and removed his jacket and raised his own t-shirt over his head, then reached for the button at the top of his waistband.

Her gaze clung to where his hands worked. Her flushed face was tight, her lips swollen from his earlier kisses. He pulled down the zipper and reached inside his underwear to draw out his cock, sighing when cool air washed over it. Her gaze raked him. He couldn't wait to finish stripping and simply shoved his pants low enough to free his balls.

She sat up and swung her legs off the sofa and leaned toward him, her face level with his cock. He held his breath while she slanted her head and ran her tongue from the base of his cock and up his shaft.

He raked her hair with his fingers and guided her toward the head.

Her tongue curved and licked the underside of

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the ridge surrounding the crown— teasing strokes that had him flexing his buttocks to push his cock between her lips.

She relented and opened wide, swallowing him whole.

He stroked inside her hot mouth, feeling the light scrape of her teeth and the soft suctioning of her lips as she drew him deeper.

He couldn't remember it ever feeling this good. Endless nights of stroking his cock inside his palm, of tamping down the memory of a woman's mouth sucking his cock to orgasm, had killed his expectations of ever knowing this kind of elation.

Wild, unfettered—hot as hell. But he didn't want to come in her mouth. Not the first time. He wanted to empty his balls inside her soft body. He pulled away and helped her stand.

Her eyes were bright, her cheeks reddened, and she reached upward to kiss his mouth while he shoved her pants past her hips.

“Sorry. I'll make it up to you later.” He turned her, pushed her down, and bent her over the couch. “Gotta be inside you, Kate. Can't wait.”

“Please hurry,” she whispered.

He didn't know if she was telling him to get it over with or she was just as excited. He was desperate enough not to care.

His fingers sought the moist opening between her legs and thrust inside.

Her inner muscles eased and clasped, urging him deeper. With her legs trapped in her blue jeans, she hiked her bottom higher—seeking a

deeper penetration.

Ty slid his thumb lower and found the hard little knot at the bottom of her slick folds and rubbed it, pressing gradually harder as her breaths shortened, punctuated by thin, feminine moans.

Withdrawing his fingers, he positioned his cock at her entrance, watching the wet, swollen lips swallow the head as he pushed forward.

Kate's lean, muscled ass quivered, and she pressed her forehead to the cushions as she groaned. "God, Ty, fuck me."

Spreading his legs wide to straddle hers, he placed his hands on the sofa cushion and started to pump his hips slowly, working himself inside her tight cunt—cramming deeper into her moist, hot passage, one stroke at a time.

"Faster, please," she said, her voice tightening like the grip of her pussy on his cock.

Faster, harder, he thrust in and out, loving the way her cunt rippled inside, caressing his shaft as he fucked her. He grew more excited as other sensations built. Hot, humid heat. Pressure surrounding him, milking him.

He pistoned into her, his balls banging against her clit. His breaths came shorter, his strokes sharper.

Her bottom slammed back to take him deeper, and more moisture drenched her channel, easing the friction and his movements as he pounded at her womb.

"Ty!" she gasped, then her whole body went rigid, straining against him, clamping hard around

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his dick.

She made it impossible for him to hold back one second longer. His balls erupted, cum exploding from his cock. He cried out, unable to temper the anguish that burned his throat. When the storm passed, he continued rocking against her, unwilling to leave the heat surrounding him and the soft ass that cushioned every stroke.

He leaned over her and laid his cheek against her shoulder while his heart and breaths slowed.

“You’ll get my people out?” she asked, her voice muffled against the cushion.

The bargain. He snorted, too drained to laugh. The contrary woman was a single-minded little bitch. “Yeah, I’ll take them to fucking China if you want.”

Chapter Four

Even as she lay limp as a dishrag on the cushions of the couch with Ty blanketing her back, a niggling thought entered her mind—something wasn't quite right. She wondered if it was just her mile-wide pessimistic streak that wouldn't let her fully enjoy the moment.

Ty had been wild and forceful, everything she'd ever craved in a man. The bigger-than-life hero come to the rescue she'd always secretly dreamed of.

But she didn't believe in fairy tales.

She could have cried with disappointment. Ty was too perfect, too magnificently honed—too well-hung to be entirely human.

Was that it? Was he a *werewolf*? If he was and the men who followed him were cut from the same pelt, then they were a species of *were* she'd never encountered before. Those she'd observed appeared to prefer their wolves' coats. The longer they lived past their first shift, the more they craved the call of the wild.

But these men appeared too organized and comfortable in their human bodies.

Well, there was only one way to be sure, but how the hell was she going to get silver inside his body? Every person who stepped on Sanctuary was tested before entering. Could she wait that long and risk bringing the enemy to the gate?

His cock stirred inside her, reminding her of its

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delicious bite when fully erect. He'd worked his monstrous cock inside her slowly, crowding past her entrance, stroking so deep he'd banged against the mouth of her womb.

Her channel was already melting around him, and she stiffened her back, fighting the urge to let him fuck her one more time. So far, only her pussy had experienced any penetration—her skin hadn't suffered so much as a scratch. A woman couldn't be turned by fucking.

But she could be if she angered him enough to bite her. How could she test him?

Draped over the sofa, her belt buckle dug into her hip. It was a turquoise and silver conch, and the prong on the back was sharp. She'd used it before, but it wouldn't penetrate deep enough to kill him if he was a *were*. So how could she stick him and make it appear an accident?

She needed him relaxed, compliant—unsuspecting. There was only one way that came to mind.

Hell. Was she just looking for an excuse to have sex with him again? Was her mind still so muddled with his spicy scent and the fullness that even now stretched her inner walls? She could hardly think past the delicious ache.

She needed a distraction—for him and her.

"Ty," she said softly.

"Mmm?" he murmured against her shoulder.

"I think these jeans are cutting off my circulation. I need to get them off."

He groaned, but lifted from her body, pulling

out his cock slowly, but not before he glided back in one more time as though he hated leaving her.

Awkwardly, she rose and faced him, dismayed to find him pulling up his pants. “Um...I thought...”

He looked back at her, one eyebrow raised.

“But I was kinda hoping...”

A smile lifted one corner of his mouth. “I need a little time to recuperate, sweetheart.”

Feeling a blush of mortification heat her face, she cleared her throat. “I was hoping I might help you with that.”

Both eyebrows rose. “I see.” He glanced at the door and lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck. Then he gave her a narrowed glance that dropped to her breasts and back up to her gaze. “I guess we have a little more time.”

She toed off her boots and hurriedly pushed her jeans the rest of the way down her legs, afraid he’d change his mind.

He stared as she finished undressing, his gaze zeroing in on her pussy.

Shifting apart her legs, she let him see the fluid dripping down her thighs. Seduction wasn’t a skill she’d ever acquired, and she hoped she didn’t look like a fool as she settled a hand on one hip and trailed the other up her belly to cup a tiny breast.

She knew she had to look like a half-grown girl—all angles and slight curves. Perhaps she wouldn’t appeal to him at all now that he could see every one of her flaws.

