

## The Serenity of Suffering

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# The Serenity of Suffering

by [missbelleblue](#)

## Summary

Elizabeth Dorsey has a past she wants to forget and a future she doesn't want. But after a botched train robbery, she's thrown into the arms of notorious outlaw Arthur Morgan. Is she willing to sacrifice everything to be with him? Or will he die trying to save her from a life she doesn't want?

## Notes

This is my FIRST RDR2 fic....I'm shamelessly obsessed and spent all weekend reading on the site. Now I'm trying my own!! I hope you like it--please let me know if you want more!! There's no such thing as too much sexy Arthur ;)

# Blind

I'd dubbed it the last voyage of Little Girl Lost. And although I wasn't a little girl anymore, I was lost.

And losing myself more and more with each passing moment.

My sister was watching me critically, almost as if she was anticipating me to, at any moment, flee through the boxcars and throw myself off the train. It was tempting. But in the end, I didn't necessarily want to die. I didn't necessarily want to live, either.

It was a predicament.

I shifted my weight from one hip to the other, trying to edge closer to the window without smacking my face off the glass. It was pitch black outside; I couldn't see anything, but it was better than looking at her. "You don't have to stare at me, Cora. I'm not doing anything to shame you...not at this particular moment, anyway."

"I know you're mad—"

"Damn right I'm mad." I leaned over in my seat, the boning of my corset the only thing keeping me from throwing myself forward. "I was happy in Prescott. It was home and you knew it. When Pa was alive—"

It was her turn to interrupt. "Exactly, Elizabeth, when Pa was alive. He's dead now and it is in your best interest to come to New York and stay with me and Owen. It'll be a new life. A better one."

"As I recall, that's exactly what you said when Mother left him and dragged us to Detroit. And then on to Chicago. And Pittsburgh. Where ever that damned man wanted to go, we went. What ever he wanted, he took."

Her hand shot forward and she slapped me across the cheek. "You watch your mouth, Elizabeth Anne. If it wasn't for Father, we wouldn't have been given the education or upbringing we had. We wouldn't have the finery or position we have now and as I recall, you mouthy little brat, you never once minded summers in the country or all the fine gentlemen who were running after you when we were in Washington. And now because that drunk old fool sent you a letter, begging for forgiveness, you're going to forget your place. It's pathetic."

"My place," I seethed, "is in Prescott."

Cora opened her mouth to snap something back at me, but before she could utter a sound, Owen pulled open the heavy oak car doors and sauntered into the box care. I could smell the bourbon on his breath before he had taken his seat across from me. Christ, if I had to put up with my sister like he did, I'd be a drunk, too.

He smiled at her. "Is everything all right, precious?"

"Quite alright, I was just explaining to my sister how wonderful it will be to have her back home with us in New York. Father's position in the Senate has opened many political doors for him." She patted Owen's arm and then rose from her seat. "I'm going to go freshen up. Elizabeth, care to join me?"

"I'm quite fine, actually, but thanks." I reached into my bag and pulled out a slim volume of poetry. "Maybe next time."

As soon as my sister left the car, Owen scooted from his seat to the one next to me. "The two fetching Dorsey sisters within my walls? I can hardly contain my excitement."

I made a noncommittal noise in my throat and tried to scoot closer to the window. Owen was a leech. If he was following in my stepfather's steps, then he was spending just as much of his time at whorehouses as he was in government buildings.

His hand dropped to my knee, his fingers tugging on the dark burgundy taffeta. "I look forward to taming you, Elizabeth. I'll break you in ways you can't even imagine."

I shoved him off of me. "Fuck you."

"You're a child, Elizabeth, you have to be taught." He leaned over again, yanking my skirt up and pawing at my calves. "And just as I did with your sister, I'll do with you. As much as I want—it's only fair, considering I'm providing you both room and board."

I bucked against him, jabbing at his arm with the heel of my leather boot. "I'm not a child, I'm twenty. And there's nothing that you could teach me that I'd possibly want to know. Touch me again, and I'll scream so loud, the devil himself will come running."

He reached for me again; as he did, a blinding flash of light erupted from outside the train. The boxcar swayed back and forth from the percussion. I heard the scream of the brakes, the gentle jolt as speed decreased.

"Jesus Christ." Owen stood up and stormed to the boxcar doors. "I need a steward here at once—I'm sorry, you bastard, do you know who I am? What I do? Get me a steward immediately."

I straightening up in my seat and pressed my nose to the window glass. It was too dark to see anything. No movement. No more flashes of unexplained light. The train was still slowing to a stop and I still hadn't heard much in the way of commotion. Maybe no one else had seen; maybe it was nothing.

Cora was in the corridor, her voice somewhere between a whine and a gasp of actual terror. "Owen, why is the train stopping? What's going on out there?"

"Nothing to worry yourself about, my sweet gem, you just sit with your sister." He was patting her shoulders as he maneuvered her back to her seat. He turned his attention to me.

“And once we’re on our way again, we need to have a discussion regarding Elizabeth’s behavior. I have some concerns.”

Cora glared at me. “What did you do this time? Lord almighty, I can’t leave you alone for two minutes and you’re up to no good?”

The train jerked to a hard stop. I leaned over to pick up my poetry book when I heard voices in the hallway. Not just voices...yelling. Demands.

Gunfire.

I jumped. Cora was immediately up on her feet, rushing to close the boxcar door. Owen beat her to it and shoved her out of the way. “You stay back. Keep the door closed.”

He was out in the hallway and then, a moment later, was rushing back in with two men. He pushed them into the boxcar and pointed a finger at them. “Twenty dollars to you both—each—for you to protect the ladies.”

They both were all too eager. The stockier one, with a thick brown mustache, pulled a pistol out of his overcoat. It was practically an antique: an old Colt revolver. My Pa had talked about them before: the weapon of an officer, he’d said, not like the smoothbore rifles infantry men had carried in the War.

The shorter man positioned himself before the door. He spit a stream of brown tobacco on the gold-colored carpet. “Don’t you ladies worry your pretty heads. Plenty o’ men on this train who will take care of things. Pinkerton’s too. One to many trains get robbed in this stretch, so they know how to keep things...well, civilized, you might say.”

I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to make us feel better, but Cora looked horrified. She sank down into her seat, looking wildly from the door to me. “We should have waited to leave, an earlier train perhaps. But Owen was so insistent we get back to New York....if hadn’t taken this train, we’d have been fine.”

“It can’t be helped now.” I glanced outside again. Still nothing but darkness.

From outside the boxcar, gunfire peppered through the stillness—it was closer this time.

The stocky man jumped up and waved the revolver at us. “Into the back of the car, ladies. Now!”

Cora grabbed my arm and jerked me up from the seat. The short man was right behind her; he hustled us to the back of the boxcar, using a firm hand to push us down.

He smiled, tobacco juice still dribbling down his chin. “It’ll be fine, just don’t you worry. It’s probably the Pinkerton’s and we’ll be well on our way momentarily.”

I could see the fear in his eyes. He was a damn liar.

The train took on an silence I didn’t like; a hollowness that made it seem like everyone has abandoned us. Left us for dead. And of course Owen, the bastard, probably was the first to

go.

Silence.

I felt my heart pounding against my corset boning; the constriction of the garment making me feel somewhat lightheaded. Cora was right. We should have waited to leave. I knew fucking well why he'd been so persistent to take an earlier train. I'd seen the look in his eyes every time he'd made eye contact. The excuses he made to try and get me alone.

Silence.

I'd rather be dead than find myself underneath him one night.

The doors to the boxcar burst open. Cora screamed right in my ear; I heard a blast of gunfire

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The stocky man dropped to the floor, his brains splattered out on the window behind him. The short man started yelling, screaming; he ran to the front of the box car.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I heard the gunfire.

And when I opened my eyes, I saw him crumpled to the ground. Blood was pooling out to one side of his body.

A man stood in the box car door, his gun still level in firing position. His hair was blond and stringy, nearly touching his shoulders, and he was dressed in a dirty red shirt, dirty trousers, and a heavy leather greatcoat. His eyes lit up when he saw us. "My my, what do we have here? I do believe I have found the treasure in this hear train."

Cora was shaking, quietly sobbing next to me. She started mumbling the Lord's Prayer.

I swallowed hard. I'd long ago decided God had abandoned us and no matter how hard she prayed, he wasn't going to hear.

The man sauntered down the aisle aiming his gun at us. "Such finery on you ladies! And pretty young things too, now, I was just thinking the other day that I might like to have some company."

"Leave us alone!" Cora hunkered down on the floor, wedging herself between me and the wall. "We won't tell anyone what we saw. I promise."

He pulled the hammer back on the gun, leveling it with my face. "Stand up."

"Elizabeth, no—"

"I said stand up!" The man stomped his foot on the ground and leaned over, grabbing my arm and yanking me up. "You and I are about to get mighty acquainted, sweet girl, so you just mind your manners and come up here all nice like. I'm coming back for you."

He shoved me forward and towards the front of the boxcar. My knees were trembling and I stumbled, nearly tripping over the body in the middle of the aisle. Where were the supposed Pinkerton's? Where was Owen?

"I like 'em real young." He slid his hand down my side, clawing at my hip. "Pretty girl like you, curves in all the right places. Damn. And to think I almost let them talk me into stayin' at camp."

Tears seared my eyes. I wanted to push him off me, but the gun...he already had it half cocked. I'd be dead before I could make it out of the boxcar. I bit my tongue until I tasted blood; damn it all. I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve this; as if life hadn't been misery wrapped in a pretty silk bow up until this point. And now this.

He pushed me up against the wall, pinning me in place with his hip. Pulling a length of rope from an interior pocket of his coat, he bound my wrists together. "You're gonna be a good girl, right? You just wait right here for me to bring your pretty friend up and we'll get going."

Cora started sobbing even louder. "No, no, please! I have a family, I have a husband!"

"That's a damn shame, my dear, it is."

"Our father is a United States Senator. You just wait until he finds out about this, why, he'll send the entire federal army after you."

I wanted to slam my head against the wall. Cora and her damned big mouth.

The man's eyebrow cocked up and he ran his hand across my corseted breasts. "Daughters of a Senator, well, is that right? I ain't never fucked a senator's daughter!"

I spit in his face. "And you won't now, either."

He reached back as if he was going to hit me, but at that moment, someone ran into the car behind him. "What the hell, Micah—I thought I told you to hurry up!"

And then he saw me. His jaw dropped slightly, his steely blue eyes locking with mine; he was ruggedly handsome, his face covered in a bristly beard a few days old. His shoulders were broad and chest crossed by an ammunition belt.

"The fuck are you doin', Micah, we ain't taking prisoners. You heard Dutch; we're here for one thing and we got it. Now let's go."

"These fine ladies are the daughter's of a senator" The man, Micah, ran his hand down my cheek. I tried to pull away, but he grabbed me by the chin and held me in place. "Imagine the ransom we could get off them?"

"Imagine the bullet holes in your head when they shoot ya. Let her go."

"Jesus, Arthur—"

“I said, let her go.” He cocked his gun halfway, then pulled the hammer back completely. “I will shoot you, Micah Bell, and I won’t think nothin’ of it. You ain’t nothing in my book.”

Micah finally stepped away from me and shoved past Arthur. “You know, Arthur, I don’t know why Dutch puts so much faith in you. You’re fucking weak.”

“Least I ain’t a damned fool like you.” Arthur cocked his head to the door. “Get back to Dutch and the others. I’ll be along in a minute.”

Surprisingly, Micah listened. Arthur turned back to me and sighed, easing the gun back to half-cock and reholstering it. He pulled out a knife and motioned for my wrists. “Lemme cut you free, Miss, and I’ll be on my way. Sorry for the trouble.”

“Trouble?” Cora started screaming. “You monsters! You killed people!”

“Well, I didn’t kill you.” His hands were rough against mine, but his grip was gentle. “This wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

“I find myself saying that more often than not.” I murmured the words more to myself than him, but he looked up at me. His gaze was intoxicating; I felt my cheeks redden.

“They’ll get the train moving again shortly.” He unwound the rope from around my wrists. “Won’t put you behind by more than a few minutes.”

“Thank you.”

He looked at me, his eyes still locked on mine. “Um...for?”

“Getting that bastard off me.” I blushed again. He was still holding onto my hands. “I’d rather be shot than be touched by him.”

Gunfire peppered outside the corridor again. He cursed, then dropped his hand to my low back and guided me forward. “You might still get your wish tonight, my dear.”

He pulled his gun out again and kicked the door closed a bit. “Think you can keep her quiet?”

I glanced at my sister. She was wailing, her body wracked with every sob. “Maybe if I hit her with something heavy.”

He chuckled. “Well, darlin, if you keep her quiet, I’ll get that gunfire away from here and be on my way.”

The door shook; I saw the flash of gunfire. Arthur swept me to the side, blocking my body with his, and fired back. I heard a yell and then, in the distance, and all too familiar voice. Owen.

“Shit.” He started reloading the revolver. “Fucking Micah, Christ, he’s more trouble than he has ever been worth.”



Cora suddenly stood up and stared screaming. "OWEN! Owen, we're still in here!" Arthur sighed, his shoulders drooping. "Now, ma'am, I wish you hadn't done that."

The door opened all the way and two men walked in: one was Owen. The other I didn't recognize, but he had his gun fixed on Arthur.

Owen reached out his hand to Cora. She ran to him, throwing her arms around his shoulders. "I thought we were done for; that disgusting man said he'd hold us for ransom. I was petrified."

The other man cocked his head towards me. "Now, you let the lady go. I'll put a bullet in your head if you touch her again."

"He didn't touch me in the first place." I snapped.

"Elizabeth, you just get yourself over here right now and let him deal with this outlaw." Owen held his hand out to me. "Quickly, now, he's a Pinkerton. This is over."

Arthur chuckled, casually tapping the revolver against his hip. "Naw, this is far, far from over."

And everything happened at once: The Pinkerton fired. Arthur was still blocking my body with his and he fired back from his hip, holding me against him to protect me from another shot.

Cora screamed.

"Sorry about this, darlin." Arthur pushed me down, grunting in my ear as he banged his shoulder off my mine.

I gasped. Blood was soaking through his blue shirt. "He shot you?"

"I shot him too, don't think he was too happy about it." He nudged me toward the dead man in the center of the aisle. "You stay behind me."

"I will."

The Pinkerton was yelling out commands. Over Cora's screaming, I heard Owen shouting back and then, abruptly, she was silent.

Arthur was still for a moment. And then, raising up onto one knee, he peered around the seats. He fired.

The Pinkerton fell silent.

"You shot him! You...you...THAT'S ENOUGH!" Owen slammed into something; I wouldn't have been surprised if he threw something against a wall. "You let her go, right now. If the girl is unharmed, I'll let you live."

I shook my head furiously and whispered, "He's lying."

“You’re out of time, you bastard. Let the girl go.”

Arthur sighed. “Sorry, darlin, but I gotta do what keeps you safe. Go. I can protect myself from a pussy like him.”

I almost laughed. Crawling out into the aisle, I shakily stood up and picked my way across the dead body on the floor. Cora was standing in the corridor, her hands outstretched to me. “Come on, Lizzie, come on!”

The Pinkerton was dead, half of his face blown off, and Owen was next to him. He waited until I was a few steps away from Arthur and then moved forward. “Out in the hall, Elizabeth. This doesn’t concern you.”

“You said you’d let him go.” I glanced to my left. Arthur had stood up, his hands up as if surrendering. “So, do it.”

“It’s not that easy, darlin.” Arthur nodded at Owen. “Think you’re gonna play hero today?”

“I’m gonna teach you not to mess with someone well above your station.” Owen cocked the rifle. “Move, Elizabeth.”

“You bastard.” I stared at him. I was still shaking, but this time, it was more out of anger than fear. “You fucking liar. This man didn’t hurt me, he didn’t even touch me.”

Owen aimed the rifle at me instead. “This isn’t a game, Elizabeth, now you do what I tell you and step away from this trash.”

“Better do what he says, darlin.”

Owen cursed, then reached out and grabbed my wrist. He yanked me forward so hard that I tripped over my own feet; I crashed to the floor in a heap. Before I could even stand up, he leaned over and backhanded me. “You deserved the bullet, you whore.”

I tasted blood. The hit made me dizzy; I heard Arthur cursing at Owen; and Owen yelling back.

And I saw the Colt revolver.

“You call me trash and that’s how you treat a lady?” Arthur’s voice was at a near roar. “I might do nothin good in my life, but ain’t never hit a woman.”

“Oh, she’ll get hers. Later, once she’s all washed and clean, that soft skin just ruddy and innocent. But first, let me grant you passage to hell where you belong. I should shoot you in the back, like the coward you are.”

The Colt was still half-cocked. I held it tight and turned, pulling the hammer back all the way. “Owen. If anyone deserves to burn in hell, it’s you.”

I fired.

Owen dropped to one knee, his rifle clattering to the floor in front of him. Arthur was staring at me, his mouth again hanging open. “You’re a damn spit fire, darlin.” And before I could answer, I heard my sister screaming. “She murdered my husband! Someone—help me!”

My mouth ran dry. Shit.

Arthur had stepped around me, in mid escape, when he stopped. He looked at my sister, still screaming, and then turned back to me. Owen was moaning.

“He ain’t dead.”

I shrugged. “You need to get away before they send more Pinkerton’s. Run.”

He took another step forward but then stopped. Running back to me, he reached out his hand and said, “You wanna run with me, darlin?”

# Somebody, Someone

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I lost myself in those big blue eyes, my breath caught in my throat. I nodded.

His lips twitched up into a grin and he took my hand, hoisting me up to my feet and immediately leading me out into the corridor.

Cora was slumped against the wall. She glared at me as I walked past and yelled, “You don’t even know him! How could you do this to your family, your blood? We WILL find you again, Elizabeth, you can’t run away forever! Elizabeth—come back!”

I didn’t answer her. I kept my eyes focused on Arthur’s broad shoulders and the way his hair gently curled at the base of his neck. He adjusted his hold on my hand, tightening his grip, and pulled me away from the luxury passenger compartments.

I immediately smelled smoke.

“Torching the cars, right on schedule.” Arthur grumbled. He dragged his forearm across his brow. “You stay close to me.”

He didn’t give me time to respond. Shoving through a group of men in dark frock coats, he pulled me out of one car and across a narrow throughway to another. The smoke was heavier on this side. It was dark, shadows dancing through dim light—but I saw the movement ahead. The glint of a steel barrel.

Arthur fired first.

The body hit the ground with a dull thud, the gun clattering away harmlessly. Arthur leapt over the body; he wrapped his arm around my waist and lifted me over in one, smooth movement. It was effortless, he didn’t even hesitate. His legs were long and the tramp of his boots heavy on the floor beneath us, but I wasn’t going to let him go. I clung to him like he was the only thing solid keeping me from plummeting over the edge; maybe he was, this stranger with his intoxicating blue eyes and lopsided smile.

A figure skidded to a stop in front of us again; Arthur leveled his gun.

Misfire.

“Shit.” He pushed me back against the wall, frantically emptying the misfired bullet. The barrel was red hot; he cursed again as the tips of his fingers burned. “Fucking cocksucker, I’m gonna put a bullet in Micah Bell’s damned head...”