But his jaw tightened as he watched her play with her tit, and his hand adjusted his cock inside

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his pants. She was further emboldened by the flush that lit his cheeks and the quickening of his breaths.

His hands dropped to the waistband of his jeans, and he slowly unbuttoned them.

This time she was the one who couldn't look away as the widening placket opened to reveal his straining cock.

When she dragged her gaze up to his, her body started quivering at the smoldering intent she read in his expression. Taking a deep breath, she nonchalantly tossed her blue jeans to the sofa, careful that the buckle landed on top.

He continued the unaffected, but sexy striptease, tugging down his zipper and gripping his pants to shove them down his thickly muscled thighs.

With his cock lifting from a thatch of dark curls and still semi-erect, her mouth went dry. Lord, he was beautiful. And the part of him that proclaimed him all male, was especially so.

His long shaft was thick and straight. The skin stretched around it had a satiny sheen. The plump head was purplish, and all along the shaft were ridged veins that stood out against his flesh like those mapping his muscled arms.

Kate shook herself from her momentary awe and licked her lips, trying to decide how best to seduce him. She had a job to do, but her body certainly didn't view it as work. It creamed with pleasure.

She stepped toward him in her bare feet and

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realized that even at 5'10", the top of her head could snuggle beneath his chin. Never before had she felt this overwhelmed by a man's height and breadth. She lifted a hand to the back of his head and pulled his face down for what might be their last kiss.

His mouth slid over hers, his lips sucking her lower lip between his teeth to nibble. Lord, she loved the way he transformed a kiss into a purely sexual act that reminded her of every place he'd already nibbled and sucked. However, she couldn't surrender to his seduction. She needed to be in charge this time.

Her hands pushed against his chest and he relented, letting her step away.

She gave him an uncertain glance, noting the tautness of his jaw and the heat burning across his sharp-bladed cheekbones. Before she lost her nerve, she dropped to her knees in front of him and pushed down his jeans past his ankles.

He stepped out of them, and she stared at his feet for a long moment, willing herself to remember what she had to do. Then she turned her face upward.

Her cheek grazed his shaft, and he sucked in a deep breath.

So he likes that.

This time, deliberately, she rubbed her cheek up and down his shaft, then sifted her hair along it. Already, she noted the changes in his cock as it filled, hardening, stiffening, straightening until it raised high against his belly.

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The satiny appearance of the skin didn't deceive—she closed her eyes as she caressed him with her face, breathing in his musky cum-drenched scent. But it was the steely muscle beneath that drew her lips to finally skim her mouth along his length, sucking softly as she made her way up one side then down the other.

Down to his balls. She cupped the heavy sac and rolled it in her palm, testing the weight. Tugging it gently, she smiled as she forced a gasp from him. She knew she was on the right track when his fingers threaded through her hair. He didn't force her direction, but the changing tension in his fingertips told her what pleased him most.

So she experimented, lifting the sac to lick behind his balls, suctioning on the soft, taut skin behind his scrotum.

His legs braced wider apart, and his thighs bulged as she scraped her fingertips up the inside of his legs. "Kate," he whispered.

She lapped his balls with the flat of her tongue over and over until a groan slid from his throat. Only then did she relent, sucking one hard stone inside her mouth.

"Christ, Kate!" His curved fingers bit her scalp.

With hers skimming his shaft, she tugged the ball with her lips while tonguing it inside her mouth. When she released it, she scooped both balls into the cavern of her mouth, earning a trembling that shook his thighs.

As much as she would have loved laving his balls longer, her own body urged her to hurry.

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Moisture trickled between her thighs, and her nipples hardened like diamonds, aching for his touch.

She moved up his shaft until she reached the head and opened her mouth wide to take it inside. Here, resilient softness responded to the pleasuring of her tongue. She rose on her knees to take the plumb-shaped crown into her mouth.

Placing both of her hands at the base of his cock, one atop the other, she stroked upward to meet her mouth as she went down on him, squeezing her hands hard around him while suctioning the cap.

Sam had showed her what pleased him, and she was glad the lesson translated so well to Ty. If she felt a moment's guilt for her enjoyment, she reminded herself, she'd never promised Sam a thing.

She chewed softly around the head of his crown and sucked again, pumping her hands on his shaft up and down, up and down.

"Kate, stop! Stop," he groaned.

Kate ignored him, not relinquishing her hold on his cock.

His hands slipped behind her nape, and he pushed her further down to take him deeper. His hips flexed, driving him against the back of her throat.

She gagged softly, and then relaxed the muscles of her throat, to take him deeper, loving his helpless moans, but this wasn't going to get him closer to the sofa and her belt buckle.

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She pulled back and lifted her chin to the sofa.
“I want to fuck you, Ty. I want to ride.”

He stared down, his chest and arms clenched, his breaths flaring his nostrils.

“Sit on the couch. I’m gonna climb on top of you.”

He did as she asked, sitting with his thighs splayed to make room for his balls, and he held open his arms.

She stepped between his legs, and then leaned to grab his shoulders as she climbed one knee at a time onto the couch. With his arms closing around her, she slowly straddled his hips, gasping when the ridge of his cock slid against her slick heat. She knelt, keeping high enough to feel the head of his cock nudge between her legs.

Ty latched onto one of her breasts, biting a nipple with enough force to set her trembling.

Her hands clutched the back of his head, urging him to suckle. Then she reached down between them and grasped the end of his cock and guided it to her entrance.

With one of his hands palming her tiny breast and the other clutching one cheek of her bottom, he helped her slowly sink toward his lap.

She circled to screw him inside, pressing downward then rising, pumping up and down to create the moisture and friction that would ease a deeper penetration. He was big, and her already tender inner tissues ached and burned. So she screwed him slowly until a wash of desire coated her walls, and she was able to take him deeper,

her thighs straining, burning as she worked.

He let go of her nipple and both hands settled on her ass to help her lift and sink—deeper each time. He kissed her cheek and nuzzled her ear. “Baby, you have no idea how good this feels.”

A final twist and her pussy met the root of his cock.

She paused, her breath coming in shallow gasps. She rolled her forehead against his, keeping her eyes shut tight. “And you don’t know how full I feel—how...”

“Complete?” he whispered.

Kate nodded and opened her eyes.

His face was dark and tense—the same smoldering look he’d given her before that created a momentary thrill of fear. That look also ignited the hottest lust she’d ever known.

She leaned toward him and took his mouth in a wide-open kiss. Their tongues stabbed at each other, and their hands gripped and squeezed whatever they could reach.

His hands squeezed her ass in a bruising grip, grinding her hips forward and back so the crisp hairs of his groin scraped her delicate clit.

She moaned into his mouth and lifted again—up and down, harder, sharper. Her movements came faster, almost frenzied. The pressure inside her so great, the friction so hot, she couldn’t control herself. She panted into his mouth, and her arms wound around his neck as she fucked him harder.

Then she was there—the blackness overwhelming her for a moment. She threw back

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her head and cried out as she rode his cock—now painfully hard and thick—her strokes pounding against his groin as she fed her ever-broadening orgasm.

Her cries strangled in her throat as she was cast over the edge.

Ty held her until the trembling subsided. Her cheek was pressed to his shoulder as his hands stroked over her back, and she realized he was still hard as a rock inside her.

She lifted her head. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t wait for you.”

He snorted. “It was worth the show. But I thought you were doing me.”

“I was. Sorry.” She leaned back and grinned ruefully. “Give me a chance to catch my breath.”

He kissed her lips, just a quick smack and grinned again. “Anytime you want, sweetheart, you can ride me like a bronc—take your pleasure off my cock.”

Blushing, she laid her cheek back on his shoulder and found herself staring at her buckle nestled on top of her jeans. Christ, it was now or never.

She hated to ruin the mood and possibly incite him into violence, but she had to know. She reached over and grabbed it.

As his hand smoothed over her thigh, she jabbed the prong deep into the top of his hand.

He jerked away his hand. “What the fuck?” he said, between gritted teeth. “You trying to stab me to death with your belt buckle?” Ty’s hand shot out

and closed hard around hers, turning it to see what she clutched inside her palm, noting the blood on the prong of the buckle.

When his glare lifted to her wide-eyed gaze, he said, "If I'd been a fucking werewolf, what would you do right now?"

She lifted her shoulders in a shrug, pretending she wasn't afraid. "I hadn't really thought that far ahead."

His eyes narrowed and then he held out his hand. "Take a look. Satisfied? Not even a welt."

The bloody wound looked angry, but the skin around it showed no signs of allergic reaction. Her cheeks heated guiltily. "Well, I couldn't risk bringing you onto the ranch without knowing for sure."

"I understand that," he bit out, his face growing darker. "But you took a risk I'm not willing to forgive."

Impaled as she was on his body, she couldn't exactly make a run for it, so she stayed silent, not wanting to incite him further.

"If I'd been a wolf, right about now, I'd be ripping your throat out. Did you even consider that?"

She shook her head and swallowed.

"Tomorrow," he said, his voice deadly even, "you can test every one of my men, but for now there's the issue of how reckless you were and the chance you took. You need to think before you act, Kate."

She tossed back her hair. "I have good

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instincts. I go with my gut on most things.”

“You belong to me now, and if there’s one thing you’re going to learn, it’s to consult with me before you take off with one of your hair-brained schemes.”

Hair-brained? Her back stiffened, and her chin rose. She resented his tone and the fact that he was pretty much dismissing everything she’d accomplished to this point. She’d been the one to lead the ranch hands. Her instincts and her will had kept everyone on the ranch alive and together. If he thought a little hot sex was all it was going to take to keep her in line...

But now wasn’t the time to argue. The look on his face said he was through talking, too. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you’re going to learn who’s in charge here. If I have to fuck you morning, noon and night to keep you complacent, I will.”

She gave a short cynical laugh. “What? You think you’ll wear me out?”

His hands closed hard around her hips, and he pulled her up and off his cock.

Before she sucked in her next breath, he took her to the floor and stretched over her, trapping her arms and legs with the weight of his body. With a darkening look, he burrowed his cock between her closed legs, and his hands tightened around her wrists like manacles.

With his first hard thrust into the narrow space he’d made, he gritted out, “Every word, every thought, every action. Mine.” His cock crowded

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past her swollen lips and rammed into her cunt.

Even as her mind protested his heavy-handed tactics, lush, wet excitement exploded inside her.

“Say it, Katie,” he growled.

She shook her head, not wanting him to find her an easy conquest—and needing more of his violence.

His hips powered against her, and she wished she could lift her legs and take him deeper inside her.

But he kept her trapped beneath him, unable to move. The only resistance she could manage was squeezing her inner muscles around him—but he couldn’t be halted and her grip only increased the friction.

“Say it.”

She shook her head, not wanting to let those words slip from her lips. He’d have to try harder.

His mouth slammed down on hers, and his tongue stroked inside, matching the rhythm of his jerking hips as he drove into her, again and again.

Kate’s breaths gusted in time with his thrusts, and her back curved to force him off, but she only managed to abrade her nipples against his chest, and she groaned.

He dragged his mouth away and nosed under her chin, scraping her neck lightly with his teeth.

She shuddered.

“Say it, Katie,” he whispered into her ear.

With her legs closed and his cock squeezing between, she felt the fullness stretching her entrance, but couldn’t get the length she needed,

Sanctuary

or encourage him to rub the delicious spot he'd found inside her.

His hips pounded at hers. "Say it, Katie," he rasped.

She couldn't stand it, couldn't take it one moment longer. She had to have him deeper. "I'm yours," she sobbed. "Please."

He halted abruptly, and one knee nudged between her thighs, then the other.

Katie quickly wrapped her legs around his waist.

He leaned up on his arms. "Play with your tits."

Not willing to argue when she was close to finally getting nailed the way she wanted, she lifted shaking hands to her breasts, spreading her fingers to let her nipples peek from between them.

His cock speared into her. "Pinch your nipples."

She lifted her hips to meet his next deep thrust and squeezed the tips of her breasts.

Apparently satisfied she'd do whatever he commanded, he lowered his body, trapping her hands between them. His hands slipped beneath her bottom to bring her closer still, and his fingers slid between her cheeks to trace her asshole.

Kate tightened in shock.

"You're going to take it," he rasped. "You'll take everything I give you." He lifted off her and rolled her to her stomach.

When his arm circled her hips to raise her bottom high, she rested her head on the carpet, surrendering completely to his will.

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Her ass wasn't virgin. Sam had shown her that delight, too. But she'd never felt so much pressure as the broad head of Ty's cock pushed against her resisting anus.

His hands massaged and spread her bottom wider. Spit dripped between her buttocks, and he rubbed it around her hole then brought his big cock back to try to enter her again.

She couldn't help the whimper that slipped between her clenched lips. It was painful. He hadn't bothered seducing her asshole into relaxing its guard. But she was hot for it all the same time.

His thighs snuggled up to the inside of hers. "It's gonna hurt a little."

She snorted. "Just fucking do it." Her words were insubordinate, but her tone was thin and needy.

He pumped against her asshole, pressing hard, then backing off, before coming at it again a little harder.

Kate's back relaxed and she willed her ass to do the same, gasping when finally he breached her hole, and his crown crowded inside her an inch.

Out again, and then deeper.

She sucked air between her teeth as her ring and inner tissues stretched beyond comfort to accommodate his girth. "Stop."

A sharp slap burned one cheek, and she reared up to aim a glare over her shoulder. "I wasn't saying no. Just wait." She squeezed around him, holding him back.

His low growl told her how much her tightness

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please him. But he lifted his hand and spanked her other cheek, the sting sharper this time.

She tried to hold back her moan, not liking the fact her body loved this further proof of his command, but he drove it from her throat with a succession of slaps that warmed her bottom and had her writhing on his cock in moments.

“Never tell me no, Kate,” he whispered. “I can’t be held off. Not when all I want to do is fuck you deep and hard and drink your cries.”

She sobbed, her body shivering—goose bumps rising on her skin at the bleak, hoarse texture of his voice.