The wall beside him exploded as a bullet smashed through the wood, barely missing us. Arthur flinched.

He dropped the bullet.

“Shit!” He shoved his hand into his pocket and yanked out a handful of bullets. “You just hang tight, darlin, I’m gonna get us out of here—“

A shotgun barrel stopped him cold. It was pointed right at him, the man behind it wide-eyed and sweaty. He was mouth breathing, his flabby fingers clutching the gun like links of sausage draped over a post. “Don’t you even think about moving, Arthur Morgan, I will blow your brains out. Come this way, Miss, right to me.”

Instead of backing away, I moved closer to Arthur. The revolver was still at my side, somewhat hidden by my skirt. “No.”

He waved the barrel at me. “I know you’re scared, Miss, but you need to come with me. I’ll protect you.”

I raised the Colt and fired.

The bullet slammed into his shoulder, no doubt splintering the bone, and he dropped the rifle. He stumbled back and away, but remained upright. Groaning; his eyes focused on me. “Why you little...”

In one fast movement, Arthur jammed bullets into his gun and picked up the discarded rifle. He passed it to me without even looking back. “Think you can handle this, darlin?”

I slung it over my shoulder. “Likely better than the Colt.”

He chuckled and again grabbed my hand, pulling me back out into the corridor. It was sheer chaos: the main train car was filled with smoke; people were running and screaming. I couldn’t see anything.

The smoke and fumes clogged my throat and I started coughing. Arthur pulled me to him, quickly tying something around my face. It took me a second to realize it was a kerchief, well worn and thick with the musky swell of cologne and sweat. He touched the tip of my covered nose with his finger. “That’ll keep ya until we get outta here.”

And then we were running again. There was nothing but shadowy movement and occasional flashes of light; it was like staring up into the night sky to watch the lightening. Only with every burst were the clouds visible, ever constant in the darkness. Arthur’s grasp was my constant. He held my hand tight, his calloused skin rough against my flesh, and pulled me after him. He never let me fall behind; he stopped only to shoot or slam his fist or boot into someone’s face.

The suffocating train car finally opened up through a doorway into the night. Arthur jumped down to the ground and spun, immediately reaching up to grab me. “I got you, darlin.”

I reached down and grasped his shoulders, broad and strong beneath my fingertips. He hoisted me down from the short platform between the train car connectors and swung me

down to the ground. Keeping one arm firm at my waist, he guided me away from the burning train and into the darkness beyond.

I should have been scared; I should have been terrified of wandering into the night with an outlaw. But I wasn't. I was more afraid that we were going to run face first into Owen or a group of armed Pinkertons.

Arthur whistled sharply. After a moment, I heard the sound of hoofbeats rapidly approaching; surprisingly loud over the chaos behind us. A dark chestnut horse skidded to a stop in front of him, nostrils flaring and foaming.

"That's my girl." He patted the horse's flank with affection, then turned back to me. He didn't even have to say anything: he boosted me up onto the saddle and then swung up behind me. The horse took off like a shot, racing over uneven ground and covering terrain I couldn't even see.

"I should make you close your eyes so you can't find the way to my camp." Arthur's breath was hot on my neck, his body pressed against mine as he reached around to grasp the reins. "Or else I might have to keep you."

He left me breathless, his chest solid at my back. His hips lifted and rotated against me as the horse galloped; there was something intoxicating about it. Maybe it was too rhythmic or, tucked so tight against him, made me wonder what his other rhythms felt like...if he commanded a woman with the same attention he commanded the horse.

Jesus, Elizabeth, keep it together.

Whether he meant to or not, he kept his head close to mine, his sharp exhales tickling my neck. Once we were adequately far away from the train, he tugged on the reins to slow the horse. "So, pretty lady, you got somewhere you need to be? Somewhere I can take you?"

"Not exactly. It's..." I bit my lip, trying to figure out how to explain the stew of misery I'd been in. "It's complicated."

"Complicated, eh? Seems you knew that man you shot."

"That's why I shot him."

He chuckled, gently untying the kerchief from around my head. "Well, darlin, you can come back to camp with me and decide where you want to go in the morning. Gonna warn you, though, we ain't good people. I ain't a good man."

I made a noncommittal noise in my throat and adjusted my weight from one hip to the other; I only meant to get more comfortable in the saddle. My body rubbed against his, more intimately than I'd intended.

He groaned in his throat and tried to quickly cover it with a cough. "Who taught you to shoot?"

“My Pa, my real father. He fought in the War; whereas my mother thought I should spend time learning the ins and outs of needlework and dancing, he taught me what he knew about being a soldier. Shooting. Gambling. Cussing. I’m small, but he intended no man mess with me and come out unscathed.”

His arms tightened around my body; it was brief, but I felt his quick embrace. “You’ll fit in just fine.”

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By the time we got to camp—wherever that was—I was nearly asleep in his arms. The deep rise and fall of his chest along with the gentle sway of the horse lulled me into drowsy silence. At some point, he’d nudged my head back against his shoulder; in the arms of an outlaw, lost in pitch black wilderness, I felt safer than I had since childhood.

That ended the moment he hitched his horse.

“Jesus Christ, Arthur, what happened back there?” A tall, lanky man ran up to the horse. “You never fall behind, dammit, that’s the rule and—who the hell is that?”

Arthur jumped down from the horse and turned around, scooping me down into his arms. He didn’t answer the other man; the moment I was stable on my feet, he stormed off into camp.

The other man and I exchanged a look; we had an understanding, obviously, and went after him.

Both men and women were gathered around a campfire, some called out to him as he approached. He didn’t stop; he walked around the fire and grabbed a man by the throat, yanking him to his feet—

He slugged him in the face. The man’s head snapped back, but Arthur kept hold of him and struck him again. “You fucking bastard, you could have gotten us all killed.”

I stopped in my tracks. He was holding Micah Bell, the man who’d tried to kidnap us. The bastard who threatened to rape me.

“What in Christ’s name do you think you’re doing, son, now let him go.” The man who’d met us at the horse stopped beside me. In the firelight, I could see him better: he had a staunch, thick mustache and a crisp white shirt under a black brocade vest. There was something strangely elegant about the way he carried himself.

And whoever he was, Arthur listened to him. He shoved Micah to the ground. “He almost cost us everything. I found him in the passenger’s compartment with a girl tied up and two passengers dead. Ransom, on Senators daughters, now that wasn’t part of the plan, Dutch, and he knew it. We ain’t in the business of raping and kidnapping.”

Micah had sat up and was rubbing his jaw; blood trickling from his nose to his lips. “I see ya brought her here anyway, Arthur, so you must have found something...desirable about my plan.”

Arthur lunged at him again, at the last moment a muscular man with long, dark hair pushed him back. He winced from the his shoulder wound. “I owe her my life. My gun misfired and I’d a’been shot if she hadn’t fired first.”

Everyone looked at me.

At first, nobody said anything. It didn’t last long: a heavy-set man wearing a top hat crossed his arms over his chest. “Are you a senator’s daughter? Here with us?”

I shifted. “Step-daughter.”

The group around the campfire burst into commotion, squabbling and fighting over what they interpreted as having happened. Arthur was loudly arguing with the mustachioed man, waving his good arm between me and Micah. “He should have stuck to the plan—we stick to the plan because when we do, we don’t get killed. That’s the way you taught me, that’s the way this show is run and he ain’t gonna walk into this gang and suddenly change everything we do.”

“God dammit, Micah, you fucking moron.”

“Shit like that gets people killed, just like in Blackwater. It could have been worse than Blackwater.”

“...and then I saw the bastard hit her and, Dutch, I wasn’t gonna stand there and watch him treat her like that. I ain’t got a moral code necessarily, but I won’t stand there and watch a woman get hurt. Not her, and damned well not by him.”

“Arthur, you damn fool, Pinkertons will be here before you know it. You want to hang for this?”

“She’s going to get us all killed.”

These people hadn’t been there. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand where they were coming from, because I completely did: my step-father was a United States Senator. He ran with the big-wigs in Washington and he had the ear of the President. And for almost the entirety of my life, I’d watched him blatantly carouse with whores. He’d practically sold my sister into the arms of Owen Blanchard and he beat my mother when nobody was watching. He ruled our house with an iron fist and sent me off to boarding schools when I was too much to handle—and too good a shot to beat back into submission. I was tired of being ‘trouble.’ I was tired of being the cause of everyone’s problems and an embarrassment to my family. They’d rather forget me like they’d forgotten my father. They’d rather I be tamed by some society man and shut up in a gilded cage. I never mattered to anyone; only to my father. And he was dead.

Tears seared my eyes and I tried to blink them back; it was already too late. They trickled down my cheeks, my chest tightened up. The last thing I wanted was for Arthur to see me cry, but sobs were welling up in my throat. I couldn’t do this anymore. It was just as hopeless here as it had been on the train except now, I was alone. Lost.



I bit my lip and gasped; it was tender from Owen's fist. I was still little girl lost, the green-eyed child of fortune. Nothing more than a disappointment. Just like her father.

"Aw, sweetheart, don't cry." A blonde woman, dressed in nothing more than her corset and a long purple skirt, grabbed my hands and pulled me into a tight hug. "You monsters just shut your mouths. She doesn't deserve this shit, especially not from the lot of you!"

A spindly, gray haired man stepped up to my other side, gently taking my elbow. "That's enough, gentlemen, we've had a rough night and I think we all just to stop and take a rest. Arthur, you get that arm looked at. Dutch, you handle Micah." He turned to me, smiling warmly. "I'm Hosea and I apologize for the less than warm welcome. And what's your name, my dear?"

"Elizabeth." I watched Arthur being led off in the opposite direction; I suddenly felt very, very alone. "Elizabeth Dorsey."

"Well, Elizabeth Dorsey, you can make yourself comfortable in my tent tonight. Miss Grimshaw, Karen, can you get her settled in for the night?"

"We'll take good care of her." A woman with salt and pepper hair, and a somewhat severe expression, draped her arm over my shoulder and hustled me away from the campfire. "This way, sweetheart, that's right. Mary-Beth, you get Hosea set up with Strauss for the night—no dawdling, Mary-Beth, lets go. Move faster."

I turned to try and see Arthur again, but I'd lost him in the dark and the movement of people around the campfire.

"What brings you all the way from Washington, Miss Elizabeth?" Karen pushed back a tent flap, motioning for me to step inside. "Don't mind the smell. Hosea love his fancy colognes."

"I didn't come from Washington. I'm from Prescott."

"Prescott!" Miss Grimshaw unfastened my black, waist length wool cape. "You're along way from home, dear. We're just south of Valentine."

Valentine? Where in the hell was that? "I wouldn't call Prescott home, not now that my father is dead. I wouldn't call Washington home, either, so I'm somewhat...um...in between residencies."

Karen giggled. "You could say we are, too."

"Pardon my bluntness, dear, but I need to ask." Miss Grimshaw flipped back the lid of a chest at the foot of the bed. She pulled out an armful of blankets and started spreading them over the cot. "How did you find yourself mixed up with Arthur Morgan?"

I turned my attention to my boots, silently unlacing the cording. "He told you. We were on the train and he saved me from Micah Bell. And, on our way out, I returned the favor."

Miss Grimshaw and Karen exchanged a look. I couldn't decipher it, but for a split second, I thought I saw Grimshaw's lips twitch into a smile. She said, "Curious."

Karen moved my boots to the side of tent and carefully laid my cape over it. “Well, Miss Elizabeth, you’re with the Van der Linde gang now. Hope you don’t plan on leaving.”

“Shut your mouth, Karen.” Miss Grimshaw snapped the blankets firmly. “You’re not a captive, sweetheart, you stay as long as ya like and then move on. It happens all the time. Now, the important things: are you hungry? There’s some stew left. Pearson can probably scare up some biscuits if you’d rather.”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. I ate on the train.”

“You ain’t missing much.” Karen snickered. “Pearson’s as jolly as they come, but he can’t make soup for shit.”

A shadow crossed the front of the tent and both women turned.

It was Arthur.

“Beg your pardon, ladies, I wondered if I might have a moment.” He hesitated. “If I’m not interrupting.”

The women exchanged another look; Miss Grimshaw was obviously biting back a smile. “Indeed, Mr. Morgan, we were just finishing up. Goodnight, Miss Elizabeth.”

They hustled out of the tent, whispering and giggling as they went.

Arthur cleared his throat nervously and stared down at the tops of his boots. “I...ah, just wanted to come and...make sure you were okay.”

I edged closer to him. Without my heeled boots on, I felt even smaller next to his tall, broad, frame. “I’m fine. How’s your arm?”

“Just a scratch. It’ll heal.” He lifted his eyes to mine and smiled sheepishly. “Think you’ll be comfortable here tonight?”

“Maybe lonely.”

He sucked in a sharp breath and smiled again, taking a half-step closer to me. He reached out his hand, trembling ever so slightly, and trailed his knuckles down my cheek. “I’m not a good man, darlin.”

“Nobody said you had to be.”

He dropped his hand to mine and gently lifted it to his mouth. His beard tickled my skin; the light touch sent a surge of shivers through my arm and down my body, settling, throbbing, in my low abdomen. Very softly, he brought my palm to his lips and kissed it.

My breath caught in my throat. His lips caressed my palm, his mouth hit pleasure points that I didn’t even know I had. And when he pulled away, he dragged his bottom lip over my thumb, his breath hot on my flesh. “I’ll see you in the morning, darlin.”

“Yes.” I could barely breathe out the words. “The morning.”

He flashed that delicious lopsided grin again and slowly let go of my hand. At the last moment, he pulled me to him. “My tent is right over there. If you ever...need me, you just come to me.”

Jesus Christ.

## Chapter End Notes

I cannot thank you guys enough for the comments and kudos!! I appreciate it SO much!!  
<3

# Coming Undone

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Morning in camp was loud. People were talking, complaining; I heard who I thought was Pearson arguing with someone over the consistency of the oatmeal.

“It’s plaster, god dammit, you could spackal the wall with it!”

“I didn’t ask you what you wanted to do with it, Bill, and you don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to eat it! Ain’t forcing ya to do anything. In fact, you’d save some for the rest of us for once because I NOTICED you’re getting a little fat.”

“I AM NO SUCH THING!”

They squabbled for another moment and then I heard another voice, a softer, lazier baritone quip, “It does look a little like casein, you know, that shit you make from sour milk and curd? That white shit? You know, an adhesive...looks a little like a man’s—“

Both Pearson and the other man snapped, “Nobody asked you, John!”

Two figures moved past my tent. I was fairly sure they belonged to Dutch and Hosea from the night before. Hosea was in mid sentence, “...they remind more, actually, of baboons. Bessie and I went to a zoo, years back, and they squabbled and carried on like those idiots. Of course, Bill hasn’t started throwing shit.”

Dutch laughed. “The morning is still young, my friend. Plenty of time for that yet.”

I wiggled out from underneath the blankets, immediately shivering in the crisp air. Gooseflesh covered my arms and I quickly retrieved my cape, fastening it at my throat. I could smell the woody, ashy scent of the campfire—and I’d be warm there.

Well. Warmer.

I’d slept in my corset last night which was not only uncomfortable, but was now painful: the garment had slipped and the whalebones were digging into my ribcage. Maybe Miss Grimshaw could help me re-lace it later. I almost grinned at myself in Hosea’s shaving mirror as I smoothed down my wild, dark brown hair. Arthur would clearly be the first choice for corset assistance, though, he no doubt was better at unlacing them than fastening them.

Once my boots were laced, I stepped out of the tent and made my way to the campfire. Karen caught my eye immediately—she waved and motioned for me to join her. “Mornin’ Miss Elizabeth, did these brutes wake you up.”

“Perhaps the pretty lady could settle our dispute?” a man in a dirty union suit, somewhat too tight trousers, and one suspender slipped down his arm—Bill, I guessed—bowed at me with great exaggeration. “If any male here is of portly cut, it’s Pearson.”

“Umm...” For the second time in as many days, everyone in camp was staring at me—especially Pearson. His cheeks were bright red. “I don’t really think it’s my place...”

“No, no, you can speak freely among us.” Dutch lit a cigar and took a deep drag. “Any friend of Arthur Morgan is a friend of ours.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, ah, in my experience, it’s typically the most hardy who survive. Frail and weak like me...well, if the wind blows too hard I’ll probably topple over. Good Mr. Pearson, though, is stocky and hardy and...um...the kind...of...broad...broadness our fine country was founded on.”

“A FINE woman!” Pearson thrust a wooden spoon—which really was coated in something that looked like glue—into the air and smiled. “Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. Have I ever told you that you’re my favorite here in camp?”

Hosea and Dutch were howling with laughter. I shook my head and kept on my path to Karen. So far, maneuvering gang life was much the same as the Washington society scene: tell people what they want to hear, smile, look innocent. But always watch your back.

I felt a tap on my shoulder; case in point. I turned, a man about Arthur’s height, but slender and in fitted, striped trousers, was standing behind me. His hair was straight and nearly black, his well chiseled face marred only by two long scars on his cheek—he was handsome and he knew it. “I didn’t get to introduce myself last night, Miss, name’s John Marston.”

I smiled sweetly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, John Marston.”

“You seem so young to be out on your own like this.” He casually crossed his arms in front of him. “How old are you?”

“Twenty. Well, twenty-one next month.” I looked past him; closer to Pearson’s wagon, I saw Arthur. He was staring at us, two bowls of the cook’s concoction in his hands. He was scowling, his expression a mixture of hurt and anger.

Not even turning my attention back to John, I mumbled a pleasant “Excuse me for a moment, sir, I beg your pardon” and made a casual—but quick—beeline to Arthur’s side. “I hope I don’t smell too much like Hosea’s cologne. His tent is drenched in it.”

Arthur’s lips twitched up, but he didn’t quite smile. “I see you met John Marston.”

“He introduced himself. Then he quizzed me on my age: I gave him the long answer of ‘twenty-but-almost-twenty-one’ and then I saw you.” I fell into step beside him, swaying close enough to brush up against him. “And I took leave of him. He’s cute—he knows it—and I’d rather be with you.”

He tilted his head down and looked at me, his gaze searing into mine; after a moment he relaxed. He handed me the bowl of oatmeal. “You make due last night, darlin?”

“I was tired. I fell asleep fast, but was lonely as expected.” I plunged the spoon in my mouth. Immediately I wrinkled up my nose and choked back a gag. It was...thick. “Umm...”

mmmm...ahhhh.”

Arthur burst out laughing. “That is by far the most polite description of Pearson’s oatmeal I have ever heard.”

I swallowed hard. “Ehhhh....it’s, ugh, original.”

“D’they teach society girls how to be polite in those fancy boarding schools you went to?”

I nodded, choking down another mouthful of oatmeal. “I also learned how to stir tea in the proper direction and how to conjugate irregular verbs in French. A wealth of knowledge.”

His smile lit up his eyes; he reached out and tenderly tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. Trailing his fingertips down across my jawline, his eyes widened. “Shit, you’re half frozen. That cape-thing all you got?”

He didn’t even wait for me to respond. Taking the oatmeal out of my hand, he put both bowls on a small table and wrapped his arm around me. “Come on, darlin, let me get you my coat.”