Slowly, inexorably, he eased his way with shallow thrusts and sharper slaps, until his cock filled her dark channel to bursting.

He leaned over her back and kissed her shoulder. “It’s gonna happen fast.”

“I’m ready.” A shudder rocked her whole body. “*Fuck me, Ty. Any way you want.*”

He rose up behind her, and his hands settled on her ass cheeks, gripping her hard, lifting them apart to make more room for him to drive closer. He widened her stance with his knees and then reached around her waist. His hands slid between her legs, and as he slammed his hips against her ass, he pinched her clit.

Kate screamed, unraveling in a shuddering, gasping convulsion.

Ty hammered his cock deep inside her ass, plucking her clit all the while until she couldn’t take the sensations slamming through her body one

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moment longer. Her head and shoulder slumped to the ground while he unleashed a storm—fucking her soundly, grinding her knees into the carpet, scooting her forward with the brutal force of his thrusts.

When at last hot, burning liquid erupted inside her ass, Kate groaned and slipped into darkness.

Chapter Five

Even before he pulled his cock out, Ty was cursing himself and his lack of self-control. He knew he wasn't making the best of impressions on this infuriating woman.

She'd been reckless. Challenged his right to command her. His response had been swift, instinctive—and harsh. He'd wanted time to woo her before letting her see that side of him.

Kate McKinnon didn't understand the nature of the monster that had her by the tail—literally. He couldn't be led. Couldn't be *partnered*. It had to be his way for her own safety. For when he finally let her see his true nature, he had to be certain she'd never incite the beast inside him into violence. He might kill her.

When she'd stabbed him with the buckle, he'd come close to letting loose the beast. Quickly, he'd substituted one lust for the darker one—pushing her to the floor and mounting her, screwing her brains out.

But if the only way to get a handle on this woman was dominating her physically, sexually, he'd do it. A man had to do what a man had to do—especially if he wasn't entirely human.

She'd been clever to realize something was afoot. She'd just picked the wrong monster, and he wondered if she'd ever encountered his sort before.

“Did you really come to Tierney for me?” she

asked quietly.

He lay on the floor beside her and pulled her into his arms, his belly to her back—perfect for him to continue groping her sweetly rounded breasts. He squeezed one small mound. “I couldn’t leave you out here on your own.”

“That’s not what I meant. You got to the sex pretty damn quick—like you’d been anticipating it. I could have been eighty years old for all you knew.”

“I knew you weren’t,” he said, rolling a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, hoping to distract her. “I did expect you to be a bit older.”

“I’m twenty-seven,” she said, a hint of gruff defiance in her voice.

“That old?” At her snort, Ty smiled against her hair. She was prickly as a porcupine. “Your dad died ten years ago. You were seventeen?”

“Yeah.”

That shut her down quick, but he needed to satisfy his curiosity about a couple more things. “When did you and Sam become lovers?”

Her back stiffened, but her nipples flowered against his palm. “Ten years ago.”

Ty could see how it had happened. She’d been young and alone when her father was killed—in need of comfort. Sam had been her rock.

Ty could understand it, and part of him was glad she’d had someone to turn to, but he was already predisposed to hate Sam’s guts. “How’s he going to take it? Your being with me.”

Her answering sigh had him tightening his hand

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on her breast, but he forced himself to relax.

Finally, she drew a breath, and said, “I’m sure he’ll be disappointed, but I’ve never led him on.” She turned in his arms, her gaze studying his face. “What about you? Have you ever had a relationship?”

Wishing he’d turned the light off, he shuttered his expression. “None that ever mattered. I went into the service pretty young and moved around a lot.”

Her eyebrows drew together. “Well, that tells me a lot. You want the down and dirty on me, but you won’t share.”

Ty frowned back, thinking he’d have been better off never opening this can of worms. He hated talking about his past. Hated even remembering he’d had a life before Davis. Choosing his words carefully, he replied, “I spent some time in the Middle East on my first tour. By the time I made it back, all hell had broken loose here. There was never time.” He picked up a loose curl of her hair and teased her nipple.

Kate’s breath caught. “Why are you ready now?”

How could he tell her the truth? He needed sex almost as much as he needed sustenance—and the two were closely intertwined. He chose not to answer. Instead, he hooked his arm around her waist, bringing her body flush with his. “I need to check on my men.”

But he couldn’t let her go. Not yet. Her warm, lithe body hummed with her quickening heartbeats.

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Kate slid her thigh over his hips and pressed her sex against his cock. “This is all you came for, isn’t it?”

Ty met her glance, but rather than giving her the words she wanted, he kissed her, sliding his mouth over hers. To shut her up. Not to tell her he already suspected he’d just been kidding himself.

He needed more than her warm body and the brilliant life force that filled her. If he’d been anywhere near ready to admit it, he might have said he’d loved her just a little bit after sharing those nighttime conversations that had left his body aching and his heart...opening.

When her hands once more surrounded his cock, he groaned and dragged his lips away. “Save that thought for later.” He eased away from her body and stood, picking up his clothing from the floor, never allowing his gaze to return to her slender form.

He dressed in silence, wincing when he closed the zipper over his swelling cock. From the corner of his eye, he watched Kate sit up and grimace.

“I’m a mess. I can’t dress until I clean up.” She gave him an accusatory glance that told him he’d better do something about it.

Rummaging through a tall file cabinet, he found a pristine altar cloth and held it out to Kate.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she grumbled, but swiped it from his hand and gave him a pointed stare.

It took a moment for him to realize she wanted privacy, and he tightened his lips against a smile.

Sanctuary

After all they'd shared, she could still be embarrassed? "I'll leave you to dress," he murmured and let himself out of the office.

When he stepped into the hall, he found Diego leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He straightened and gave him a sly look. "I would have tied her up. She's going to be a problem."

Ty snorted. "Let's just get inside the ranch first. Did they find those guys?"

Diego nodded. "The team shouldn't be hungry for a while. We saved you a snack."

* * *

Kate walked down the aisle between the pews. Many toward the end had been shifted against the walls. Army cots had been assembled and several of the men Ty had brought lounged in various stages of undress.

Shep sidled up to her, eating from an opened can of beans and eyeing the men around them with suspicion. He glowered when he caught her eye. "You sure about these guys?" he said, under his breath.

"I stabbed Ty in the hand with my belt buckle." She shrugged, fighting the blush that burned her cheeks. "Nothing, not so much as a welt."

Shep's narrowed gaze swept over her, and Kate's blush deepened.

Danny strode toward her, his gaze sweeping from her unbound hair down her rumpled clothing. He gave her a pointed look, and Kate knew he disapproved. His loyalty lay with Sam.

She lifted her chin, daring either of the men to

say a word.

“Missy, I hope you know what you’re doing,” Shep muttered.

Her throat tightened. She’d known them all her life, but this wasn’t something she was willing to talk to them about. She shrugged. “Not really. Not yet. But I need to find Ty so I can get a few things cleared up.” And this time, she needed to make sure their conversation didn’t involve hands and lips, or she’d never get to the bottom of it.