No doubt everyone around the campfire was watching us retreat to his tent; Arthur clearly didn’t care. His hand was firmly planted on my low back and he guided me away from the others. I’d seen his tent the night before when he pointed it out, but now...this close, it was...

Intimidating.

He pulled back the tent flap and motioned me to enter first. “My lady.”

The inside of the tent was much like Hosea’s, except Arthur crammed in a table, chair, and a large trunk. Several photographs were pinned to the wall by his cot and, on the table, was a leather journal. It was cozy, but like him, it was mysterious—so many questions, and no answers.

I leaned over and examined one of the photographs. Three men, two seated: the standing man was clearly a clean shaven Dutch, while a darker haired Hosea was seated, leg crossed over leg, on the left. On the right side, though, a young, dark haired, square jawed man stared solemnly at the camera, one hand holding a cigarette and the other balanced on his knee. I looked over at Arthur. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

He’d been watching me; now he smiled. “Shit, I must’ve been eighteen or nineteen in that picture. Seems like a lifetime ago.”

“You act like you’re nearly seventy.”

“I feel like it, darlin, too many years hunched over a horse’s back or crouching on the ground avoiding gettin shot.” He opened the chest and rummaged through the clothes inside. “I’m damn near thirty-six.”

“Ancient.”

“Maybe for an outlaw.” He pulled out a blue coat, the interior thick with wool. “It’ll be big on you, but it’ll work. Keep ya warm.”

I reached for the coat, but as I did, my corset slid down further. I winced; immediately, I turned my head and looked away from him.

But he’d already seen. “You okay, darlin?”

“Wardrobe issues, I’m fine. Just a corset persistent to no longer do its job.” I dug my elbows into my sides, trying to nudge it up my body. “Stop looking so concerned. I’ve worn a corset since I was twelve.”

“I can fix it for you.”

I raised an eyebrow quizzically. “I didn’t know you were a master of corsetry, Arthur Morgan.”

He stepped closer to me and slid his hand back into my hair, cradling my head. “Say it again.”

“What?”

“My name. I like the way it sounds comin’ off your pretty lips.”

I curled my lips up into a coy smile, slowly running my tongue across my bottom lip. “Are you trying to seduce me, Arthur Morgan?”

“Only as much as you seduce me with those big green eyes and these curves.” He sucked in a sharp breath. “You better let me fix that corset before I lay you down on my cot.”

I obediently turned around, unfastening my cape and letting it slide off my shoulders. I tossed it onto his cot and started unfastening the tiny hook and eye fasteners on my blouse. Arthur had fallen silent, but I could feel his eyes on me as I moved; I could feel the warmth of his body as he stepped closer to me.

He pressed his hands to my shoulders and slowly pulled the blouse off me. His touch was gentle; his fingertips brushed against my bare neck as he swept my hair to one side. “You gotta take that frilly corset cover off, darlin. Maybe that skirt, too.”

I blushed. His hands grazing my skin was driving me out of my mind. I’d just met him; I knew absolutely nothing more about him than his name and that he was an outlaw, yet, here I was: letting him slowly undress me.

And I had no intention of stopping him.

The corset cover had only a few small buttons. As soon as I had it undone, he swept it off my shoulders and tossed it aside with my blouse. The skirt buttoned in the back; I felt him tug on the waistband as he unfastened it and then, a moment later, he cupped my hips with his hands and pushed my skirt down.

He worked his fingers against the petticoat button. Dipping his head forward as he slid it down, he murmured in my ear, “Is this okay, darlin?”

I breathed, “Yes, Arthur Morgan, it certainly is.”

He squeezed my hips before moving his hands up my body and to my waist. “Put your arms up so I can lace it tight.”

I did as he said; that’s how it was done, after all: putting your arms over your head lengthened your torso so the corset could be pulled as tight as possible. But the way he commanded it made it sensual. Even in the cold, my flesh felt warm—every place he touched sent thrills through my body.

He slid his hands up my bare arms, digging the pads of fingers into my skin as he made his way up to my wrists. Guiding my arms around his neck, he dipped down and pressed his mouth to the back of my neck. “I never seen a blue corset before.”

“I got it in Paris.”

He trailed his lips downward, stopping and nuzzling the curve where my neck and shoulder met. His lips, rough and chapped, left light kisses on my skin; his breath was hot. “Got any other fancy underdrawers I can look at?”

“Why don’t you find out?”

He tugged on the corset cording; it was so loose that the front slipped down further and pushed into my breasts—they almost spilled out completely. With his hands tight around my waist, he spun me around in his arms. He pulled me closer to him and slowly dragged his fingertips over my pushed up cleavage. “I know other ways I can warm you up, darlin.”

I could feel this arousal, the bulge in his trousers he was trying to hide. Sliding my arms around his solid, broad shoulders, I rose up on my tip toes and, against his lips, murmured, “Show me.”

He tilted his head forward and kissed me. It was gentle at first, but his lips quickly parted, caressing my bottom lip and teasingly touching his tongue to mine before pulling away.

“Arthur.” I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and gently nibbled on the tender flesh; he groaned in his throat. “I’m not an innocent, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I ain’t worried...” He smirked. “But it sure does interest me.”

He didn’t let me respond; he kissed me again, this time, with a wild hunger that made my pulse throb between my legs. He explored my mouth, lapping his tongue against mine, and started working his hands down the corset’s front steel hooks.

I slid my hands down his shoulders and tugged down the straps of his suspenders. His shirt was next: while he fussed with my corset, I started unfastening the little white buttons. I desperately wanted to touch his skin; to feel the soft hair on his chest beneath my fingertips.



He cupped his hand over mine and slid it down his chest and to his trousers, pressing it to his erection. He practically purred in my ear. "I need you, darlin."

I heard a noise outside the tent and then, without warning, the tent flap pulled back. "Hey, Arthur, Dutch needs you to—"

"Lenny, don't—"

But it was too late. He burst into the tent without even slowing down his speech. "He said if you go now—oh, shit, Arthur, I'm sorry!"

I buried my face against Arthur's chest, trying to muffle my laughter. I heard scuffling and then a softer whimper from outside the tent. "Sorry, Arthur."

"God dammit, Lenny, just go tell Dutch I'll be along." He sighed deeply, more of an irritated groan, and wrapped his arms around me. "I guess now is not our time, darlin."

I nuzzled my face against his chest; I could hear his heartbeat still racing. "Later then. I'm not going anywhere."

He dipped me backwards and trailed his mouth across my chest, his beard tickled my breasts. "Don't you go making promises you ain't gonna keep."

I giggled and held onto his arms—I couldn't get my hands around his biceps. "I always keep my word, Arthur Morgan. Especially when it comes to you."

He pulled me upright and kissed me again, this time tenderly. "Let's get you dressed and warm, then go see what bullshit Dutch wants to discuss."

His touch was tender as he helped me get dressed, his large hands easily lacing my corset tight—though he seemed hesitant to pull too hard. After he buttoned my petticoat and skirt, he sat on the chair and watched me finish dressing.

I glanced up at him as I fastened the hook and eyes on my blouse. "What?"

"Just you." His cheeks turned red and he adjusted his black hat, tugging it down to shadow his cheeks. "A man like me...well, I ain't been with...um, a woman like you."

There was an odd hitch to his voice, like he wanted to say more but wouldn't let himself. He shifted in the chair and rubbed the back of his neck; his head was tipped down but even so, I could tell he was looking at me.

I fastened the last hook and then walked over to him, gently sliding the hat back on his head. Hitching up my skirt, I crawled up into his lap and straddled him, cradling his face with my hands. "I'm just a woman. I don't bite...unless you want me to."

His lips curled up into a smile and he kissed me; tenderly, his mouth caressing mine with aching need. He ended it with a smile. "Don't you get me started again, darlin. I'll ride you out into the middle of woods and take you right up against a tree."

I trailed my finger down his lips. “Now you’re making promises you don’t intend to keep.”

“I do, beautiful girl. I sure do.”

I slid off his lap and went to retrieve his coat from the cot. Arthur was faster; he grabbed the coat first and waited while I slid my arms in, then fastened the buttons in the front. “Might loose you in here, darlin, it’s a bit big on you.”

The sleeves hung past my hands and the coat reached much further down my thigh than it would have on Arthur’s strong frame. But it was warm and, best yet, smelled like him. Heavy with musky cologne and the salty hint of sweat: it was like being wrapped up in his arms. “Don’t you be all jealous when you’re cold in that tan duster. We can share, though, I don’t mind.”

He chuckled. Sliding my hand through the crook of his arm, he led me out of the tent. All the women at the campfire immediately looked away; clearly, this was the moment they’d been waiting on. The men gathered on the opposite side of the camp, closer to the tent Dutch shared with a red-headed woman. Arthur drew my hand to his mouth, raking his lips across my knuckles. He said, “I’ll be along shortly. You go keep warm by the fire.”

I nodded. I watched him amble over to the rest of the gang, his body swaying in a confident swagger. He was intoxicating. His touch, his kiss; I’d never been this bold with a man—well, not without the heavy influence of champagne or bourbon—and he made me curious. Curious how far it would go...curious how it would feel to have him inside me...

Arthur Morgan was a storm.

And I was ready to drown.

## Chapter End Notes

Hey fam! I'm going to be out of the country for a week, but I wanted to leave you another chapter before I left! I'll work on it while I'm away and post as soon as I'm home. Thank you for all your kudos and support! <3

# A Different World

## Chapter Notes

I'm back!! I wrote a ton while I was away and had to break it into two separate chapters: non-smut and smut. It would have been massive, haha. I'll post more later this week. Hope you guys love it!!

“Well, girlie, come sit down with us.” Karen again patted the quilt covered spot next to her on the log. “I brought you a brush if you wanted to...well, fix that. Arthur’s work I’m guessing?”

The blonde next to her elbowed her sharply. “Karen, for Christ sake. Jesus! Sit down, Elizabeth, I’m Sadie Adler. Pleasure to meet you and all that, you gonna be stayin’ awhile?”

I liked Sadie immediately. She was no nonsense and right to the point, unlike Karen who only insinuated I’d already climbed Arthur like a tree. “I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Karen pushed a wooden, horsehair brush into my hand and turned her body, peering at me. “What brings you to all the way from Prescott? Nobody truly wants to come to New Hanover, ‘specially if they have the right to be in Washington.”

I started pulling hairpins out of my fluffy, drooping pompadour. “My mother and stepfather decided that I’d lived in Prescott long enough and it was time to fetch me. I didn’t want to be fetched.”

“Oh, yes, because being a society girl is so difficult. I’m sure.” A dark haired woman—I’d seen her hovering around John Marston—glared at me from across the fire. She rolled her eyes, her upper lip curling up in a sneer. “It must be so hard to decide if tonight you’ll eat mutton or steak or go through all those fine, silk dresses and decide what to wear. Your life, Jesus, it must be dreadful.”

Silk dresses and satin hair ribbons...I remembered everything that happened that night. The clink of fine glass goblets as we drank and cheered. The way the candles in the sconces seemed to dance and blur as I swirled around the dance floor. Sweat and laughter...the kiss of light rain when we ran outside...and then the sweet, coppery smell of blood. The way her eyes were so fixed, her pupils so large that I thought I’d fall into them. The screams...my screams...

I swallowed hard and looked down at the brush. “I guess it’s quite different.”

She snorted.

“Abigail, you hush.” Karen swatted at her. “We all have dark pasts, Miss Elizabeth, every last one of us. Ain’t no matter here. You are what you want to be. Come on, you know all the girls? Me an’ Sadie’ and Abigail—the girl with the ringlets there, that’s Mary Beth. And there’s Tilly.”

All but Abigail smiled and said hi—she just scowled and chewed on her fingernail. Karen kept talking, “You met Miss Grimshaw over there. And the sullen Irish woman, that’s Molly. Dutch’s girl; she don’t talk much these days. Got real upset after the problems at Blackwater.”

I shook my hair loose from the plaits I’d twisted on top of my head and carefully started brushing. It was a rats nest at the top. My eyes drifted to the group of men still talking. Arthur was standing by Dutch, his hands balanced on his leather pistol belt. He’d adjust it from time to time as he shifted his weight from one foot to another, fussing to get it to sit on his hips a particular way. Even from that distance, I could tell he was watching me.

Karen must have followed my line of sight. She snickered. “Been a long time since I seen Arthur Morgan sweet on a woman.”

I blushed. “I’m just glad he was there when I needed him. I’m not sure who was worse: my sister’s fiancé, Owen, or your pal Micah.”

Tilly snorted. “He ain’t a pal of ours. He’s been here, what, six months? We still don’t know anything about him.”

Mary-Beth was furiously scribbling in a notebook. “If you ask me, Dutch puts too much trust in him. I think Hosea is more wary and Arthur can’t stand him, but Dutch...I don’t know. He acts like he’s the second coming of Christ. I for one want to knock his teeth out every time he calls me ‘little girl.’”

“You should do it.” Karen nodded, somewhat enthusiastically. “That’s the only way to show some men you mean business. High society men like that too, Elizabeth?”

“Probably even more so.” I worked a snarl out of my hair with the brush and then flipped my hair to my other shoulder to work that side. “Women are property. Just pretty porcelain dolls for men to play with and break. Maybe not all men, but a good many; at least of the ones I’ve met.”

Abigail raised her eyebrow, her lip curling up in a snarl. “But, you’ve been with a man, right? Arthur Morgan ain’t gonna want a virgin, I can’t tell you that. He wants someone who knows what she’s doing.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes.”

“More than one?”

“Yes.”

“More than two?”

“I’m not sure what this—“

“So, just two.”

“Is there a point you’re trying to make, Abigail?” I shook my hair loose, letting the waves settle back over my shoulders. “Because we can go around and around like this and you’re still not going to like me and I’m still not going to care.”

The other women burst into shrieks and giggles; Abigail’s frown seemed to grow deeper and she crossed her arms over her chest. “You rich girls are all alike. Think you’re perfect.”

“Far from it. I know my sins.” I shrugged and handed the brush back to Karen. “The only difference is that mine got locked away in silk and lace and I can’t atone for them. And I never will.”

The silence that settled over the campfire was awkward; I knew what they were thinking. Poor, broken little rich girl whose sins were probably stealing boyfriends or baubles. It was more than that—so much more—and part of me would never get past it. It was my secret. It was my shame.

Movement in front of me caught my attention, shaking me out of my stupor. The men were filing back over, with Dutch in the lead; Arthur pushed past John Marston and stepped around the fire to my side. He perched on the edge of the log and lit a cigarette—he was scowling.

Dutch held his hands up to call for attention that he already had. “Ladies, I’m in need of a few volunteers to go to Valentine. There’s a fancy train full of rich folks headed this way and in order for us to get their...” he glanced at me. “...donation, I need specifics: estimated time of arrival, route, any stops it might make, value of who or what is on that train. As much detail as you can get. Uncle has volunteered himself to go; I’m sending Arthur in charge to keep things clean. No mistakes.”

Arthur took a deep drag on the cigarette, exhaling the smoke from the corner of his mouth. “I told you, I ain’t interested in going.”

“I didn’t say you had to be interested, I said you had to go.” Dutch crossed his arms, looking from me to Arthur. “Is there something you’re worried about, son?”

“Plenty I’m worried about.”

“Well, Arthur may not want to go, but I do.” Karen jumped up from her seat next to me and headed towards her tent. “A good time is just what I feel like. Tilly, you come too.”

Mary-Beth looked up from her notebook and directly at Arthur. “I’ll go along.”

I didn’t like that look—I’d seen that look before, in the way my sister looked at men. She’d been like a plague of locusts with the male species, even as far back as our early teenage years. And she’d been good at it, too...until it got her in trouble...

“Elizabeth’s coming with me.” Arthur blew smoke out of his mouth, somewhat in Dutch’s direction. “I ain’t leaving her here.”

“God damn it, Arthur.” Micah motioned wildly at him with his free hand, nearly dumping his coffee from the mug in his other. “We’re only as strong as our weakest member and, other than the damn boy, she’s the weakest. Women like her fuck everything up.”

Arthur and John snapped at the same time: Arthur in my defense and John’s higher, tenor voice, in protection of ‘his boy.’ Micah turned to Dutch, loudly complaining about kids and women and their general uselessness in camp before launching into a tirade about Arthur and his affections.

“Dumb bitches like her get men like us strung up with a noose.” Micah stretched out his arm with the coffee cup, pointing vaguely in my direction. “And just because she spreads her legs for him, his ugly fucking ass jumps to her defense and acts like she’s something special. She ain’t.”

My cheeks burned. Arthur’s face was red; John and Hosea were shouting—and Dutch just stood motionless, staring at me. He was waiting for something, maybe my reaction or feeble tears or whatever he expected a female to do. He was clearly just like all the other bastards I’d met in my life: women were less. Just pretty dolls to put on a shelf.

And without giving it much thought, I reached over to Arthur and pulled one of his pistols from the holster. It was large, no doubt fitting comfortably in his grasp, but it took my entire hand to pull back the hammer. I took quick, careful aim, and fired.

The bullet hit Micah’s coffee cup, nothing more than a simple tin mug, and crushed the front with a hole the size of a quarter. The back blew out completely—larger than a pancake. Coffee splashed out on him and spattered to the ground.

The camp fell silent.

I stood up and handed the gun to Arthur. “Cross me again, Micah. When I shoot, I never miss.”

Turning on my heel, I stormed back to Arthur’s tent. The hell someone was going to use me and abuse me again. The years I’d spend at boarding school and flitting through Washington society hadn’t taught me much, but it left me a reasonable judge of character. And I didn’t trust Micah or Dutch; there was something about them. A demeanor, some sort of deep set tarnish I couldn’t quite put my finger on. I’d known men like them my entire life, they were the sort that ran Washington. The kind of man my step-father had been since the moment I’d met him.

I wanted to slam my hands into the hard side of the tent made from his wagon wall. Damn it. This wasn’t how things were supposed to be.

I heard him walk into the tent before he said anything. He cupped his hands over my shoulders and pulled me back against him. “My girl.”

My lips twitched up into a smile. The sound of him calling me his girl was enough to set my pulse at a frantic pace. “Of all the virtues I learned in boarding school...patience was not one of them. If you want me to leave because of that little outburst, I understand.”

“Nah, I want you to stay. With me.” He swept my hair to the side and dipped his head down, trailing his lips down my neck. “You’re wild sassafras, darlin. Makes me want you even more.”

I tipped my head close to him; he nuzzled his face to my hair, brushing it away from my ear with his fingertips. “Just when I think you can’t be anymore beautiful, you unwind all this.”

I bit my lip, nibbling on it to try and distract myself from the hot puff of his breath on my skin when he spoke. I said, “It’s not exactly fashionable, I suppose...most girls keep it short because it’s easier to style. I always liked it long...I’m...ugh...rambling.”

“Look at me.”

I turned around in his arms and looked up at him through my lashes. His gaze rooted me into place almost as strongly as his arms; my fingers ached to reach up and trail my fingertips down the light scars on his chin.

He tangled his fingers into my hair, tilting my face upward. “I will never, ever let anyone hurt you, darlin. Not Micah Bell. Not anyone.”

Before I could say anything—before my brain could even process what he was saying—he kissed me. It was softer than earlier, but full of just as much desire. His tongue lapped against mine, his fingers pressing into my skin; he pulled away gently. “Come on, the sooner we get this shit done in Valentine, the sooner I can get you back here.”

Firmly taking my hand in his, he led me out of the tent and across camp. Most everyone had scattered, but Dutch and Hosea were still beside the fire. Hosea was chuckling. “I damned well doubt anyone in Valentine can even name a senator, let alone identify his step-daughter by sight. I trust Arthur’s judgment.”

“I don’t have time to be concerned about another mouth to feed, Hosea, I have enough to think about—“

“She’s my concern.” Arthur pulled me past them, hesitating only at a low growl from Dutch. “I think she handles herself damn well, but if someone has to take care of her, it’s gonna be me.”

He didn’t wait for either one of them to respond; he adjusted his hand, lacing his fingers around mine, and led me across camp to where the horses were hitched. Uncle was already seated on the front bench, while Mary-Beth, Tilly, and Karen were in the back, cackling and giggling like a flock of geese. They quieted considerably at our approach.

“Miss Elizabeth, you get yourself back here with us.” Karen motioned at me, her smile so broad that the apples of her cheeks turned rosy. “Just you wait until we show you around Valentine. It may not be Washington, but it’s a gem. A big ole gem stuck plum in the mud and muck.”

Mary-Beth rolled her eyes. “You’re comparing Washington to Valentine?”

Arthur hoisted me up into the wagon and waited until I was seated, before rounding it and climbing up onto the driver's bench and flicking the reins. His hat was low over his eyes, but I caught the slight hint of a smile on his kiss reddened lips.

And when he caught me looking at him, he winked.

"Well, Elizabeth?"

I adjusted to a more comfortable position in the wagon, tucking my legs to my side, and shrugged. Puling my hair to one side, I started plaiting it into a long, thick braid.

"Washington is all whore houses and congressional buildings. I assure you, it takes a lot to scandalize me."

Tilly spoke up suddenly. "Do you want us to call you Elizabeth? Or is there something else you like; I mean, my name's Mathilde, but I've gone by Tilly for as long as I remember. I feel like we're all just calling you by your full name because we thought you were some rich bitch. But you're not."

I giggled and then shrugged. "My sister always calls me Lizzie. My Pa was the only one who called me Bethie...otherwise it's Elizabeth. I don't mind any of them."

"What happened to your Pa?" Karen's voice was quiet. She took a quick nip from a flask and then tucked it back in an interior pocket of her cloak. "It changed who you are, sweetheart, didn't it?"

I glanced at Arthur. His eyes were fixed on the dirt road in front of us, but I could tell he was paying attention. I cleared my throat nervously. "He fought in the War and...uh...if left him affected, you know? He drank to forget, to silence the screams he still heard, the blood he still smelled. And my mother...she didn't want any of it. She put up for it for awhile, but, when I was around seven or eight, she took off with a lawyer from the next town over and dragged us from city to city, town to town, while he worked his way up the political ladder. When I was seventeen, my Pa sent me a letter. He begged for my forgiveness, for me to come out to Prescott and meet him. I did. It was fine, for awhile, but he was still drinking too much. I went back to Washington....and then..." I closed my eyes, fighting back the tears I refused to let spill over my cheeks.

When I opened them, the three other women were staring at me. I said, "Something happened and I ran away. I was done with society and all the pomp and nonsense. I was in Prescott for, seven months maybe? And he got worse. He saw things—people—who weren't there. He drank too much and used too much laudanum. And one day, I found him hanging in the barn. Just like that. Dead and cold, all this yellow liquid streaming out of his eyes and nose." I shuddered. "And, I had no one. I stayed in the house and I lived as best I could, until my sister Cora and her fiancé tracked me down. They'd decided enough was enough and I 'wasn't in my right mind' and needed taken back to New York. Congress isn't in session at the moment and, of course, Owen and my step-father know what my best interests are, according to them. Owen couldn't wait for the train we were scheduled to take back east, so we left on a different train. Which was, subsequently, robbed. So, here I am."



The women were staring at me. After a moment, Tilly leaned over and fiercely hugged me. “You’re a damn strong woman, Elizabeth Dorsey. You may have a fancy dress and fancy hair, but you’ve been through your own hell.”

I choked back my emotion, quickly dragging my sleeve across my cheeks. “So, anyway, my biggest fear is that they hunt me down again. I’m not going back there. Ever.”

Arthur cleared his throat, his voice a near growl. “Nobody will take you anywhere, darlin. I won’t let them.”

The women exchanged glances, snickering quietly.

“Arthur!” Uncle suddenly sat upright, flapping his arms in the air. “Arthur, stop the wagon!”

Arthur pulled back on the reins; the horses slowed to a walk. “The hell...”

A wagon was broken down by the side of the road, a gray haired man jabbering and holding a horse’s bridle. He waved his arm to us. “Help—can ya help me? My horse got away—he’s over there, but I can’t calm this one and get her too. Please; I ain’t got nothing to offer ya. I just need help.”

Arthur sighed deeply, but complied. “Sure.”

He hopped down from the wagon and swaggered over to a sparsely wooded area across train tracks. The moment he was out of hearing distance, Karen elbowed me in the ribs. “That man fancies you, sure as hell, I ain’t seen him flustered and protective like that in years.”

Mary-Beth started mumbling. “Not since...”

“So,” Karen grabbed my hands. “What happened in his tent?”

I tried to look casual, but I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. “Nothing. He got me a coat, I accepted.”

Tilly laughed. “That’s not what Lenny said.”

“Yeah, well, what did Lenny say?”

Karen and Tilly exchanged a glance; Mary-Beth crossed her arms and clearly pretended to look uninterested. Karen said, “He said—in confidence, I assure you—“

Tilly broke in, “Once we dragged it out of him.”

“Yes, once we dragged it out of him,” Karen glanced at Uncle, and then back at me. “He said you were in, let’s say, various stage of undress and in Arthur Morgan’s embrace.”

I made a noncommittal noise in my throat and shrugged. “Well. I can see why he’d think that.”

Karen howled with laughter, again elbowing me. “Any rumor is based in fact, Miss Lizzie, sure as shit.”

Arthur was walking back to the broken down wagon, easily leading a tall, Arabian across the railroad tracks. The man practically squealed, quickly accepting the bridle from him. “I can’t thank you enough, mister, I’d be lost without yer help. You’re a good man.”

Arthur snorted. “I wouldn’t say that.”

But when he looked at me, he smiled.

\*\*\*\*

Valentine was a muddled hole in the ground, nothing more than a muck road, broken down blot. Even the wooden, raised boardwalks were covered in mud and shit. Everything was run down—the people milling around seemed faded and grime covered.

Arthur maneuvered the wagon down...well, I wasn’t sure what it was, but it seemed to be a wider spot in the road that circled around to a big barn with the words ‘STABLES’ painted above the double doors. He jumped down from the bench and hitched the horses to the post. “You girls spread out. We ain’t stayin here all day. Get what Dutch wants and meet back here.”

The three women jumped down from the wagon and scattered. Tilly slowed down and turned back to me, calling, “You coming, Elizabeth?”

I shook my head. “No, but thank you. I’ll stay here and...um...blend in.”

As the women and Uncle disappeared into the town, Arthur casually leaned up against the back of the wagon. “I hate to break it you, Miss ‘Lizbeth Dorsey, but you wouldn’t blend in anywhere around here. You’re far too beautiful to be with the likes of us.”

I trailed my fingers across his jaw and strong, square chin. “Well, no, Uncle’s not really my type...but you, sir, are strikingly handsome.”

His cheeks reddened. “Naw.”

“Yes.” I pouted. “Are you saying I’m a bad judge of character?”

He swept me down from the back of the wagon, holding me close to him. “I’m not a good man.”

“You are to me.”

He finally smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling from the broad, sweet grin. Lacing his fingers around mine, he led me to the boardwalk and to a general store. Uncle was already inside, browsing.

“Hey, Arthur.” He motioned wildly at a display. I was getting the impression Uncle could only mumble or wildly flap his arms in the air. “Look at these here cee-gars; damned fine

from Cuba. You get one, it's on me."

"Sure." Arthur tucked the cigar in his tan, jacket pocket, and idled around the store. My hand was safe in his; his closeness and musky, cologne tinged smell distracting me from the wares on display. He squeezed my hand. "Anything you need, darlin? I'll buy you whatever ya want."

"I don't need anything, Arthur." I smiled at him. "Really. Pearson's oatmeal..."

"Exactly what I meant." He pulled me over to a display of plump, red strawberries and apples. "Pick what you want."

"Arthur—"

"Now, darlin, if you argue, I'm gonna have to insist you pick out a nice saddle and horse too while we're here in town."

I finally agreed and let him buy me a quart of strawberries. He added a couple other items—gun oil, cigarettes, and a couple carrots for his horse back at camp—and paid for everything. The shop keeper was giving us an odd look, but Arthur ignored it. Tucking the items in his satchel, he slid his hand around my waist and guided me out of the shop.

Uncle was sitting on a bench outside, taking a long, deep drink from a stone jug. "Sit yerself down, Arthur and...Arthur's lady...and rest yerselves."

"The lady's name is 'Lizabeth.'" Arthur rolled his eyes at me; I stifled a giggle. "We're rested, Uncle, don't you worry."

"I ain't worried, Arthur. 'Cept maybe about Blackwater."

Arthur waited until I finally started eating the strawberries. They were sweet and delicious; when I started on the second, he seemed to relax. He said, "We ain't talking about Blackwater."

"Damned shame about Jenny. She was a good girl."

"Too much shit happened after Blackwater." Arthur leaned closer to me, plopping his hat low on my head to cover my eyes—I saw him steal a strawberry from me anyway. "We won't make those mistakes again."

I tipped the hat back a little, enough so I could see him. He grinned at me, trailing his fingertip down my cheek. "You look stunning, 'Lizabeth."

I adored the way he said my name, the gravelly drawl of his voice; the way his eyes lit up when he looked at me. "I might not give it back."

"I'll come an' get it later." He draped his arm around me, pulling me close, and brushed his lips against mine. "You can owe me."

I took a slow, methodical bite of the strawberry. "That a fact?"

He licked his lips, his chest rising and falling faster. “Oh, darlin, it is.”

I burst into a smile—I couldn’t look into that sweet, handsome face and not grin like a fool. I ducked closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder, and offered him a berry. “Well, I do like you, Arthur Morgan. I’ll share.”

Uncle had dozed off, the empty jug discarded on the ground, and mumbled in his sleep. Arthur groaned.

I reached up and tilted his face to mine. “We’re almost...kind of alone again.”

“Damn right.” He nodded across the street. “We could be more alone over there at the hotel.”

When I looked across the street, I saw Tilly in the alley between the hotel and the building next to it. Arthur suddenly stiffened; he saw her too—and he saw the man trying to yank her further down into darkness.

He stood up, pushing the bag of strawberries into my hands. “You stay here, darlin. I’m gonna take care of this.”

Without another word, he stormed across the street and to Tilly’s side. The argument between the man accosting her was short: whatever he said, along with a expertly aimed gun, ended it. As I watched, Tilly motioned at the hotel. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but even from that distance, I saw the anger in Arthur’s face.

He went inside.

Tilly ran across the street, quickly sitting down beside me. “This place is shit, Elizabeth, Christ. It ain’t worth the trouble.”

“What happened?”

I knew she wouldn’t tell me; she didn’t have to. I could see the look in her eyes, the way she hugged herself. I linked my arm with hers. “Where’d Arthur go?”

Almost at the same time, Mary-Beth scampered up to us, her ringlets bouncing. “Where’s Arthur?”

Tilly rolled her eyes. “Lord, all this ruckus. He’s in the hotel—Karen’s got more than she can handle.”

“If that ain’t Karen to the core.” Mary-Beth rolled her eyes. “Shit. I can’t find anything out about the train. Either no-one knows, or their lips are as tight as their billfolds.”

“Did you ask at the station?” I shrugged. “I mean, the ticket master will know.”

“No, because I ain’t a damned fool.”

Tilly elbowed me. “You do it.”

I shook my head. “He told me to wait here.”

“Yeah, from the situation over there.” Tilly cocked her head to the hotel. “You won’t hurt nothing. Just go.”

Mary-Beth crossed her arms. “She won’t.”

“She will.” I stood up, pinching my cheeks to bring color to my pasty, porcelain complexion. I bit my lip a few times to make them look rosy, then handed Arthur’s hat to Tilly. “Where is it?”

Mary-Beth nodded a few buildings down from the hotel. “There, with the blue shutters.”

I sucked in a deep breath, pushing my shoulders back, and picked my way across the muck and puddles to the opposite side of the street. I was fairly certain Tilly believed I could do it, but it seemed like Mary-Beth just wanted to see me land flat on my face—and as far away from Arthur’s embrace as possible.

The post-office, much like the rest of town, was dreary and dirty. The man behind the counter looked almost younger than me; he straightened considerably when I walked inside. “How do, Miss? C-can I help ya?”

I twisted the end of my braid around my finger, shyly walking up to the counter. “I’m sorry, you must think I’m a mess.”

“I don’t think that at all, Miss.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just,” I pursed my lips together, fluttering my eyelashes sweetly. “I’m all confused and lost. You see, my carriage lost a wheel and we lost so much time. I’m supposed to be...well, honestly, I don’t know exactly where I am now, but I’m waiting on a train.”

He frowned. “A train, Miss?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes, a train! You see, my uncle is a professor of literature in Maine, practically governor after the War but, you see, he lost by four votes—can you believe four votes?—and I’m headed that way to be governess for his children. And of course, I’ve misplaced my ticket. Lord knows how much my dear, Uncle Joshua paid for it. He fought in the War, you know, and has such a mind for showering me with needless gifts and silly baubles. Why paint the peacock? My sweet auntie died during the war, though, and all he had is the children so I’ve become a surrogate daughter.”

I stopped long enough to take a breath. The man was staring at me, but quickly glanced at papers on his desk. “Not many trains with expensive tickets come through here, Miss.”

“I know and I hate to be a bother, but we’re so very much off course.” I bit my lip, willing myself to try and cry. It wasn’t working—but hopefully I looked pathetic. I certainly felt it. “I’m all alone. Quite...erm...frightened.”

“Well, there is the express train headed through town tomorrow around 10pm. Lowest price tickets are nearly twenty dollars. It takes the B&O through Virginia and cuts up the coast.

Maybe this was it?"

"Oh, goodness yes, it must be!" I reached across the desk and grabbed his hands. "Thank you! I'll go fetch my carriage driver and have him pay—twenty dollars you say?"

"Yes, Miss."

I quickly backed up, making my way to the door. "Thank you, sir, you are quite a lifesaver. I'll be back; just a few minutes and I'll be back."

With that, I hustled out the door—and right into Arthur.

"And just what do you think you're doin'?" He grabbed my arm, firm but with a gentle grip, and pulled me into the alley way. "Those damn women put you up to this?"

"Tomorrow, 10pm. Lowest priced tickets are twenty dollars and it's taking the B&O east. That line goes straight to Washington." I pursed my lips together, trying my best to look innocent. "You're mad."

"I'm supposed to be keeping you safe and they sent you right in to do what they wouldn't." He clamped his hand to the back of my neck, pulling me close. "Did he know you?"

"Of course not. I told him my uncle teaches college in Maine." I raised up on my tiptoes and kissed him. "Is Karen okay?"

"She's fine." He swept me up against the wall, pinning me into place with his hip. "I just want to keep you safe, darlin. I ain't mad. I'm...impressed."

"And?"

"And?" He was trying to hold back a grin, but his lips perked up in a lopsided grin. "And... stay with me. Here. Tonight. We can find our own trouble to get into."

I cocked my eyebrow upward and slid my hands up his shoulders. "Just what kind of trouble do you want to get in, Arthur Morgan?"

He dipped his head forward, his parted lips working against mine; the kiss deepened and he lapped his tongue against mine, while his hands slid down to my hips. He trailed his kisses down my throat and grazed his teeth over my collarbone. "The kind between your thighs."

# Beg for Me

## Chapter Notes

**\*\*Smut alert\*\*** I had to change the rating on this because of how hot it gets.....enjoy ;)

We spent the next few hours doing nothing but spend time together. He took me to the stables and we browsed the horses for sale, probably irritating the owner with our clear lack of desire to do anything but look and admire. For a man with such a rough, mean exterior, Arthur clearly had a soft spot in his heart for animals. He'd murmur to the horses as he looked them over, immediately winning their affection and trust. He threatened to buy me a tall, sweet natured roan; I threatened to turn around, sell it, and buy him a fancy, dapper suit. He laughed, tucking my hand in the crook of his arm, and asked the owner to hold the horse, just for a few days, under the name T. Kilgore.

After we'd seen all there was to see in Valentine—and there wasn't much—Arthur led the gang's horses to a sunny spot near the stables and we sat close together in the back of the wagon. He hunkered down, resting his head on my lap, and tipped his hat down low over his eyes. "I was too busy thinking of you last night to get much sleep."

"You've got me now."

"Almost, sure." He caught my hand in his and pressed it to his chest, just beneath the opening of his shirt. "Promise me if I start snoring, you'll wake me up."

"I promise."

He was asleep within a few minutes, his hand still cupped around mine. Even in this shit hole town, just across the road from a man openly butchering a deer and partitioning out the innards, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time: happiness. My situation had only marginally improved since I'd fled the train, but I was with him. Arthur Morgan. That was what mattered. Not who I was, not where I'd been or what I'd done...just this moment.

I must have dozed off next to him, because the next thing I heard was Tilly's voice, "Lizzie girl, I never thought someone would tame Arthur Morgan."

Arthur stirred on my lap, gently squeezing my hand. "I ain't tame, Miss Tilly."

"You're curled up in her lap like a kitten."

"I'm still as mean as hell and ugly as sin."

"And cranky as shit." Tilly climbed into the wagon and tossed a wad of cash at him. "Poker. Didn't get anything on the train, but took 'em for all they were worth."

“Good girl.” He flipped his hat back and scooted up into a sitting position, shoving the money into an interior jacket pocket. “You see Mary-Beth and Karen?”

“Mary-Beth’s coming now. You can guess where Karen is.”

Arthur rolled his eyes.

“I got nothing.” Mary-Beth rested against the wagon and leaned over to brush dust off her skirt. “Except annoyed, if that counts. Shut my finger a door, got felt up by a drunk ranch hand, and didn’t find the journals I was looking for; damn waste of time.”

“Gotta go to Strawberry if you want decent journals.”

“Yes, Arthur, I’m aware.”

I asked, “Are you a writer, Mary-Beth?”

She glared at me for a moment, almost as if she thought I was mocking her, but quickly softened. “Romance. They’re just silly though, nothing special.”

“Have you ever read *Wuthering Heights*?”

Her eyes widened. “I did; it was wonderful! I read it the same time I read *Jane Eyre*, I much preferred *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff, God, the tragic lover.”

“Though, not as tragic as Shakespeare’s masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*.”

Mary-Beth climbed into the wagon and knelt down next to me. “I’ve only read it once. I was conning this gentleman outside Blackwater, years ago, and he had a library in his fancy house. I’d sneak in after he’d fallen asleep and read for hours. ‘For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo.’”