She found him standing in the darkness on the front steps of the church, talking to the Hispanic man she’d seen with him earlier. They both grew silent as she approached.

She ignored the other man, turning her back slightly to him as she faced Ty. “I thought we might talk about what’s going to happen tomorrow.”

Ty nodded. “Let me introduce Diego Salazar,” he said, tilting his head toward the dark-haired man next to him.

She didn’t like really want to meet him. Something about the way his gaze slid over her body, made her feel like she was the butt of a joke and only he knew the punch line.

Kate returned his stare, taking in his darkly tanned skin, black hair, and Spanish features. Too handsome for her to trust or even feel comfortable standing beside.

“Diego’s my next in command.”

Her back stiffened, but she nodded, reluctantly acknowledging the introduction. So this was the man Ty wanted to command her in his absence?

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When Hell froze over!

Diego lifted one sardonic eyebrow as though he could read her irritation. The slight smile curving his lips infuriated her.

Kate lifted her chin and glared.

“You two know each other already?” Ty said, a hint of laughter in his voice. His arm slid around her waist, and he leaned to whisper in her ear, “He’ll grow on you. Promise. I only want to kill him twice a day.”

She snorted and drew away.

“There’s not much left to discuss,” Ty continued. “When we get to your place tomorrow, we’ll need everyone to pack up their belongings, and we’ll load them all into the deuce-and-a-halves.”

Kate stared at him blankly.

“The transport vehicles,” Diego murmured, his deep voice a silky murmur.

“We’ll leave so soon?” Kate asked, feeling suddenly cold.

“It’s not safe for you there, and you know it, and I didn’t like leaving a skeleton crew behind at Fort Davis. How many people do you have now at the ranch?”

She shivered, fighting the urge to offer a protest. Ty was right. Much as she hated the thought of leaving Sanctuary ranch, she had to. She drew a deep breath and dropped her gaze as she forced herself to count. “I have my foreman and six ranch hands. Three families—thirteen total there. Another nine stragglers who showed up at the

gates.” Her voice grew fainter toward the end, and she realized she was close to tears. *What the fuck?* She never cried. “Oh, and Cass, the cook.” Wishing she’d never sought him out, she half-turned, ready to escape back into the church.

“Do you have horse trailers?” Diego asked.

“I have three—big enough to load all the horses.” It hit her then. She raised her gaze to Ty. “I won’t be able to bring my cattle will I?” A *McKinnon without a ranch or a herd.*

“No,” he said quietly.

She nodded, pretending to take it all in stride. “I’ll have to leave them on the open range to graze,” she said faintly. They’d be fodder for the wolves. Feeling chilled to the bone, she asked, “How long will it take us to get to Davis?”

“About ten hours. We’ll leave in daytime—lowest wolf activity.”

“So we’ll spend one night at the ranch, then leave the next morning?”

He nodded.

“And when we get to your post, what happens?”

“There are officer billets standing empty. The families can be split out there. They’ll be comfortable, but there’s no running water. They’ll have to use outhouses and get their water from the central well. The single men can bunk in one of the barracks.”

“What about the women?”

She didn’t miss the charged glance he shared with his next in command. “We’ll see what

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arrangements they prefer when we get there.”

Kate nodded, once again going with her gut to trust him. She wanted to ask where she'd stay, but he saved her the embarrassment.

“We'll have our own quarters off the operations building.”

While she stood beside him, his hand rested on the small of her back, his thumb circling. It probably wasn't even something he was aware of doing.

But she noticed. She'd never considered herself an affectionate person. She and Sam had kept their relationship pretty much under wraps for years. The few gestures of affection they shared were relegated to the bedroom.

But when Ty slipped his arm around her shoulders while he continued talking to Diego, she leaned into him and slipped her arm around his waist.

His answering squeeze warmed her.

How had she come to crave his touch so quickly? She hadn't the example of a mother and father sharing physical affection, her mother having died shortly after she was born. Her father had raised her the best he'd known how, but his was a gruff sort of love, and he hadn't known exactly how to raise a little girl. She'd known he loved her with the obvious care he took with her education and the pride he displayed with her accomplishments, but he hadn't been easy with physical signs of love. A kiss had been a rare thing.

Ty's hand came up behind her neck, and he

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tilted back her head. “Why don’t you go ahead and get some shut eye. I’m going to make the rounds and make sure everything’s closed down tight for the night.”

“You don’t want company?” she asked, not caring that the other man listened to their conversation.

“Tomorrow’s going to be a big day. Get some rest. I’ll join you in a little bit.”

She understood he probably wanted to talk privately with Diego and his men. She wished he were more open, but again, her instinct told her he was there to help. She knew there was something they weren’t sharing, but she was tired. She’d worry about it tomorrow. For tonight, she’d lay her trust in his hands. She glanced at the parking lot and realized with a start that the pickup with the body slumped at the wheel—the one she’d been responsible for—had been removed. His men had been busy with cleanup, although she wondered why they’d bothered.

Other than the drying pools of blood on the ground, all other signs of the earlier battle had been removed.

“I’ll see about cots,” she said quietly.

Diego shouted over his shoulder to the men inside, “Don’t bother bringing a cot in for Ty, he’s found something soft to sleep on.”

Kate fumed, really beginning to detest Diego. The way he looked at her with dark amusement gleaming in his eyes annoyed the hell out of her. He could mind his own damn business.

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She escaped into the pastor's office and closed the door to the noise of the men's laughter. Hanging her hat on the doorknob, she removed her coat and gun belt, and dropped them on the desk. Then she sat on the edge of the couch and removed her boots. She laid down fully clothed and pulled her coat over her to chase away the chill in the air.

Strangely, for the first time in longer than she could remember, she fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

* * *

Ty stalked through the darkness toward the man kneeling in the center of a ring formed by his soldiers.

The man smelled of sweat, sharp and acrid despite the cold—and fear.

And well he should.

“He was their leader,” Diego murmured. “The smartest among them. He ran.”

The man stumbled to his feet, whimpering. “Please. Let me go.” He reached out a hand.

Ty knew he couldn't see a thing, so thick was the cloud cover that the full moon above it was completely shrouded in darkness. He strode toward the man and reached behind his head to grasp his thick hair. He pulled him close, grimacing when the man released urine that leaked down his pants leg and filled the air with the sour odor.

He leaned close to whisper in his ear. “Say your prayers.”

“Make me one of you. Please,” he begged, his breaths hacking with his sobs. “I don't wanna die.”

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“You frightened my woman. Why would you think I’d spare you?”

The man trembled like a leaf on a windy day. “I didn’t know... I wouldn’t have hurt her. I swear, I’m sorry.”

Ty jerked back his head, baring his throat. “You’re gonna give me a bellyache, aren’t you?” He shook his head, letting loose his beast with a roar and bit deep into the man’s throat.

Blood surged inside his mouth—rich, young, but tainted with the sour bite of alcohol. The man struggled, a gurgling sound issuing from the gaping wound in his neck.

When at last he quieted, Ty released him, letting him drop to the ground. With his bloodlust sated for the moment, he threw back his head and howled.