“My bounty is as boundless as the sea, My love as deep; the more I give to thee, The more I have, for both are infinite.” As I spoke, I saw Arthur turn his head slightly to look at me, his lips curling into a smile. Just as fast, he looked away and again tucked his hat down over his eyes.

Mary-Beth grinned. “Well, since you do seem to enjoy literature...maybe sometime I can let you read my works. Maybe.”

Tilly spoke up before I could answer. “Sweet Jesus, here they come.”

Uncle and Karen were meandering back to the wagon, arm in arm, sloppily singing a bawdy song, Ring Dang Doo. They were drunk. Clearly.

It seemed to take them hours to get to us. Uncle slapped his hands against the bench seat and hooted. “Damn it all, this place is a shit hole. I lost all my dang money.”

“Well, I found all your damn money!” Karen swayed unsteadily and giggled. “What y’all been doing?”



“Waitin’ on you, as always.” Arthur jumped over the side of the wagon and reached for me; he swung me down next to him. “Did you get anything?”

“Uncle’s money. Thought he’d lose a finger playin’ Five Finger Fillet, then beat him four times—four TIMES, Arthur—in aces and spades.” Karen sucked in a sharp breath. “Dutch’s train is coming from the Black Hills in the Dakotas. Somethin’ about healing waters and gold and shit.”

“Wonderful.” Arthur hoisted Uncle onto the bench; the old man almost toppled over face first into the horses. “Miss Tilly, if you’d be so kind to drive this lot back to the Overlook, I’d be mighty grateful.”

Tilly looked between me and Arthur. “You ain’t comin’?”

“No.”

“It’s a long walk back home from here.”

“Don’t you be worrying about distance, you just get back to Dutch and tell him about that train. I’m...uh...gonna...I have to make one more stop before I head back.” Arthur nudged me with his hip. “Come on.”

Tilly looked at me, pursing her lips into what was clearly a suppressed grin. “Are you staying or...coming, Lizzie?”

I said, “I’m staying.”

She snorted.

Karen swayed in the back of the wagon, giggling wildly. “You two have fun! Gonna be dark soon, might need to find lodging for the night.”

“Heeeey-ooooooooo!” Uncle flailed his arms through the air. He flopped backwards, tumbling half into the back of the wagon and nearly knocking Karen down.

Arthur groaned, pressing his hand to my elbow and pulling me away. “You all are nothin’ but trouble.”

None of them disagreed. Tilly and Arthur managed to get Uncle upright again and, after a few minutes of assuring Karen she wasn’t going to be crushed by him, the wagon drove off. Once it was well down the road, Arthur slid his arm around my waist. “What do you think?”

“About Valentine?” I curled in close to him. “Or the company?”

“You’re the best damned company there is.” He pressed his lips to my forehead and guided me down the boardwalk. “Come on, there’s just one more unpleasant chore to do for Dutch.”

We walked to a saloon, hazy with smoke and rank with the smell of stale alcohol and body odor. The sun was starting to descend in the sky, but it was just about as dim inside as it was out. We made our way around tables of men playing cards and around wobbly drunks, right

up to the bar. Two somewhat familiar men were standing at the end, throwing back shots and clearly trying to impress the two whores with them.

“Hey, Arthur!” The man with a skinny little mustache waved at Arthur. “Lemme buy you a drink.”

“Sure.” He cocked his head to them. “Lizabeth, this is Javier and Charles. Good friends of mine. You wait here, won’t take me but a moment.”

“Elizabeth.” Charles was stocky with solid looking biceps and long, black hair. A feather hung down from a braid near his ear and his eyes were so dark they were almost black. “You’re Arthur’s girl.”

It was a statement, not a question. I blushed. “Well...we’re acquainted.”

“No, you and I are acquainted.” He looked at me over his shot glass, and chuckled. “You and Arthur...well, I never seen him storm into camp and slug someone because of a woman before.”

I opened my mouth to respond to Charles, but at that moment, a loud and obnoxious voice started talking over us. “Aren’t you a pretty thing?”

I glanced to the side. A well dressed man in somewhat of a disarray—stained shirt, crooked cravat, missing a shoe—draped across the bar next to me. He walked his index and middle fingers across the top to me and tapped me on the arm. “Kinda skinny, but you’ll do.”

I edge closer to Charles. “I’ll pass.”

“Bet your thighs are nice and tight.”

“Hey.” Arthur stepped in front of me and straight-armed the drunk back a few steps. “She’s spoken for.”

“Yeah? By who—you?”

“Damn right by me.” He lowered his hand to the pistol at his hip. “Now, you’re gonna step away and leave her alone—or I’ll put a bullet in your head.”

The man straightened up, swaying unsteadily from one foot to the other. “Ya think so? Well, I don’t like your face. It’s mean. And ugly.”

Arthur yanked the pistol out of the holster; in an instant, Charles was at his side and forcing his arm back down. “Not here, my friend. And you—this lady’s with us. Get out of here.”

“Oh yeah? And who the fuck do you think you are?”

Javier was at Arthur’s other side, and said, “The Van der Linde gang. Ahora deja, bastardo.”

The man stared at the three of them and then waved his arm through the air. “I don’t know shit about no Van der Lindes. Go fuck yourselves.”

I bit my lip to hold in a giggle. The drunk looked so inconvenienced by them as he stumbled away. At the door to the saloon, he bounced off a man walking in, but just kept right on walking.

The bearded man slowed and then saw us at the bar. He raised his hand in greeting, turning on his heel and heading in our direction. “Hey, Arthur! I been looking for you assholes for almost twenty minutes.”

I must have looked bewildered. Charles leaned over and mumbled, “That’s Bill. He’s one of us.”

Halfway to us, Bill bumped into another man. It was barely a brush—he didn’t even wobble in his seat—but the patron leapt up to his feet so fast that the chair toppled over.

“Just who the FUCK do you think you are??” He shoved Bill backwards. “You ain’t welcome here and then you hit me?”

Bill shoved him back. “I didn’t hit you, you bastard, I bumped you. If you want to step outside—“

“The hell I do!” The man jumped on him, wildly swinging his arms in crazed, but ineffective, punches. He whooped out a war cry of sorts.

And everything went straight to shit.

The saloon exploded in chaos. Before anyone had a chance to react, a hulking beast of a man jumped on Javier, wrestling him straight to the floor. Arthur barked some kind of order and dove after him; at the same time, Charles grabbed me with both arms, picked me up, and dragged me around the bar.

“You stay put, Elizabeth.” He pushed me down, nudging me back against the wall. “Keep down and wait for Arthur.”

With that, he leapt over the side of the bar and disappeared.

I exchanged glances with the barman, a chubby, balding man with round spectacles. He covered his head with his hands and cursed. “I don’t ask for saints in this establishment, but I’m sick of these bastards breaking all my damn chairs!”

A body flipped over the edge of the bar, smashing into a shelf of whiskey bottles. Everything cascaded to the floor in a heap of drunkard, glass, and amber hued liquid.

The barman cursed again and shoved me aside, yanking a rifle out from underneath the bar. He pumped it into action. “That’s it, you get up and get the hell out of here! Enough! This ain’t water, it’s damn fine whiskey, and I’ll be damned if any of you lowlifes bleed me out of money!”

He’d barely finished speaking before he motioned at me with the gun. “You too, Miss, I’m sorry, but you came in with those bastards and you’ll go out with them too.”

As I stood up, I saw Arthur brawling with three men at once. He was breaking free from one man who jumped him, while simultaneously smashing a chair into the side of a behemoth. The attacker was huge: maybe a petite giant, with fists the size of my head. Or, at least it seemed.

But Arthur didn't even seem to flinch. He was timing his doges, grappling free if he got put in a chokehold, and slamming his fists into them like it was second nature. There was something oddly graceful about it, an odd ease to his fury and rage against the men who'd picked a fight with him.

I heard the musical shatter of glass. Someone threw a table at the saloon doors. The barman screamed like a maniac and launched across the bar. It was enough of a distraction for Arthur to slam his foot square in the giant's stomach. The man wobbled, his face turning bright red.

He fell.

"We've got this, Arthur!" Charles dashed by, ducking down and missing a punch from another patron. "You get her out of here!"

Javier tipped his hat to me. "Pleasure to meet you, pretty lady." That said, he jumped the fallen giant.

Arthur grabbed my hand, pulling me to him, and quickly pressed my palm to his mouth. "You okay, darlin?"

"I'm coiled steel, Arthur Morgan."

He laughed.

He wrapped his arm around me, hustling out the busted front door and out into the street. A crowd had gathered; with me in tow, he tucked his hat low and maneuvered through mud and people to the opposite side. No one seemed to notice—they were still too busy pulling Javier and Bill off the giant.

Arthur guided me down the boardwalk, chuckling softly. "I didn't intend for that to happen, darlin, wasn't supposed to turn into a fight. Some of these bastards just need a little more persuade'in than others."

"You're notorious around here."

"Maybe."

He slowed to a stop, his expression suddenly changing from cocky to nervous. "It's too dark to head back to the Overlook."

I nodded, leaning against him and resting my chin on his chest. "I agree, especially since I don't know the way."

"We could stay here."

I pursed my lips together in a coy smile and nodded, raising up on my tiptoes to kiss him. "I'd like that."

He slid his hand into mine and led me further down the street to the building Karen had gone into earlier. The hotel. My pulse thudded in my chest, thrills shooting across my low abdomen. No more flirting, no more saucy conversation and hungry kisses. I wanted him. And I wanted him to feel that same need; that same urgent desire.

He barely had the door open before the clerk was barking orders at us. "You ain't part of that ruckus out there, are ya? This is a place of business."

"No, sir, just need a room for the night." Arthur pulled me to the desk. "How much?"

The clerk glanced at me. "One room? Or two?"

"One."

"A dollar. Sign here." He again looked between us, cocking his eyebrow upward. "You don't need to use your real name, anything is fine. Just need a record."

"Sure." Arthur scribbled something in the hotel ledger, then tossed a crumpled greenback on the counter in exchange for a key. He didn't say anything else, he just pulled me to the stairs and upward.

Everything about the hotel creaked: the stairs, probably the entire foundation every time the wind blew. I could hear noises from the rooms we passed; loud moans, squealing bed frames, cursing and crying. The walls were paper thin. Anything going on in those rooms was fodder for anyone in hearing distance...maybe the whole damn town.

He abruptly stopped in front of a door and jammed the key in the lock. It swung open. The room was small. There was a strange smell coming from somewhere I couldn't quite put my finger on but, surprisingly, was lit by kerosene lamps. Just like the rest of Valentine, everything about it looked worn and used. The bed was sagging, the sheets yellowed and stained. Two broken chairs were leaning against a table and, in the corner, was a shoddy nightstand.

Arthur locked the door behind him.

I watched him cross the room, tossing his hat and tan jacket on the table. He sighed deeply. "It ain't a palace."

"It's not...terrible."

"It's not what you deserve."

He yanked off his boots and suddenly stood very still, staring at the empty, ash-filled fireplace. After a moment of uncomfortable silence, I walked behind him and circled my arms around his waist, resting my cheek on his muscular back. "Just what do you think I deserve?"

“Everything. Not a shitty hotel room with an old, ugly cuss who has too much blood on his hands. I...” he hesitated, then started again. “You deserve more than I can give you.”

I slid around him and wrapped his arms around my waist. “The only thing I want, I already have: a somewhat notorious, blue eyed outlaw who might be older than me, yes, but who I find handsome and absolutely intoxicating.”

His lips twitched up into a slight grin. “Intoxicatin', huh?”

I nodded, sliding my hands up his chest and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. “Mmm-hmmm. He tries to act mean and cranky, but he’s charming. And he’s got these broad shoulders and solid chest and this incredible smile...do you want me to keep going?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

I cupped his cheeks with my hands and pulled him into a kiss. It deepened right away; his arms tightened around me and he pulled me against him, cradling my body. His hands were everywhere, but not like he was pawing or fumbling. He was slow, sensual; exploring every curve and line of my body.

He moved his kisses to my throat, his lips hovering at a tender spot just below my ear. “I could touch you easier without all these damn clothes on.”

“Same goes for you.” I pulled his suspenders down and started unbuttoning his blue shirt. “I haven’t seen nearly as much of you as you’ve seen of me. And I want to see, Arthur, I do. Everything.”

He cupped my hips and pressed his body against mine. He groaned deep in his throat. “My sweet little tease.”

Hitching up my skirt, he fumbled with my drawers; shifting the fabric until he found the split in the cotton. His fingers trailed down my inner thigh, pressing the pads against my sensitive skin. “You like that, darlin?”

“Arthur....”

The table behind us scraped across the floor from the pressure of our bodies. He burst out laughing and scooped me into his arms, leading me to the bed. “I could make you feel so good tonight, darlin; so much better than you could even imagine.”

“Wait.” I unfastened the last buttons on his shirt, sliding it off his muscular shoulders. He’d left his gun belt and bandolier at the table; without them, his trousers hung crooked on his hips. If only he could see the man I saw: rugged, somewhat disheveled from the earlier fight; but strikingly handsome. The look in his eyes made my pulse race...heavy with desire, fixated on me.

He perched on the edge of the bed, balancing his powerful hands on his knees. “Take your clothes off for me.”

I slid my hands up to my blouse and started unfastening the small hook and eyes, then did the same to my corset cover. He was watching every movement I made, chewing on his bottom lip and his head cocked to the side. I was deliberately slow as I unbuttoned my skirt and petticoat, easing them down the floor, letting the yards of fabric pool at my ankles.

He sucked in a sharp breath.

Reaching behind me, I pulled on the corset ties until the length came loose; it was enough to loosen the stays so I could unhook the metal fasteners in the front. I felt heat reach my cheeks as I stripped the corset and split leg drawers off. The binding from the corset left weird, lined impressions in my skin.

If he noticed, he didn't seem to care. "Christ almighty...you're beautiful."

I pulled the pins out of my hair, shaking the braid loose so it cascaded down my back and shoulders. Every inch of my body was on fire; my pulse pounded in my ears and between my legs...fuck, if I stood here much longer, I was going to pass out. I felt the heat radiating from him; I could see the hunger in his blue eyes.

"You can touch me, Arthur."

His cheeks flushed and he chuckled. Reaching out, he cautiously trailed his fingertip down my sternum. "Oh, darlin, I'm gonna do so much more than just touch you."

He cupped my hips and pulled me to him, sweeping me onto the sheets and stretching out next to me. The bed that seemed so dirty before felt like silk and satin as I laid naked next to him, unbuttoning the wooden buttons of his union suit.

He traced the curve of my jaw with his fingertips and tilted it downward, kissing me. It was tantalizing: he'd brush his tongue against mine and draw in a sharp breath, but then pull away. He knew exactly what he was doing. Shit, I felt like I could feel the blood coursing through my veins. My body felt alive, passion and desire and sheer fucking lust like the sizzle of water on hot stone surged through every inch of me.

He murmured, "darlin" against my lips and then dipped his head down, kissing my collarbones and leaving sensually painful love bites on my shoulder and neck. His hands were at work just as much as his mouth, gently squeezing and sliding down my waist and hips. I drew in a sharp breath as he reached my breasts, his hands shaking slightly as he cupped them with his hands.

I trailed my hands down his soft, honey brown chest hair towards his navel. "Don't stop."

"I won't."

I couldn't see what he was doing, but after a beat, I felt his warm, wet mouth cover my nipple. His tongue circled it, flicked against it; then just as fast he nibbled with his teeth, switching between nibbling and sucking and licking. His other hand had slid to my opposite breast, kneading it and pinching my nipple between his forefinger and thumb. "Is that how you like it, darlin?"

I could barely breathe out my response. “God, yes.”

“Are you wet for me?” He slid his hand down my thighs, grazing his fingertips between my legs. I clamped my teeth down on my lip, trying to bite back a moan of pleasure. Arthur widened his eyes, pretending to look stunned. “Mmmm, darlin, you are.”

He pressed his forehead to mine and, as he did, he dipped his middle finger inside me. His eyes were locked on mine and, after he slid one finger in and out a few times, he dipped his index and ring fingers inside as well. “You feel like silk.”

His fingers felt insanely long inside me, reaching deeper and caressing me in ways no one ever had. He’d crook his fingers, he’d work them in and out. He adjusted his body against mine and pressed his face to my breasts again, kissing and sucking on my nipples while he finger fucked me. His thumb circled my clit; I gasped out in sheer delight. The combined feelings pulled me closer to the edge; I could feel the ecstasy building between my legs.

He must have felt it building from inside because he suddenly slowed down, again adjusting his hand and sliding his body upward. With his fingers still inside me, he started kissing my throat. “Do you like that, sweet girl, is this all for me?”

“Fuck yes.” I squirmed against his fingers, trying to get him to brush against my clit again. “You have me so close...please, please keep going.”

“I want to taste you.”

My brain couldn’t come up with a suitable response; I just nodded.

He scrambled down the bed and shrugged his union suit off his broad shoulders, pressing his hot flesh against mine. In that moment, he leaned over and buried his face between my thighs. I wasn’t immediately ready for it and gasped—the sudden pressure of his tongue against my clit was almost enough on its own to make me cum. My brain was screaming how fast amazing he felt but, somewhere, way past the brain numbing pleasure that made it hard to think, was a little voice reminding me just how fast we’d gotten to this point. The desire, the attraction was so intense; so palpable, that we couldn’t stop it.

And clearly neither of us wanted to.

He was teasing me with licking me, barely tapping his tongue across my clit, and then would move down further, sticking his tongue inside me and caressing my clit with his fingers. Or, he’d slide back up and lick me while he dipped his fingers back inside. It was...there were no words for it. I was sailing the stairs, my entire body was on fire for him and I couldn’t take it anymore. The first time he made me cum, I heard him moan in his throat with delight. He kept his fingers inside me, trailing soft kisses down my inner thighs. After a few seconds of letting me enjoy the feeling, he pulled out his fingers and started licking me again.

I moved slightly, reaching up and tugging union suit the rest of the way down his hips. He murmured something against me—I couldn’t quite hear him—and nodded his head. We fumbled around for a moment, getting into a better position, and while he kissed me between my legs, I ran my tongue down his length. His thighs were toned, his cock thick and longer



than I'd anticipated. I traced his length with the tip of my tongue and heard him groan; his grip on my thigh tightened. Without saying anything, I licked my way back up and took him all into my mouth. He'd established our rhythm and I mirrored it, running my tongue up and down, grazing his tender flesh with my teeth. It didn't take long to figure out what he liked—and what drove him close to the edge.

For several minutes, we pleasured each other. He made me cum two more times and then he pressed his face to my thigh, wrapping his arms around my legs. I caressed him with my tongue and with my hands; I could hear his breathing growing more rapid. His grip on my legs got tighter.

He gasped out in raspy, sensual pleasure. "Let me have you. All of you."

I nodded; he scrambled up the bed and pulled me into his arms. I'd never needed someone so desperately in my life; every inch of me craved him. He hesitated only long enough to yank his union suit off his legs and then was again at my side, searching out my lips with his. His fingers grazed my low abdomen.