* * *

Ty found her sleeping on the sofa, fully clothed and unaware someone watched. He doubted she’d slept so soundly in a long time. Satisfaction warmed his heart—she felt safe. This was one thing he could give her.

Only with a full belly was he able to stand being this close to her. Even now, his hunger rose thick to choke the back of his throat. Soon, he’d have to taste her sweetness.

He woke her and pulled her up, then lay on the sofa, and dragged her body over his.

Her legs intertwined with his, and she sighed, murmuring sleepily as she fell quickly back to sleep with her head resting over his heart.

Sanctuary

Ty gritted his teeth against the urge to rut against her. His cock was full to bursting, but he embraced the ache, thankful he'd finally found the woman he thought might be strong enough to be his mate. She'd taken his rough loving, even reveled in it. When the time came for a deeper, harsher joining he knew in his gut, she'd survive.

Holding her, *breathing* her in, felt natural and right. He willed himself to relax. With his hand settling on the curved small of her back, he too fell into a deep slumber, lulled by the soft, warm breaths that gusted against his chest and the steady beating of her heart.

Tonight, he'd let her rest. If he could stand it.

Chapter Six

Kate awoke to find herself pressed against the back of the sofa as Ty rolled out from underneath her. Just as quick, she felt her jeans give at the waist and heard the zipper rasp as he yanked it down. He quickly peeled her pants off her legs.

“Ty?” she asked, knowing what he intended since he left her top completely alone.

She quickly found herself, sitting at the edge of the sofa, her legs draped over the tops of his shoulders.

The inky blackness that surrounded them leant a feeling of unreality—like she was dreaming. The sounds of his breaths and the creak of the leather beneath her bottom seemed louder, filled with a ripening tension that brought her past dreamy pleasure straight to the blackest, hottest sense of eroticism she’d ever felt. Fear heightened her sensitivity so that when his thick thumbs parted her outer lips, she jerked and released a startled cry.

“Ty?” she repeated and reached between her legs to grab his hair. “Talk to me.”

“Can’t. Have to taste,” he said, his voice so gravelly it was almost unrecognizable.

“Jesus,” she gasped when his tongue, strangely wide and roughened, lapped between her legs from asshole all the way up to her clit.

When he repeated the action, again and again, she moaned, sure she was going to burst out of her skin she was so aroused.

Sanctuary

Hot, thick cream gushed from deep inside her, and she arched, digging her heels into his back.

His hands gripped her hard, holding her hips steady as he growled and lapped the liquid pleasure smearing her thighs and his face. His tongue tunneled into her, twisting to reach as far as he could, seeming to search for every drop her body offered.

Kate gripped his hair hard and tilted her hips to grind her pussy into his face, wanting him deeper, needing his attention on her hardening clit. Her belly trembled, and his thighs widened—splaying to give him better access to every part of her that ached.

When one thick thumb sank into her ass, she keened long and loud. “Ty, oh God. Please. Suck my clit.”

Instead, fingers, thick and calloused, crammed into her cunt, fucking in and out, twisting to screw her hard.

Ecstasy slammed through her, gripping her body in a convulsion that shook her belly and thighs and had her whimpering endlessly as it built.

When at last his lips closed on her clitoris, and he sucked—air whooshed from her lungs and her back shot off the sofa as a pulsing coil of heat tightened her womb. She rode his mouth and fingers, tightening and slackening her inner muscles to hold onto the rapture a moment or two longer.

When his mouth moved off the throbbing knot, she sighed in relief and slumped against the cushions as the aftershocks rippled through her

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vagina. He lapped her like a cat—rasping, soothing motions, now—licking over her swollen lips and clit, delving to either side to trace the crease between her thigh and her pussy.

Her pulse throbbed against his tongue where he paused at her inner thigh, licking until the spot burned then grew oddly numb. A faint pricking sensation registered on her mind a second before she was thrust suddenly back into the maelstrom—her body awash with another deepening orgasm.

All the blood in her body seemed to flow toward her cunt in a rush, drawing to the spot where he mouthed her inner thigh. Hot and cold all at once, she writhed as his fingers thrust deep inside her ass and cunt. Her inner muscles clamped hard around him, milking him—lush, wet sounds quickening to the rhythm of his strokes.

Beyond words, almost beyond breath, her fingers clawed at his hair as her body undulated, riding out the storm that never seemed to wane.

He groaned, a deep, guttural sound she echoed as she flew out of herself, rushing headlong into the darkness.

* * *

“It was too soon, *amigo*,” Diego said quietly, as they sped up the long gravel road.

Ty glanced over his shoulder to where Kate sat huddled in the back seat of the Hummer, sleeping despite the rough ride. The dark purple crescents beneath her eyes bespoke of exhaustion and blood loss. “*Creo qué sí*. You’re right.”

He damned himself for his selfish act the

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previous night. He should have slept with the men inside the church rather than succumbing to the delicious temptation she embodied. With her warm body wedged close to his and her heart beats thudding steadily against his chest, he'd been driven slowly mad, until he'd broken the vow he'd made.

He'd promised not to take what wasn't offered.

That morning, Kate seemed unaware he'd crossed that line. Sluggish, she'd put her fatigue down to too little sleep and too much sex. She'd roused only long enough to see them all through the gate. Thankfully, his men had kept Shep and Danny busy long enough for Ty to bundle Kate into the lead vehicle without them realizing anything was amiss.

"That's one helluva fence," Diego said, eyeing the 12-foot tall game fence with the barbed wire coiled on top like makeshift concertina wire.

"Maybe she didn't need us so badly after all," Ty murmured, not sorry one bit they'd made the trip. "Maybe we'll find you a girlfriend, too."

Diego gave him a sour look, and Ty laughed. Diego's cynicism regarding the opposite sex was a longtime source of humor for the team.

Finally, the ranch house and outbuildings came into view. He blew out a breath, surprised by what he saw. Despite the chaos that reined in the world beyond the fence, here, everything seemed well-tended—whitewashed, nothing out of place or order.

"Nice operation," Diego murmured. "No

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wonder she didn't want to leave.”

Ty echoed the sentiment in silence as men poured out of the buildings.

Hands stood beside the corral and barn door and perched along the front porch, well-oiled weapons glinting at their sides or in their arms.

He approved.

He turned in his seat. “Kate, honey, wake up. You're home.”

* * *

Kate held a steaming cup of coffee between her hands and breathed in the aroma. Finally, she felt like she was perking up. She sat on the railing, eyeing the loading of the transport vehicles.

The families tromped in a steady trail back and forth to the vehicles with their meager belongings. Even the children came with boxes of their toys for the journey. Watching their excitement, Kate felt the weight of her responsibilities shift off her shoulders. She'd done the right thing for them.

Boot steps clomped on the wooden porch, and she stiffened. Without turning to see who it was, she knew Sam had joined her. All morning long, she'd acted like a coward, retreating behind the excuse of overseeing the introductions of Ty's men and her people, taking part in the discussions with the families to help alleviate their fears of the coming trek westward to the Davis Mountains.

“Kate,” he said, “you happy with your choice?”

She swallowed against the lump forming at the back of her throat and turned to face him, setting her coffee cup on the railing. “Yes, Sam. I'm sor—“

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He shook his head. “Don’t. I’m okay. It’s not like we ever made any promises.”

It was hard meeting his gaze. His eyes were moist, but a slight smile curved his lips. He looked sad but resigned.

“You know I love you,” she said.

“And I love you. I only want you happy.”

He held open his arms, and she walked into them, wrapping hers around his waist. They stood like that for a long time.

“I’m not going with you, Kate.”

“What?” she drew back, staring in shock at his handsome face. “Sam, you can’t stay by yourself.”

“Shep and Danny, and a couple of the new men, are staying, too. We’ll take our chances here.”

She wanted to argue with him, rail at him for being foolish, but she recognized the stubborn set of his jaw. She could have been looking in a mirror. “Then she’s yours. Sanctuary is yours, now.”

“Come back when you can,” he said, his voice rough.

She nodded, tears blurring her eyes, not knowing what the future might hold for either of them.

The front door slammed, and Kate turned to the sound. Shep stepped out onto the porch, his gaze hard. “What hand did you say you stabbed?”

It took her a moment to understand what he asked. “Are you talking about Ty?” she asked, feeling uneasy at the way Shep’s lips thinned. “His left one, why?”

“Not a mark on him. I looked just a minute ago. Somethin’s not right.”

Kate stiffened, feeling like the other boot had finally dropped. She hadn’t paid any attention, but she also didn’t recall seeing even a scratch on the back of his hand that morning.

Shep and Sam drew their weapons, and Sam signaled to one of the hands who sat astride the corral fence. He jumped down and strode toward them, his hand already going to the gun strapped to his thigh.

Kate followed suit, knowing where her duty lay, even as her stomach plummeted. She tucked her coat behind her holster and stepped off the porch toward the men loading the vehicles.

Diego watched them approach and murmured something to Ty, who turned slowly to face Kate and her cowboys.

His gaze swept down to the gun her hand rested beside, before coming back up to meet hers. “Something wrong, Kate?”

“Your hand,” she said, keeping her voice dead even. “You healed really fast.”

He nodded slowly. “I’ve got a great metabolism. The only problem is it needs blood to fuel it.”

Shep sucked in a breath. “Vampires.”

Kate felt as though the ground buckled beneath her feet. “What? They’re real?” Then she remembered the pricking sensation she’d felt the previous night when Ty had gone down on her. She stared at him for a long hard moment. “You said,

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you'd never take what wasn't offered," she said, hating how hoarse her voice sounded.

Ty's jaw flexed, but he didn't respond.

"Nothing's changed, Kate McKinnon," Diego said. "We're not the bad guys. You are still under siege. We've come to help."

"For what price? Our blood?"

"Only if it is offered," he said, the Spanish inflections in his voice more apparent as he enunciated each word precisely.

Kate snorted and gave both Diego and Ty a disbelieving glare.

"Does this mean we're not going?" One of the women said, her arms filled with pillowcases of clothing.

"Ma'am, you'd best get back inside the house," Sam said, never taking his gaze off Ty and Diego.

Ty reached toward Kate. "We need to talk."

She drew her gun in a blur of motion. With her thumb, she clicked off the safety. "Don't ever come near me, again. I want you gone."

Ty started to step forward, but Diego's hand landed on his shoulder. "Not now, Ty. The children are frightened."

Sure enough, several sets of round-eyed stares peeked around the corner of the truck.

Just as Kate was about to ask Sam what they ought to do next, the radio clipped to Sam's shoulder squawked, "Sam, we've got another break along the southwest fence!" Danny said, his voice shaking with excitement. "And it looks like we have a whole goddamn pack headin' toward the herd."

“We gotta saddle up,” Sam shouted to the men running from the barn. To Ty and Diego, he said, “This ain’t over. Kate, you comin’?”

“Damn straight!”

“That’s bullshit, Kate!” Ty shouted, his fists curling at his sides. “Let me and my men handle it. We’re better equipped.”

“My men are out there. I’m not sitting on my thumbs.”

Ty glared at Sam. “You gonna let her ride into danger, again? Let me do this.”

Sam gave Kate a quick questioning glance. At her nod, he tilted his head. “Have at it, soldier boy.”

Ty blew a loud whistle between his teeth, and his men came running. In minutes, the Hummers were filled with his men, one standing in the gun turret mounted atop each vehicle.

Kate watched their trail of dust for a moment and then gave Sam a narrowed-eyed look. “You just gonna stand by and let those wolves eat their way through your herd?”

Sam’s lips curled upward at the corners. Over his shoulder he shouted, “Saddle up, boys.”

In minutes, Kate was spurring Lucy Lu across the wide open fields, heading to the wooded southeast corner of Sanctuary with Sam, Danny and his dogs, and two more hands at her sides. This was something she understood, something she was good at—the hunt stirred her blood and filled her thoughts so she didn’t have to think about Ty and his “Band of Bloodsuckers”.

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Ahead, they heard the rapid bursts of automatic weapons firing in the distance.

At the edge of the woods, Kate reined in and looked to Sam. “They’re going to drive the wolves towards us and into the brush, unless we can force them back their way.”

Sam nodded. “Danny, send out the dogs.”

Danny pointed into the tangle of brush and trees, and the dogs took off, whining and growling as they began to hunt. The cowboys separated, putting ten foot of distance between them to cover more ground.

Kate urged Lucy Lu to follow, ducking beneath low branches but following at a fast clip, keeping the sounds of the dogs just ahead of her. This deep in the brush, they’d not cross paths with the vampires in their vehicles. Perhaps, they could chase the wolves from the brush into their path and let the soldier-boys take it the rest of the way. They seemed so eager to prove they were there to help.

Kate and her horse entered a clearing, and she pulled back on the reins. Lucy Lu’s ears were pricking back, and her flanks quivered with her fear.

The dogs suddenly sounded louder, and that was when Kate heard deeper growls and saw blurs of gray fur as wolves burst from the brush and leaped into the air toward her horse.

“Sam!” she shouted, slipping her boots free of her stirrups when Lucy Lu started to go down. She kicked away from her horse, firing her pistol at the

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beasts as she fell back to the ground.

Wolves snapped at Lucy Lu whose high pitched whinnies tore at Kate's heart, but she had her own problems. She scrambled to her feet while two wolves circled her, tightening the circumference with each turn.

She had three silver bullets left before she'd need to reload. Each shot had to count or she was dog meat.

Danny's dogs hurtled into the clearing, biting at the flanks of the wolves savaging her horse but never letting the beasts' muzzles near their own hides.

"Kate, hold on!" Sam shouted from astride his bay as he rode in with his gun drawn.

Kate couldn't take her eyes off the wolves closing in on her. If they'd only pause a moment or move in a way she could predict where they'd be the next instant, she could risk a shot. But she stood, turning in slow circles, her gun pointing outward, but close to her body so they couldn't knock it away.