"Arthur." I reached up and cradled his face with both hands. "I want you...I need you."

He nudged my legs further apart with his knee, then slid his hand between us; fumbling with himself until I felt the intoxicating pressure of his the head of his cock against me. He lowered his full weight down on me and, with one gentle thrust of his hips, pushed inside.

His kiss muffled my moan of pleasure. It took a moment for my body to adjust to his size and he seemed to hesitate, barely tipping his hips forward. It was dizzying: the way he filled me, the way his lips caressed mine and he stared, unwavering, in my eyes.

"M-more." I mumbled against his lips, sliding my foot up his leg and bracing it against his calf. "Fuck me."

He flashed his beautiful, lopsided smile, and then kissed me again; he thrust his hips against me. His eyelids fluttered, his blue eyes seemed to roll up in his head. "Oh, darlin."

I mirrored his rhythm, raising my hips and arching my back upward to get closer to him. His cock filled me, hitting me deeper than anyone had before. Each thrust felt better than the previous; I wanted him to touch me, to lick and kiss and do whatever he wanted. Every cell in my body was on fire; every beat of my heart seemed like it was in time with his.

"You feel like you were made for me, darlin." He trailed his kisses down my throat; at the same time dropping his hand to my nipple and rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. "So damn perfect."

I slid my hands into his hair, urging him back up to me. He peppered my mouth with kisses, moving his hand to cradle my face and, with the other, slipped beneath me to hold my ass and anchor me in place. Pleasure was building inside me again; I was losing myself in his hungry kiss, his soulful blue eyes. His lips curled up in a smile. "That's my girl."

“Arthur.” I whimpered against his lips; I arched my back as his cock pressed against a sensitive, pleasurable spot inside me. “Arthur, harder.”

“Oh, darlin.” He sucked in a sharp breath as I pulled my legs up higher, anchoring myself to him by crossing my ankles. “I’ll fuck you harder if you scream my name louder.”

I smiled against his kiss. “And all of Valentine will hear me.”

“That’s fine.” He smirked, his throaty growl turning me on even more. “Let them all know you’re mine.”

He slammed his hips into mine, his thrusts somewhat more urgent. Moving his hand from my cheek to my leg, he urged my knee forward towards my shoulder. The adjustment in position made his cock hit even deeper inside me; it was enough to push me over the edge. The orgasm caught me by surprise and I cried out his name louder than I’d anticipated. “Arthur!”

“I’ve wanted you since the moment I saw you on that train.” He groaned in his throat, touching his forehead to mine. “Promise me, ‘Lizbeth, promise you’ll only give it to me.”

His cock felt even harder than it had before; he was rapidly coming undone on top of me. I nuzzled my face against his and kissed him. “I promise, fuck, Arthur, I need you. Always.” I was dizzy with the euphoria of his body; his gaze. My words trembled off into a half moan, half whimper.

He slowed his thrusts, partially sliding his cock out of me. “Darlin, I ain’t gonna last much longer with you purring like that.”

I arched my back, trying to raise my hips to his. “Keep going...please...don’t stop.”

He chuckled, dipping his head back down to my neck and running his tongue across the sensitive love bite he’d left earlier. I shuddered with the pleasure his lapping tongue arched across my body. He tilted his hips forward, sliding into me just a little, then pulled back out.

I bit my lip, squirming underneath him in an attempt to get him to move his hips harder and deeper. “Don’t make me beg, Arthur Morgan.”

“I’ll never make you beg for anything, darlin.” He tangled his hands into my hair and dragged his lips across mine. “I’ll give you anything—everything—you could ever want. I swear.”

He pushed inside me again: this time his pace was faster, more frantic. I easily matched his and our bodies writhed together in sync, in perfect time; I felt like I was sailing the stars, drowning in the heat and passion and adoration that was my blue eyed outlaw.

His brow furrowed and he again pushed my leg up, hooking it over his shoulder. Pleasure was welling up inside me again, heightened by his low, throaty growl. “Fuck.”

His cock twitched inside me and he suddenly sucked in a sharp breath, his entire body at once clenching and stiffening. As he reached his climax, burying his face against my neck, the rush of his release sent me over the edge again. We shared our peak, our pleasure together.

After a few moments of comfortable, satiated silence, he slid off of me and rolled me to his side, so that he was looking in my eyes. Brushing my hair back from my forehead, he pressed his lips to mine and whispered, “My wild sassafras...I adore you.”

He wasn't going to say love. And he didn't have to; this didn't have to be love. It could be whatever he wanted—whatever we decided it was we had together. We barely knew each other, but the attraction, the insatiable desire, couldn't be denied. He didn't have to love me, but all I wanted—desperately—was for this moment, this feeling of sheer bliss wrapped in his arms, to stay with me forever. I cradled his face in my hands and nuzzled against him. “Not nearly as much as I adore you, handsome.”

His eyes lit up; he pulled me into his arms and held me tight against his body. “You are my everything, darlin. My absolute everything.”

# Never, Never

## Chapter Notes

I've had a super bad week, so this is kind of an angsty chapter. I'm so THRILLED that you guys are loving it!! So much more to come <3

When I woke up, he was gone.

I tried not to panic, sliding up in the bed and pressing the yellowed sheet to my chest. There was nothing in the room that even hinted a man had been in there: his gun belt, bandolier, hat, jacket, everything, was gone. My clothes and corset were on the floor where I'd left them.

I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to comb down the mess. There had to be a reasonable explanation for it...right? Because Arthur wasn't like that; he'd made love to me, he'd told me how much he adored me....it wasn't just a line. It couldn't have been.

But the truth was, I didn't actually know him. He'd warned me himself, several times: I ain't a good man. I don't do good things.

Panic rippled across my chest, making my heart skip out of cadence. I'd fallen asleep in his arms; I'd woken up at one point in the middle of the night and he was still there, his chest evenly rising and falling, his face pressed up against my shoulder. When did he leave? And, moreover, why?

I was mentally berating myself when the doorknob jiggled and the door swung open.

It was Arthur.

I exhaled a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "Hi."

"Mornin'." His cheeks reddened and he awkwardly set a brown paper wrapped package on my lap. "They were warm when I got them for ya...but...Dutch found me."

I unwrapped the paper. Inside were two small loaves of sweet bread, no longer warm, but still soft. I smiled shyly and handed him one of the loaves. "Did I get you in trouble?"

"Nah." He reached out and tenderly tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "But...I do have to leave."

I tore a piece of bread from the loaf and popped it in my mouth. He was somewhat standoffish, which was the exact opposite of how I'd expected him to act after last night.

"Okay."

“Plans are always changin.”

“You don’t owe me an explanation.”

He plucked his hat off his head, idly fussing with the rope tied around it. His honey brown hair was closely cropped on the sides and back and the top was left a bit longer, pomaded back from his forehead. I said, “You got your haircut.”

His cheeks again reddened and he nodded. “Yeah...I was startin to feel more like Marston than me.”

“I like it.”

He flashed his beautiful lopsided grin at me and then sucked in a sharp breath. “I’m gonna send you back to camp with Charles. You can stay in my tent...don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Hope not long but...”

I leaned over and put the bread on the nightstand, then scooted closer to him. “Are you okay?”

His eyes were focused on his hat and he nodded, but his gaze had turned distant. “It’s just trouble from Blackwater followin us. O’Driscolls still after Dutch, a kid from our group got himself tangled up with some bounty hunters. I guess I’d just hoped things would be different this time.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to him, so I stayed silent.

“Anyway,” he plopped his hat back on his head, “I trust Charles to get you settled back in camp, but then he’s got business to attend to...and...if you ain’t there when I get back, I’ll understand.”

My brow furrowed into a frown before I could stop myself from reacting. “Why...why would I be gone?”

“‘Cause,” he still didn’t look at me. “You’re too good to have happened to a man like me. This ain’t an easy life. The danger and the death and the blood...it gets tryin after awhile. And what it does to people...it...it just ain’t worth it. Not in the end.”

“Still,” I stood up and eased off the bed, trying to push away the hurt his words left in my heart, “I’m staying until you get tired of me.”

His hat was low over his eyes but even so, I could tell he was watching me dress. I was deliberately slow pulling up my silk stockings and drawers; even slower fastening my corset around my torso. He finally stood up and stepped behind me, urging my arms up so he could tighten the cording. His breath was hot against my skin as he spoke. “I’ll never get tired of you, darlin. Not as long as blood flows in my veins.”

He sounded sad and it bothered me, but he didn’t seem like he was in the mood to discuss it further. While I finished getting dressed, he packed up the sweet bread and ambled over to

the door. There apparently wasn't a lot of time, so I just quickly swept my hair to the side and tied it in a half braid.

His lips perked up into a smile. "So damn beautiful."

I blushed.

He slid his hand down my back, fixing it on my waist, and guided me down the corridor and to the staircase. Charles was waiting for us outside, leaning casually against the wooden balustrade. He nodded at me. "G'morning, Elizabeth."

"Hello." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Dutch and Javier slumped against the exterior wall. Dutch was closely watching me; he was wearing a black frockcoat with the collars flipped up, partially obscuring his face. Javier awkwardly waved at me.

Christ. They all clearly knew what had happened between me and Arthur last night. And it seemed like there was some kind of unspoken judgement—not because of him, but because of me. It was the same way Cora had watched me on the train: calculating, questioning. Scrutinizing.

I didn't like it.

Arthur kept his hand firm on my low back as Charles led us to his horse, a tall black and white creature anxiously pawing at the ground. Charles swung up first, scooting as far forward as the saddle would let him. He turned his head away from us, like he was studying something in the far distance that gripped his attention.

Arthur trailed his fingers across my jawline, and then cupped my face in his calloused hand. "I'll be back when I can."

"I know."

He pulled me to him, quickly brushing his lips across mine, and then hoisted me up onto the horse's back. I wrapped my arms around Charles' broad chest and looked back at Arthur.

He smiled, but the expression didn't reach his eyes. "You take care of her, Charles."

"I will Arthur."

And without giving me a chance to say goodbye, Arthur slapped the backside of the horse and we were off. Just like that—no explanation, no words, no feelings. Just gone.

"Jesus Christ." I mumbled against Charles' back.

"Are you okay, Elizabeth?"

I cringed. I hadn't meant for him to hear me grumbling and the situation wasn't necessarily something I wanted to chat about. "Just...um...overwhelmed."

He didn't respond right away. Once we were on the outskirts of Valentine, he slowed the horse down to an easy trot. "Arthur cares about you."

"Oh." I wasn't sure how to respond to that, he cares about me? That was mild. Bland. And it was a hell of a lot colder than his previous declaration that I was "Arthur's girl."

"He asked me to take you back to camp and keep an eye out for you. Or," he hesitated. "Take you wherever you want to go. Stage coach, train station, shipyard. He said he'd pay your passage if you want to leave."

My heart was skipping beats again, popping in and out of cadence like a phonograph record skipping on a scratch. I didn't want to ask, but I had to know. "Does he want me to leave?"

"He wants you to stay."

"Well, that's what I want, too. As long as you'll have me, I don't plan on going anywhere."

"Good."

I waited a few moments and when he didn't say anything further, I asked, "Did I do something wrong?"

"You mean because of leaving Valentine like this?" He didn't wait for a response. "No. Dutch's plans, they change. And when he gets something on his mind, he wants it done right away. Arthur wasn't happy when we found him in the general store this morning and Dutch told him what he wanted him to do. He said he was otherwise occupied, but Dutch wouldn't listen."

"I thought he was mad at me."

"Arthur? Mad at you?" Charles chuckled. "Hell, no. He was worried what you'd say when he told you he had to go. He made me swear that I'd keep an eye on you and keep you safe until he got back."

"How long will he be gone?"

"I'm not sure. We never know. I just know what my part of the plan is and what's expected of me. That's how Dutch likes things done; Arthur usually enforces it."

"Usually?"

"Things just feel different. I don't know, I try to keep to myself most of the time...but I think Blackwater was a crack. A crack we can't fix."

I adjusted my arms around him. It seemed forward, but, apparently that was how I was being these days. It wasn't the same as holding Arthur though...and something about that hurt. "Is it because of me?"

"Absolutely not." Charles fell silent again, but then abruptly said, "Don't let this change the way you feel about him. It's out of his hands. Arthur is loyal...maybe to a fault. He does

anything Dutch says. Most times, he does it without even hesitating, but today...today he gave Dutch hell. Leaving you—sending you back here without him—put him in a damn rage.”

My lips perked up in a smile. That was kind of thrilling.

Charles was quiet for most of the ride, but he suddenly spoke up as we rode along side railroad tracks. “He thinks he doesn’t deserve you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re not like the women we run with; you’re softer. More innocent. Arthur takes his past very, very seriously and the things he’s done...they’re not good things. I don’t think that he believes that you’d want to be with him. I mean, hell, it’s only been a few damn days.”

It made me uncomfortable. “The last thing I am, Charles, is innocent.”

He didn’t respond and I was glad. We rode through the woods a bit until the horse started trotting up a slight incline. A voice, hidden from sight, called out from some where in the trees, “Name yourself or meet God, rider, I’ll shoot ya dead.”

“It’s me, Bill.” Charles didn’t even slow the horse. “Charles and Elizabeth.”

“Shit, the little kitten came back?”

Charles maneuvered the horse to a small clearing with the other horses and easily swung down to the ground. He reached up, steadying me by the waist as I climbed down after him. I could smell lunch before I could see it: an odd, fishy smell with an extremely heavy odor of thyme. Oh boy.

“Just in time for...” Charles thought for a minute. “I’ll say lunch, but don’t hold me to that. It might be a bold statement.”

I laughed, falling into step beside him as he walked to the heart of camp. “You’ll be comfortable in Arthur’s tent tonight?”

“I’ll be fine. Everyone seems so worried that I’m going to fall apart, but I assure you. I can fall asleep anywhere.”

Charles started laughing; we walked into camp together laughing and smiling—and everyone immediately noticed.

Of course. Damn it.

“What’d ya’ll do with Arthur?” Karen cocked her eyebrow up and was clearly teasing, but it was annoying nonetheless. “Kinda funny seeing you without him, Lizzie.”

“Dutch had some things for Arthur to do. Important business in Strawberry; didn’t give him much of a choice.” Charles shrugged and pulled two bowls from the stack by the fire. He filled them with a curiously hued stew. “He asked me to bring Elizabeth back here.”



Mary-Beth sighed dreamily. I half expected her to pull out her journal. “That man fancies you, Lizzie.”

I reluctantly took a soup bowl from Charles and sat down on a log with the other women; he drifted off to sit with Pearson and Uncle. Miss Grimshaw wasn't there but, after a few moments of me avoiding eating, Molly walked past the fire, clearly making a beeline for Dutch's tent.

Tilly raised up her hand in a small wave. “Did'ya want to join us, Molly? We got plenty of room here. It's nice to socialize.”

Molly looked like a frightened rabbit. She slowed down, looking at the campfire and the logs we sat on, but then quickly looked back toward Dutch's wall tent. “I'll join ye in a bit. I have a few things to do for Dutchy.”

The other women—Abigail Roberts included—rolled their eyes and snickered as she walked away. Mary-Beth whispered, “She ain't coming back out. She never does.”

“She was yapping to me just the other day on how much she loves Dutch, how it's real love.” Tilly shook her head. “I asked if she was planning on helping me with the wash and you'd think I asked her to shave off all her hair and make a blanket out of it. I ain't seen her move that fast in 'bout a month.”

The girls howled with laughter. Karen abruptly stopped and pointed her spoon at my throat. “Did Arthur leave that on your neck? A little...sex bite?”

My cheeks—probably my entire head—turned bright red and I swooped my braid over my shoulder, trying to cover the marks. Most were on my shoulder and collarbone....but apparently he'd sucked at my throat a little too hard. “Ummm....bed....bugs. Fleas, likely.”

Abigail rolled her eyes. “We already know you bedded him, for Christ's sake, it's easier just to admit it. He ain't a married man or something.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes and I tried to will them away, but it only drugged up more, bitter memories. That house—that goddamned house—was so close to ours that I could have seen her from my bedroom window. Everyone else had seen, apparently, so when it was all over with, there were no more secrets to hide. If only I'd said something, made some kind of effort, none of it would have happened. I had to live with that.

“Well I, for one, am glad he's pining for Elizabeth.” Tilly stirred her soup, crumbling another piece of cornbread into it. “Maybe that damned woman will finally go away.”

My stomach fluttered in my body, almost as if the ground had been taken out from underneath me. “What woman?”

“Mary Linton. God, she's like a plague from the Bible or something. I half expect it to start rainin frogs or rivers to turn into blood when she's around.” Karen craned her neck around to see Charles better. “If you see him, you tell him he's damn lucky we didn't just burn her letter.”

“Wait.” My head was throbbing. “She sent a letter?”

Mary-Beth spoke up, her voice soft. “You don’t need to worry about Mary, Lizzie, she’s just a ghost from the past.”

“She’s more than a ghost.” Abigail broke in. “She was his life. And for whatever reason, she always shows up at the most...inconvenient time.”

“Did I wrong you in some other life, Abigail?” I narrowed my eyes at her. “After the day I’ve had, the last thing I want is to hear about some old girlfriend.”

“Nah, she wasn’t his girlfriend. She was his fiancé.”

I slammed the soup bowl down on the log next me to and stood up. “Excuse me. I think I’ll go find a nice place to be alone and drown myself.”

I didn’t even care what they thought anymore. This was not supposed to be like this—I kept thinking that more and more—and especially now after I’d given myself to Arthur like I had. Everything was fast: our attraction, the buildup of desire and the ultimate culmination of a passionate night in Valentine and yet, here I was. He was gone. Some woman was after him. And apparently, in Abigail Roberts opinion, I was nothing more than a laughing stock to the whole camp.

“Shit.” I kicked my foot at a bush, accomplishing nothing more than losing my balance and toppling over. I sank down to my knees, hoping I was far enough away from the camp that they hadn’t seen. I was a fool. I’d known that since the first moment I lost myself in his big blue eyes, but I’d thought, maybe, it was worth the risk.

“Elizabeth?”

Abigail. The tears that threatened to spill finally did, trickling in rivulets down my cheeks. “Did you walk over here just to mock me more? I’ll spare you the effort: I know I’m an idiot.”

“You ain’t an idiot.” She crept forward and sank down beside me. I couldn’t see her expression. She said, “I’m sorry for the way I acted.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t deserve it.”

“It was just,” she sighed, picking a tall stalk of wild wheat from the ground and then tossing it aside. “When you got here, I heard John say that you were the most beautiful woman he ever seen. I...uh...I wanted that to be me. Not you; not some rich girl Arthur plucked off a train because she caught his eye.”

I wiped my sleeve across my eyes, blotting away the tears. “I can assure you, I didn’t come all the way out here to steal John Marston from you. I came because of...”

Well, I didn’t have to say it. Everyone knew why I was here.

She didn't say anything for a moment. She plucked another stalk of wheat and idly picked at it. "Arthur Morgan is a complicated man."

"Apparently."

"Did you sleep with him?"

I lolled my head to the side to glare at her. "Really, Abigail, this again? Because—"

"No, I ain't making fun. Listen, I came to this gang a nickel whore. I shared myself with everyone, till I fell in love with John, but never Arthur."

"Are you looking for a medal or something?"

She actually laughed. "No, look, what I'm sayin is that Arthur is many things. Deep down, he's a good man. He's trustworthy and loyal and honest, but one thing he ain't is affectionate. He's...he's broken."

I stared at her.

"I ain't one to pry into a man's business and I only know what I know because John told me. But Arthur..." she hesitated. "He had a family once. A good woman and a son, but they... they died. Horrifically. And he didn't let himself love a woman again until Mary. She broke him. They were going to get married and then, after her damn parents told her she was better than him, she decided she was and left him. And he was devastated. He blamed himself, he did, because it was over the life he leads and the things he does. She wanted him to choose between us—his family—and her. He couldn't leave the life. None of them can."

I swallowed hard. It broke my heart to think about what he'd been through...losing a son? Losing one woman and being rejected by another? He'd seemed so confident and bold. The man who took my hand on the train was not the same man who'd sent me away in Valentine. Maybe this was why.

"He never lets a woman get close to him. Ever. He doesn't chase skirts and he doesn't buy whores, so, when he was all sweet and forward with you...well." She reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Don't give up on him. I know he's scared; he's terrified to open himself up to someone again because...well...he's afraid to love you because he's afraid to lose you."

It only made me cry harder. Abigail scooted closer and threw her arms around my shoulders, hugging me fiercely. "It ain't an easy life, Elizabeth, but you'll never meet a more loyal man than Arthur. Definitely not John, so you dodged a bullet on him."

I looked at her and she started laughing. "Well, it's true. He's gettin better but Lord help him, he ran off and left us all for a year. A year, Elizabeth, and I damn near shot him when he came crawling back. I probably would have too, if Hosea and Arthur hadn't talked me down. They're like brothers, John and Arthur; grew up together. Hosea and Dutch took 'em in when they were young. Kids, really, I think Arthur was only fifteen. John younger, they were both

street rats and hooligans, but Dutch saw more. Potential I guess. John sure did sweet talk me.”

She hugged me again and pulled me to my feet. “Come on, I’ve talked your ear off long enough. Let’s go back. Uncle and Pearson will be drunk soon and you need a good laugh.”

“Abigail.” I sucked in a deep breath. “Thank you...just for caring enough to say something.”

“I kinda like you. It’s nice to have another woman around, ‘specially one who is real and honest.” She giggled. “And hot headed. Did’ya ever think you’d be running with a gang of sinners and no goods? That’s what we are. Every last one of us.”

I burst out laughing. “I can honestly say no. I turn twenty-one in four days and, I’d always thought, by this point I’d either be married and shut up in some fancy Washington house or committed to a sanitarium. The sanitarium was more appealing.”

“Your birthday’s in four days? Well, shit, we need a good time around here. Let’s plan a party!”

“Um...no, really, that’s okay.”

“Nope, my mind’s made up. You should know by now if you fight me, I’ll win.” She draped her arm over my shoulders and led me back to camp. “Girls—girls listen to this! We got a party to plan! Our very own Elizabeth has her birthday comin up!”

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We sat up around the campfire, laughing and joking until I was so tired I could barely see straight. Of course there’d be a party and of course we were all going to have fun. Whether I liked it or not.

Molly never joined us.

When I finally made my way back to Arthur’s tent, bleary eyed and unsteady, I sank down onto his cot and sighed deeply. I saw the letter on his table, the fancy cursive writing of his name clearly written by a feminine hand. I wanted to pick it up and throw it in the fire. God damn it all, why couldn’t anything be easy? And if it came down to it and he let his heart override his brain, who would he pick? Me? Or the woman he’d been prepared to marry before? What if he still wanted to marry Mary?

Marry Mary. Jesus Christ, I wanted to slam my hand repeatedly in a drawer.

I unlaced my corset and boots, shivering in the crisp night air, and crept over to the trunk at the foot of his cot. Pushing back the lid, I pulled out a white cotton shirt. The thought of sleeping in his shirt, in his cot, made me feel a little better. Closer to him, almost. And I wondered...was he thinking about me? Was he worried? Part of me wished we’d just left Valentine with the others the day before. As wonderful as our night together had been and how good he’d made me feel...the thought that it had sabotaged our relationship just made me cringe.

Relationship. I snorted. We didn't have an actual relationship: we had desire and attraction and sex so hot, I was surprised the floorboards hadn't caught on fire. But that didn't mean it was love.

As I went to close the trunk, my eyes landed on his journal. I knew I had no business looking at it and it was a damn breech of his trust going through his things....but I picked it up anyway. It wasn't a tome of his feelings or anything like that; it was incredible, detailed artwork. He'd drawn flowers and horses, bridges and strange houses in hillsides. Everything was neatly captioned in his handwriting. It was the things he'd seen, a collection of his wonderment and things he wanted to remember.

And when I got to the last completed page, I nearly dropped the book. It was a drawing of an eye, framed by dark, silky looking lashes, and beneath a cocked up eyebrow. At the bottom of the page, he'd written: Her name is Elizabeth. Her eyes are green, her smile makes my breath catch in my throat. She's beautiful.

I snapped the journal shut and put it back in his trunk, covering it back up with the white shirt. I'd sleep in my dress again. It was fine.

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I laid in his cot, my face pressed to his pillow. I was falling in love with him. And there was absolutely no guarantee that he would ever love me back.

# Here to Stay

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The next day was overcast and dreary, which was fine because it matched my foul mood perfectly. Miss Grimshaw decided that, as I was clearly more than just a guest, it was time for me to pitch in with the chores. And a lot of damn chores there were: washing and mending and cleaning dishes and looking for firewood and making never ending lists of things we needed and lists of lists we needed to make. I wasn't entirely sure she expected me to be any good at work, but I was more than just a good shot. I knew how to sew. I knew how to wash clothes. I just was too easily distracted to make lists.

Once the morning work was done, it was time to start the afternoon work: lunch, looking after the horses; a nearly fifteen minute whispered speech from Karen on how unfair it was that we worked our fingers to the bone while Molly sat like a doll in Dutch's tent. I realized that even in the gang, there was a social hierarchy like back in Washington. Most of the women were all on the same level, except for Sadie who went out with the men because she had a self described mean streak; and Abigail, since she and John were almost-sort-of-kind-of-currently together. And then Molly, who was at the top of the food chain. She apparently got to play by different rules.

I spent the rest of the day helping Abigail with Jack. He was stubborn and precocious—I wasn't sure if he got it more from Abigail or John, but he was the perfect combination of the two of them. When he'd gone off to collect sticks, Abigail confided that some of the other girls didn't believe John was Jack's father. I told her they must be blind.

It was good to have Abigail. She was determined; had hopes and dreams. And that woman had the bawdiest, most scandalous sense of humor I'd ever heard.

The first day bled into the second day, and the second into the third; the only difference seemed to be that the roster of men in camp kept changing. Dutch, Uncle, and Pearson didn't seem to leave often, but the others came and went constantly. Arthur still hadn't come back or checked in—and when Charles and John meandered back into camp without him, I started to panic.

“He's fine, sweetheart, I was with him yesterday. We ran into some O'Driscolls and had a little—” His voice cut off as Abigail elbowed him in the ribs, cocking her head at Jack. “We had a social call. It got a little nasty, but he's fine. Grumpy and mean, but fine. Neither of you fine ladies have asked how I am and, I'll tell ya, I'm a little hurt by that.”

Abigail and I exchanged a look; I rolled my eyes. She said, “We could smell ya coming John, we didn't have to see you. I know I told ya to stop trying to attract ladies all the time, but I didn't mean for you to start attracting flies.”

“Buy ya a bath in Valentine, my lady.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t hardly wait.”

I stood up from my perch on their cot and edged outside. “I think I’ve had as much fun as I can stand in one day. I’m gonna turn in.”

“You don’t have to leave, really.” John winked. “There’s plenty of room here on my left while I’ve got Abigail on my—ow, why’d you hit me, woman!?”

“Damn it, John Marston! She ain’t interested in ending her day covered in your grime!” Abigail swatted at him again and then gave me a quick hug. “Tomorrow’s your birthday. Wait until you see what me an’ the girls have planned.”

“Your birthday?” John pepped up, draping his arm casually over Abigail’s shoulders. “I know ways we can celebrate.”

“Give me your gun, John. I’m gonna shoot you.”

“For gods sake, woman, I may not be the sharpest knife in the sheath, but I damn well know better than to go sniffin around a woman Arthur Morgan has laid claim to.” John grasped my hand in his and shook it very politely. “Pleasant evening, lovely Miss Lizzie.”

“Night John.” I giggled. “If you’re not at breakfast in the morning, I’ll know why.”

Abigail hugged me again and I turned away, walking down the little expanse of open grass that was like a street leading to Arthur’s tent. The fucking letter was still staring me down every time I moved, but I was somewhat able to push it from my mind by burying my face in Arthur’s coat. Or, by putting things on top of it.

I was flat out exhausted from the days work. My feet felt swollen and bruised inside my boots and I smelled like I’d been carrying raw onions under my arms for about a week. Gross. I stripped down and held my arms up for a minute, unsuccessfully trying to air myself out, and then crouched beside Arthur’s chest. This time ignoring the journal, I pulled his white shirt out of the trunk; it was warmer tonight and I was sick of sleeping in my corset. It was too big on me—the sleeves were past my hands and the bottom partway down my thigh—but the worn fabric was soft against my skin. With it on me, I saw it was actually white with thin, gray stripes...something about it made me smile. He seemed to like stripes: his blue shirt was striped, too.

After I extinguished the candle, I settled down in his cot and pressed my face to his pillow. The past few days had been nice being with the girls and, to an extent, Charles and John. These women were some of the most honest, loving people I’d ever met. They all welcomed me with open arms—

—all because of Arthur. And without him, no matter how long I stayed here, it would never be home.

In the dark, with my eyes now somewhat adjusted, I could make out his face in the photograph of him, Hosea, and Dutch. I trailed my finger down the side of the daguerreotype. “Wherever you are, I hope you’re still safe.”

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I awoke to screams.

It wasn't the kind of panicked screams of terror; it was wails. Devastated, guttural sobs. A female voice—I thought it was Karen—was crying out over and over, repeating a name in rapid succession: “Sean, no. No no no no no not Sean.”

I hoisted myself up onto my elbows and then upright. It was still dark out, which meant I probably hadn't been asleep terribly long. I wasn't sure if it was my place to go to her; I could hear the murmurs of other people with her. Still, I considered Karen a friend. I had to at least check, or else I'd never get back to sleep.

I shuffled over to the table and fumbled with a box of matches. It took a few strikes, but I was able to light the candle—and immediately realized I couldn't go traipsing about camp wearing just Arthur's shirt.

As I leaned over to pick up my skirt, I saw the tent flaps move; there was a deliberate pause.

And Arthur walked in.

I bolted upright, staring at him for a moment...by brain couldn't actually believe it was him.

His cheeks reddened. “My darlin.”

I crossed the distance to him in two, easy strides and threw myself into his arms. I didn't want to let him go; I wanted to keep my arms around his broad shoulders, my head tucked against his chest, and just have time stop like that. “You had me worried, cowboy. I won't lie.”

He tightened his hold around me. Planting a kiss on the top of my head, he said, “It was a bad one, darlin, I ain't gonna lie neither. I...I had to kill a lot of men. Good men. Just doin their jobs—and all because of Micah. They was gonna hang him and I should have let 'em. I break him out, the law shows up...just more killin.”

I slid my hands to his face, gently cradling his bristly cheeks. He looked tired. Defeated. I said, “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine. Better now that I got you in my arms.” He dipped his head down and kissed me, expertly deepening it and lapping his tongue against mine. Just as quickly, though, he pulled away. “I gotta go out again, though. Sean's in trouble. First Micah, now Sean; our troubles just keep followin us. And they gonna take Sean to federal prison and hang him.”

Well, now it made sense. “That's why Karen's upset.”

“She loves that boy. I don't know why the hell she puts up with him.” He hesitated, his eyes searching mine. “I'm sorry...about the way I acted in Valentine. Charles said you were worried you did something wrong. It ain't you, darlin, it's me. I was upset with Dutch and—“



I pressed my fingertips to his lips and shook my head. “You do what you have to do and come back to me. I’ll be here. Unless Miss Grimshaw gets tired of my inability to hang wet clothes to her standards. Then, Lord knows she’ll have me out on my own, sleeping with the horses or worse.”

He burst out laughing and then kissed me again; it was urgent, longing. He ended the kiss with a sensual smack. “Don’t you go thinkin I didn’t notice you wearing my shirt.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind too much.”

He chuckled, sliding his hand down to my thigh and urging my leg up to his waist; he held me in place. “Hope you’ll wear it for me when I get back.”

“Only if you promise to help take it off when you’re done looking.” I pursed my lips together coyly. “Unless you’d like me to keep it on.”

“I never get tired of looking at you, darlin.” His hand slid up the bare skin of my thigh, the rough, calloused skin sending a ripple of shivers down my spine. “But I do very much enough taking clothes off that sweet, tight body of yours.”

I trailed my hands up his chest, letting my fingertips push underneath his shirt fabric. “Sure you can’t stay a little longer?”

He pulled me tight against him, groaning low in his throat. “I want to, sweetheart—god I want to—but I gotta ride like hell. Javier’s waiting for me. And if I start somethin with you, you know I ain’t gonna leave until I finish it.”

I stood up on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, nuzzling my face against his. His beard tickled my cheeks. “You stay safe and come back to me.”

He reached around me, gripping the backs of my thighs, and hoisted me up into his arms; I wrapped my legs around his hips to steady myself. “I’ll always come back to you. Long as you’ll have me.”

There was deep sadness in his eyes, a nervous lilt to his voice. I ignored it, flashing what I hoped was a dazzling smile, and dipped my head down to kiss him. It was thick with desire and need, his grip tightened around my body. I sucked his bottom lip into my mouth and gently nibbled on the tender flesh. “You better go before I won’t let you.”

He chuckled, gently easing me to the ground. After a moment, he cupped the side of my face with his hand and gently caressed my cheek with his thumb. “I don’t deserve you.”

“You do. You deserve to be happy, too.”

He pulled me into a tight hug and gently pressed his lips to the top of my head. “I’ll be back when I can, darlin. I...uh...I promise.”

My cheeks flushed; I was glad my face was tucked against his chest. For a split second, I thought he was going to say love. But, it didn’t matter—it didn’t change the way I felt about him.

He kissed my lips again. And then he was gone.

It was hard to get back to sleep.

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Luckily, I heard the shriek before the four-year-catapulted his body across the tent and onto me. “Happy birthday, Aunt Lizzie! Wake up wake up wake up wake up!”

I heard Abigail laughing outside the tent. “Jack wanted to be the first to tell ya.”

“Well, thank you, Jack my friend.” I tousled his hair. “What exciting adventures do we have planned today?”

“Washing.” Miss Grimshaw stepped halfway into the tent. “It may be your special day, ‘Aunt Lizzie’ but we have a lot to do this morning if you want to have a party tonight. Now, get on up and over to Pearson. He’s got breakfast for you and if you make him wait much longer, he’s going have to beat someone back with a chunk of wood.”

She reached out for Jack to follow her and he did, flashing me his sweetest smile. “I heard Uncle Arthur was here last night.”

“For a few minutes, yes.”

“Do you love him?”

“That’s enough, Jack.” Abigail swept him out of the tent and then smirked at me. “See? Everyone can tell.”

I rolled my eyes. My lips perked up in a smile and it was hard to get rid of. I hated my birthday. Every year, it was miserable—but this time, it appeared, it might be...well...maybe not all that bad.

Once I was dressed, I walked out of Arthur’s tent and over to Pearson’s wagon. He was wearing a jaunty top hat, with an oversized brown sweater pulled over his usual rumpled coat. “There she is, happy birthday, Elizabeth! Got a special treat for you this morning—I can’t take all the credit, as Charles and Javier were instrumental in getting me ingredients—but for you: a rose among a bunch of thorns.”

He presented me with a dish of sweet smelling mush. I looked closer: it was apple dumplings. “Oh, thank you! That’s so sweet!” I walked around the table and gave him a quick hug. And he blushed—probably all the way to the top of his head. “I’ll be sure to thank them when they’re back.”

With my bowl tight in my hands, I walked over to the campfire. It was strangely deserted, except for one person: Hosea. He was puffing on a cigar and holding a blue covered book. As I sat down, he smiled at me. “I hear birthday wishes are in order.”

“Abigail really spread the word, didn’t she?”

“It’s not often we get an excuse for a celebration. They’re all mighty happy.” He closed the book, keeping his finger between the pages as a marker. “Dare I ask how old you are?”

I took a quick bite of the apple dumpling. It was delicious, soft and warm; the apples were mushy and cooked to perfection. I hated crunchy baked apples. “Twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one, Christ, I don’t even remember being twenty-one.” He crossed his leg over his opposite knee and grinned at me. “I remember Arthur at twenty-one. John was only eleven then and, my god, how those two fought. Arthur called him his little ‘leech.’ The boy damn well clung to him like moss on a tree; there were times I was just waiting for Arthur to punch him right in the face.”

“Did he ever?”

“No, they fought like demons those two, but they depended on each other much, much more.” Hosea sighed. “They’re still like that. Arthur really laid into him after John’s little disappearance recently. I’m not sure if it was hurt or anger, but he was very expressive in how upset he was.”

I laughed. “So...Abigail told me you raised them? You and Dutch?”

“We took them in and taught them. Arthur was this fourteen year old kid living on the street, in trouble and in and out of jail. His mother died when he was little and his father...well, his father wasn’t a good man. Arthur tried stealing a horse from us, but instead of getting mad, Dutch took him under his wing. And, with him, we put together our little operation. Best damn shot I’ve ever seen.”

“He saved my life.”

“From what he says, you saved his too.” He peered at me, his eyebrow cocked up. “He’s never brought a woman back from a train robbery. Peculiar, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“It was a...peculiar situation.”

“Arthur told me you shot your sister’s fiancé.”

“I don’t particular care for him. He’s a society man, a politician, and enjoys society things: questionable business practices, whores, buying votes in congress. I think he hits my sister but I don’t have any proof.” I sucked in a breath, tapping my thumb against the spoon. “And I think—no, I know—if I’d made it to New York with them, it wouldn’t have long before he bedded me against my will and turned me into one of those broken down, dull eyed women all over the city.”

Hosea was studying me. He was mostly expressionless, but, I already knew him well enough to know the gears in his mind were turning. He said, “Is that why you learned to shoot?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, I learned to shoot in boarding school. When I was thirteen until I was fifteen, I went to school outside of London. We learned all the normal finishing school nonsense: French, Latin, dance, etiquette, housewifery, which fork goes where on the table, that kind of

thing. But they also take the art of the hunt very seriously. So, “I had to hold back a smile; god, I’d loved those days. “We learned riding and shooting, mostly with old muskets, but we had time with pistols too. Then, when I spent time with my Pa, he immediately informed me that no daughter of his was going to shoot like a prissy socialite, so he taught me what he’d learned in the Army. Bayonet and all, there I was, sixteen and in a silk dress, stabbing flour sacks with a bayonet and spitting tobacco juice on the ground. My mother would have had a fit.”