Her heart raced, and her breaths shivered as she clamped down on the fear that threatened to seize her muscles. She needed to remain steady, sure—needed like she never had before to hit every target.

One bite and she was a dead woman. If the wolves didn't kill her, one of her men would have to—those were the rules.

She'd shed buckets of tears over her father's death, but she'd understood why he'd stuck his

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pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger. He'd done it to save her. She'd demand no less of herself.

Danny broke into the clearing and took aim at the wolves covering Lucy Lu.

"Kate, I'm going to try a shot. Don't move too sudden," Sam said, sliding from his saddle. He raised his weapon and sighted down his barrel.

But Kate had to turn to keep both wolves in sight. Suddenly, one lunged inside the circle, and she jerked off a shot, missing the cur who quickly returned to circling her, its fur raised in hackles on its back and its fangs bared.

Devils! Hell's spawn! She hated and feared these creatures. And she didn't care that most of them hadn't entered their present state willingly—they earned demon's souls the first time they turned their appetites toward a human.

"Dammit, I can't get off a shot. I'll hit you," Sam said, his voice tight with fury.

"Take it, Sam. Better a bullet than a bite. Do it," she commanded.

A gunshot rang out; dust lifted as it burrowed in the dirt at her feet. As if the shot was their signal, one wolf turned to Sam, and the one remaining faced off with Kate.

She stared it in the eye, knowing even if she could get off a shot, it would be too late. At that moment of clarity, she pulled back her trigger.

The beast leaped, the shot hitting it dead center in the chest, but his momentum set him on a path to take her down.

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She braced herself, but a movement crossed the edge of her vision—a blur so fast, she couldn't understand what she was seeing.

Something knocked the wolf aside.

When it rested on top of the wolf, holding it down as the silver worked its poison through the beast, Kate blinked and found Ty braced over it, his chest heaving and his arms bulging with effort.

Kate swayed on her feet and caught herself before she crumpled. A quick glance around the site and she saw more soldiers spilling into the clearing, blasting the last of the wolves into oblivion.

Sam stared at her, his arm dangling by his side with his weapon pointing toward the ground. He drew a deep breath. "You all right?"

Kate nodded and swept her gaze from head to toe over him. "You?"

"Not a scratch." His lips curved upward. "Damn, but that was close."

Relieved they'd both been spared a bullet that day, Kate settled her gun into her holster and turned back to her horse, lying in an ever growing puddle of blood. Lucy Lu's sides billowed.

As she came around to the horse's head, Kate saw the deep gashes beneath her throat.

Her horse was dying.

Kate dropped to her knees beside her old friend and smoothed her hand over her muzzle, not caring that tears tracked down her cheeks. She knew what had to be done, but she couldn't let go.

Her daddy had helped her train the horse,

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spending endless hours watching them ride in circles around the corral. She leaned close and kissed her and looked into her wild, brown eyes. Then she drew her gun from its holster.

“Baby, let me do it,” Ty said, kneeling beside her.

She gave a savage shake of her head and leaned back to place the muzzle of the weapon to Lucy Lu’s head. The shot dulled Lucy Lu’s eyes in an instant, and Kate dropped the gun in the dirt.

Strong arms closed around her, and she turned to snuggle her face in the corner of Ty’s shoulder. Sobs tore from her throat, tears flowing to wet his t-shirt, but he held her as they knelt in the dirt, crooning nonsense into her ear and rubbing her shoulders and back.

“Kate.”

Sam’s voice broke through her pain-filled haze, and she drew back to look over her shoulder.

“Look at his face, sweetheart.”

Kate lifted her gaze to Ty’s face and gasped. His handsome features were a gruesome mask—heavy, protruding brows, fangs curving over his bottom lip. Even his dark eyes were changed—narrow, vertical slits against gold disks. A monster held her inside the circle of his arms.

That he hadn’t traded his mask for his human face told her something—either he was still too caught up in the moment, too angry to remember...or he wanted her to see the real him.

The longer he held her stare, his chest barely lifting with his shallow breaths, the surer she

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became it was the latter. She lifted her hand and traced the shape of his heavy, hooded brow. “You aren’t ruled by the demon inside you. Not like them. I understand now,” she said quietly.

The bony mask melted, reshaping into his strong, sharp-edged features. “I’ll understand if you can’t accept that part of me. I’ll still take you and yours to safety.”

Her hand crept from his shoulder to his nape, and she grasped his hair to pull him closer. With her lips a breath away from his, she said, “I’ll take all of you, Ty.”

* * *

For Ty, her kiss felt like absolution—a purifying burst of heat that cleansed his soul. He wrapped his arms around her and slanted his face to deepen the kiss. When they came up for air, he realized they were still sitting in the dirt beside her dead horse.

He pressed her face to his shoulder. “Don’t look. I’m going to take you back home.”

A trembling shook her slender frame, and she ducked her head. “Sorry, I’m such a wimp. I always feel like this afterwards.”

He shared a smile with Diego. His aftermaths usually involved breaking something. Tears, he’d learn to handle. “It’s okay,” he said and kissed her hair. “You can lean on me.” He started back down the trail to his Hummer, but Sam Culpepper stepped into his path.

Sam’s gaze fell to Kate snuggled against his chest, and his jaw tightened.

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Ty gave him a moment to accept her choice, and then stepped forward, forcing the other man to make up his mind quick how he wanted to handle it.

Sam stepped back and turned away. "Gather the horses, men. Let's ride back to the house."

* * *

Kate hefted her suitcase onto the rear of the transport, surprised when hands reached around her to help her. "I can manage this myself, Ty."

"I know. I want to help."

She let go of the case and stepped away, turning for a final glance at the ranch house.

Sam stood on the porch with Shep and Danny beside him. They'd already said their goodbyes, and she was through crying. She gave them a little wave and headed toward the Hummer at the lead of the caravan.

"You know," she said over her shoulder, "I'm not going to let you fight all my battles."

"I had a suspicion you'd be stubborn," he said, his voice a sexy rumble, closer behind her than she'd thought.

Her mouth stretched into a grin. Their easy banter helped. As she'd packed a few precious photos, the clothes she'd need, and loaded the few horses she knew she'd want to bring along, she realized that while she'd miss her home, excitement stirred inside her.

While Ty stowed her daddy's gun beneath the seat, she glanced around her one last time. "I love you, daddy. Watch over Sam," she whispered.

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With Ty's hand at her elbow, she climbed into the passenger seat and faced forward—toward new life. One she was finally ready to embrace.

About Delilah Devlin

She's lived in Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Ireland, but calls Texas home for now. Always a risk taker, she lived in the Saudi Peninsula during the Gulf War, thwarted an attempted abduction by white slave traders, and survived her children's juvenile delinquency.

Creating alter egos for herself in the pages of her books enables her to live new adventures and chronicle a few of her own (you get to guess which!). Since discovering the sinful pleasure of erotica, she writes to satisfy her need for variety-- it keeps her from running away with the Indian working in the cubicle beside her!

Having established a career as a hot, erotica author, Delilah recently inked a two-book deal with Avon.

Readers may visit her on the web at www.delilahdevlin.com.

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