He laughed; his expression stayed pleasant, but I could tell there was something still heavy on his mind. “And what if they come looking for you? Your mother and stepfather? You weren’t kidnapped, obviously, but that doesn’t mean it wouldn’t be their propaganda.”

“The last thing I want is to be with them. I want nothing to do with Washington or any of that society bullshit again. I know what those people value in life,” I hesitated. “And it’s not me.”

“So, you’d rather stay with Arthur.”

“Yes—wait, what?” My cheeks burned and I looked down at the bowl in my hands. “I mean, as long as you all don’t mind me being here...I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“Well, my dear, trouble is usually what we’re all in.” He chuckled, then leaned over, resting his elbows on his knees. “Arthur is practically my son. I’ve watched him grow up; I’ve watched him have his heart crushed. Broken. And I’ve seen him close himself off to any emotion or feeling or longing when it comes to a woman. What I haven’t seen, is him look at someone the way he looks at you.”

I looked up at him. “What do you...”

He held up his hands. “Arthur’s a grown man. He’s makes his own decisions and I don’t go around prying into the matters of his heart; that said, I know Mary Linton was here. And I know what she’s after. I just want you to be sure—absolutely sure—you understand what you’re getting into here. You can’t fall in love with the man and not be affected by his choice of profession. That’s what Mary did. And when she decided to make him choose between her and the life...well, it broke his heart. He told me he’d never set himself up for that rejection again.”

I swallowed hard. “Not even God himself could change the way I feel about Arthur.”

Hosea pursed his lips together, clearly biting back a smile. He said, “I may not be able to promise you much in the way of a comfortable, easy life, but I can guarantee if you are loyal to Arthur, then Dutch’s Boys will be loyal to you. And when these men are loyal? There’s no one out there who could ever hurt a hair on your head.”

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Birthday or not, it was still another busy day of chores and work and generally just trying to distract Jack enough that he didn’t wander off into the woods or set something on fire. Karen and Miss Grimshaw insisted on teaching me ‘Ring Dang Doo’ and ‘Nine Inch Will Please A Lady’.

Finally, after we'd all laughed so hard that my face hurt, Miss Grimshaw clapped her hands together and, "off to the river, now, ladies. Wash up before the party."

I cocked my eyebrow up. "Can't we just wash here with the basin?"

"We damned well earned this!" Karen bound her hair up high on her head. "Down to the river and enjoy a proper bath."

"I can honestly say I've never heard 'river' and 'proper bath' in the same sentence. I'm new at this, Karen, remember. I thought that spider this morning was a frog."

She rested her head on her hip. "And ya know, I ain't seen Charles look that bewildered before. I don't think someone has asked him to shoot a spider before."

"That wasn't just a spider, Karen. You could have put a saddle on it."

She howled with laughter.

Mary-Beth and Abigail brought over some blankets for us to dry off with; as we got ready to leave, John came over, slinging his gun over his shoulder. "You ladies ready?"

I glanced at Abigail. "Um...I don't think you're invited, Johnny old boy. But good effort."

"As much as I'd enjoy that," he glanced at Abigail, too, "I'm comin' along to keep you ladies safe."

"I thought we had Sadie for that."

"Unfortunately, Sadie can't look in all directions at once." Sadie was armed to the teeth, with two pistols in a double holster and a rifle slung over her back. I hadn't met a woman before who wore trousers like she did, but it seemed to fit her personality better than any dress. She was tough. She was active and a dress would have just slowed her down.

Abigail said, "He won't be watching, Lizzie, I make him turn around. Still...somehow...even when he ain't lookin', he still manages to see. I don't understand it. He's some kinda mutant."

John chuckled. "Gifted. I'm gifted."

Tilly and Miss Grimshaw stayed behind with Jack and the rest of the group (Molly, of course, didn't even respond when we asked if she wanted to join us). We headed across the valley to a wide river, with muddy shores and water so clear I could see the fish swimming around near the middle.

And as far as I could see, it was deserted. For now, at least.

The other women didn't seem to care about stripping down and splashing into the water. I was less excited, spending as much time as I could pinning my hair up on my head. Arthur seeing me naked was one thing—but this whole group of women I considered to be friends was just....not something I'd done before.

Karen whistled. “Come on, Lizzie, you ain’t got nothing we haven’t seen. Just take it all off and and jump in.”

From behind me, his back still turned, John mumbled, “I can help ya if you want.”

“I’m fine.” I stood up and awkwardly undressed, leaving my clothes in a neat pile, and crept to the bank. The water was freezing cold—I wasn’t about to flop in like some kind of fish and I didn’t want to run back to the shore like a child, so I just waded in: muttering a string of curses the entire time.

Mary-Beth handed me a fat bar of soap. “You plan on wearing a corset like that now that you ain’t so proper? What a bother.”

“I’m used to it.” I scrubbed my underarms and chest. “Besides, my clothes won’t fit without it.”

“I knew a girl when I was working a cathouse in Rhodes.” Abigail held out her arm to me so I could balance while I washed my feet. “She wore her corset so damn tight—tighter than you, Lizzie—and men paid her extra to see her tiny little waist and fuck her while she wore that corset. Well. She ended up getting pregnant and that poor child was born with a big ole stain on his face, cause he was pressed up right against her bowels. I seen him. Poor thing looked like he fell in mud.”

Through her laughter, Karen nudged me. “Lizzie, I ain’t trying to stick my nose where it don’t belong, but you gonna explain those love marks on your shoulders? They’re fading so they ain’t scars. And they sure as hell don’t look like bug bites.”

“Birthmarks.”

Abigail splashed Karen. “You leave her alone. You know she ain’t gonna tell ya.”

“She tell you?”

“Well no.” Abigail fluttered her eyelashes innocently. “But I can figure out what they are... and who put them there.”

My cheeks flushed; I quickly lathered up my hands and washed my face. “We all know who put them there, come on now. And if you can all figure out the circumstances surrounding it, well, see I don’t have to tell you. You already know!”

They laughed and the subject, thankfully, was dropped. The cold water felt refreshing and made my sore, angry feet feel better. Once we’d finished, Karen kept watch so Sadie could bathe, and Abigail, Mary-Beth and I scrambled up the shore to warm up in the blankets.

John still had his back turned. “If any of you ladies require assistance...”

“We can help each other, John, thank you.” Abigail rubbed her legs with the blanket to better dry off. “Washing in the river ain’t so bad, huh? We didn’t lose ya downstream like we did with Molly once. I was willing to let her keep floating, but she managed to snag on a log and Dutch fished her out.”

“Before I say this, I just want you both to know I ain’t trying to sound catty.” Mary-Beth took a deep breath. “Molly likes to think of herself as high class. We aren’t, none of us, except you, Lizzie. And she’s avoiding you like the plague.”

I shrugged, wrapping my corset around me and fastening the steel closures. “She doesn’t seem like the friendly sort.”

“She ain’t.” Mary-Beth leaned forward, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Dutch’s last girl, Annabelle, now we loved her. She was sweet and kind. She love singing. But that damned Colm O’Driscoll killed her. Something inside Dutch died with her; he ain’t been the same since. If you ask me, Dutch picked up Molly just because he didn’t want to be alone.”

Abigail nodded knowingly. “And long before Annabelle, he was involved with Miss Grimshaw. She’d sit on his lap while he played poker and she knew John and Arthur long before any of us did. She says she lost her looks and that’s why Dutch moved on; that’s why she’s so angry at us all the time. But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“No,” Mary-Beth giggled. “It sounds like something we’d hear from Bill when he’s drunk. Damned fool.”

As I was fastening up my blouse, Abigail grabbed my wrists. “Girl, I love you dearly, but you gotta stop buttoning that damn shirt all the way up to your chin. We know you ain’t severe, so why dress like you are? Here, like this. It’s much more flattering.”

She unfastened my blouse to just below my collarbones, yanking the fabric back to that it hung comfortably open. It did feel a little freer and a little scandalous. I liked it immediately.

When John saw it, he nodded in approval but didn’t say anything—and I didn’t think that Abigail saw.

We made it back to camp faster than it took us to walk to the river, mainly because it was starting to get dark. John called out to the guard posted at the base of the hill—Lenny tonight—and we picked our way through the dark undergrowth: hopping over sticks and trying not to get caught in brambles.

When I saw the area around the campfire, I audibly gasped. They’d decorated the entire camp with paper lanterns and streamers made from strips of fabric. The area around the campfire was blazing with light and music, with big bunches of flowers and vines decorating around the log seats.

Uncle practically threw himself off the log. “Happy birthday, Lizzie-girl!”

“Oh my gosh.” I turned and stared at Abigail. “This is wonderful—you all didn’t have to go to all this trouble, just for me.”

“We wanted to!” She hugged me tightly. “Dinner is stew, as always, but we’ve got beer and fancy little cake things Hosea got in Saint Denis, and chocolate and, of course, music!”

Javier played a little riff on his guitar. “Feliz cumpleaños, mi amor.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes, but I was smiling. No one had every done something this nice for me. Not when I was a child, not as a society girl, not as a congressman's daughter. "Thank you doesn't even seem like it's enough."

Miss Grimshaw didn't even insist we do the dishes once dinner was finished. They set right into music and dancing: I danced a waltz with Hosea, some kind of strange little jog with Pearson, Charles, and Uncle, and a half reel, half...something, with Sadie. Beers were flowing, Javier passed around a bottle of tequila—and that's when I started getting dizzy.

So, it didn't even faze me when John sauntered up to me. He held out his hand. "Mind if I have this dance?"

After Abigail nodded and literally pushed me off the log, I let John lead me out to the makeshift dance floor. The song Javier was plucking out was fast and neither of us knew any actual type of dance that went along with it, so we ended up with something kind of like a fast waltz. Even Miss Grimshaw was dancing with Pearson; it was the best thing I'd seen in camp.

John was laughing. "I thought you learned to dance in finishing school."

"Reels and waltzes and all kinds of ridiculous dances to be done in the round." I giggled, a little tipsy from the beer and shots of Javier's tequila. "I never liked it. They only force big group dances like that because they think it stops people from running off and having sex in dark hallways."

He chuckled. "Does it?"

"God no."

Jack suddenly threw himself at us, pulling my hand out of John's. "It's my turn, Aunt Lizzie, come on, I wanna dance it with ya!"

"Cut down by my own son." John shook his head, then tipped his hat to the little boy. "As you wish, good sir."

The music was still a little fast to be a waltz, but I curtsied low to him and reached out my hands. "Certainly, young Master Marston."

He giggled, taking my hands in his and kind of shuffling, hopping in a circle. "I don't know any fancy dances, Aunt Lizzie. My momma didn't go to school like you."

It broke my heart. "I'll tell you two secrets, Jack. But only if you promise not to tell."

He nodded seriously.

"First, I didn't learn anything in those fancy schools that your momma didn't already know. And second," I pretended to glance around. "Dancing is nothing more than moving your feet and acting like you know what you're doing. As long as you go the same direction as everyone else, no one knows the difference."



“Really?”

“Well, sure. I don’t know what dance we’re dancing, but we’re doing it awfully well. Don’t you think?”

He grinned. “My pa is jealous.”

“He doesn’t know our secrets.” I adjusted his hands, putting one on my hip and holding one out to our side. “Here, this is an easy one. It’s called the waltz. Just keep counting to three—and every time you say a new number, you move your feet; in a square, like this. One, two, three. One two three. Perfect, see? You know more than you let on.”

He was concentrating so hard, with his little tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth. The music was waaaaay faster than a waltz, but he was absolutely delighted.

I squatted down so he could ‘spin’ me. “You are a very fine dancer, Mr. Marston, I’m quite impressed. I think you’re more advanced for more than just a waltz.”

He giggled. “You’re so silly.”

“Dancing is a pretty silly thing. I have to agree.”

Javier picked up the tempo of the song he was playing. I showed Jack how to dosey-doe and we took turns with Hosea, Mary-Beth, Dutch, and Molly, skipping and twirling around the make-shift dance floor. The other girls were singing, laughing, and clapping; John and Charles were laughing. We were all terrible. We knew it—and that made it all the more fun.

We took a few more (literal) spins around the dance floor. Javier slowed down the tempo—which was good, because I was getting dizzy—and moved into a song I somewhat recognized as Spanish Ladies. And then, as he Jack was leading me back in another direction, a figure stepped up behind him.

Arthur Morgan leaned down, plopping his hat on Jack’s head. “You wouldn’t mind if I cut in and dance with this pretty lady, would you Mr. Marston?”

Jack giggled. “Noooooo. I’m thirsty, anyway.”

“You go back to your momma.” Arthur opened his arms to me; I was against him in a heartbeat. He held me close to him, quickly pressing his lips to my forehead. “I ain’t a good dancer, darlin.”

“Neither am I, so we’re evenly matched.” My eyes were locked in his gaze right away; I smiled shyly at him. “You make up for it by being extremely good at...other things.”

He chuckled and slid his hand around mine, holding it firm in his grasp as he gently spun me. “Well, I enjoy doin’...other things with you.”

He pulled me back into his arms; like with Jack, the movement was a kind of quick, waltz and not terribly in time with the music. I didn’t care. Those blue eyes, that lopsided grin. He was so fucking handsome and he didn’t see it at all; yet, still, every time he looked at me with

that intensity, I felt myself losing more of my heart to him. I shouldn't, and I knew I shouldn't...but I needed him. Like I needed sunshine or oxygen or water or to be as far away from Washington as I could possibly be—I needed to be with Arthur Morgan.

I heard Karen squealing; over Arthur's shoulder, I saw her run into the arms of a skinny man with long, shaggy red hair. "You're everyone's hero tonight."

"Hero? Naw." He dipped me backwards, his eyes flicking down my throat and chest. "Just following our code and doing what I have'ta do."

"I washed a lot of clothes. Sewed some pants; oh, I knocked over a bunch of stacked wood and then attended a lecture, led by Kieran, on how to properly restack wood. I feel like I'm equal parts helping and making a mess. Like a plague of too skinny, too short, locusts."

He again pulled me tight to him, gently running his knuckles down my cheek. "You don't have to do anything here, if you don't want. You're my girl."

Even in the dim light, I could see his cheeks redden. He muttered, "I mean, if you want to be my—"

I touched my fingertips to his lips; he kissed them gently. I said, "I like helping. Miss Grimshaw is never giving me an axe again, but I'm completely allowed to sew, and wash, and clean."

He chuckled.

The music abruptly stopped. Dutch jumped up on top of one of the logs and held his hands up for attention. "Tonight, my friends, we celebrate doubly! The twenty-first birthday of our very own Elizabeth Dorsey, and the successful return of Sean Maguire. It's been hard since we left Blackwater. I won't deny that. But tonight, let's celebrate this step to our future! Our future, people, our freedom."

Everyone cheered, some whooped and whistled. Javier started playing the guitar again and the festivities seemed to launch at a whole new level. Arthur draped his arm across my shoulders, pulling me close. "Twenty-one, my wild sassafrass...what am I gonna do with ya?"

"I have a list."

He burst out laughing, his eyes twinkling in the light glowing from the paper lanterns. Trailing his fingertip down the exposed skin revealed by my somewhat unbuttoned blouse, he said, "Well, darlin, you get your list an' we'll work our way down. Down the list. Down you."

"Hey, Arthur!" John motioned at us with two bottles of beer. "Come get one before Uncle drinks 'em all!"

He guided me forward, leading me to a spot with John, Abigail, Jack, and Tilly. Arthur cracked open his beer and did the same for mine; he handed it to me. "Damn fine drink, my

friend.”

“Well, there was tequila.” Abigail snickered. “But John drank it all.”

John pretended to look stunned. “The hell I did, woman! Lizzie here drank as much as me. You were there.”

I took a quick drink of my beer and shook my head. “I don’t remember any of that.”

“Arthur, don’t you go fallin for those pretty emerald eyes.” John pointed at me with his beer bottle. “Javier taught her to swear in Spanish.”

Abigail elbowed him in the ribs. “And she taught him to cuss in French. We’re all kinds of cultured here tonight, Arthur, swearing and drinkin and dancin!”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter anymore; I almost doubled over. “Tilly nearly had Kieran convinced that tequila was used to leech the color out of clothes.”

“And I still think it will!” She laughed so hard she snorted. “Y’all know what that shit’s doing to your insides? Please. I’ll stick to beer an whiskey. And bourbon. And gin.”

The drinks flowed and the laughter got louder. And the singing got dirtier and more bawdy; at one point, even Arthur was singing along with one called “Charlotte the Harlot”

Way down on the prairie where cow plot is thick,  
Where women are women and cowpokes cum quick;  
There lived pretty Charlotte, the girl we adore  
The pride of the prairie, the cowpunchers whore.

She’s dirty, she’s vulgar, she spits in the street,  
Why whenever you see here, she’s always in heat.  
She lay fur a dollar, take less or take more,  
The pride of the prairie, the cowpunchers whore.

One day in the canyon, no pants on her quim,  
A rattlesnake saw her and flung himself in,  
Charlotte the harlot gave cowboys the frights,  
The only vagina that rattles and bites.

One day on the prairie, while riding along,  
My seat in the saddle, the reins on my dong,  
Who should I meet but the girl I adore  
The pride of the prairie, the cowpunchers whore.

I got off my pony, I reached for her crack,  
The damn thing was rattling and biting me back  
I took out my pistol; I aimed for its head  
I missed the damn rattler and shot her instead.

Her funeral procession was forty miles long,  
With a chorus of cowpunchers singing this song:  
“Here lies a young maiden who never kept score  
The pride of the prairie, the cowpunchers whore.”

They got worse after that.

But eventually everything started to slow down. Javier was playing the guitar, Jack was falling asleep in Abigail’s arms; Molly was sitting alone by the fire, quietly singing Molly Malone to herself.

In Dublin's fair city,  
Where the girls are so pretty,  
I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone,  
As she wheeled her wheel-barrow,  
Through streets broad and narrow,  
Crying, “Cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh!”

"Alive, alive, oh,  
Alive, alive, oh,"  
Crying "Cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh”.

She was a fishmonger  
But sure 'twas no wonder  
For so were her father and mother before  
And they each wheel'd their barrow  
Through streets broad and narrow  
Crying "Cockles and mussels alive, alive oh!”

She died of a fever,  
And no one could save her,  
And that was the end of sweet Molly Malone.  
But her ghost wheels her barrow,  
Through streets broad and narrow,  
Crying, "Cockles and mussels, alive, alive, oh!”

I’d watched Karen and Sean flirting and fooling around nonstop, eventually stumbling off to his tent behind where Arthur and I sat. Now they were both sobbing.

Arthur leaned close and pulled my hand into his. “Wanna take a walk?”

“Sure.”

He laced his fingers around mine and pulled me to my feet. We edged around the campfire and away from the noise of camp, swaying comfortably against each other as we walked. The night had turned cool; away from the fire I shivered.

Arthur pulled me close, tightly holding me against him. He said, “I got you somethin.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I wanted to and I was in Valentine anyway. Made sense.” He led me over to where he’d hitched his horse. “If you wanna ride with me, you gotta be able to ride.”

Hitched next to his horse was the beautiful roan we’d looked at in Valentine. I stared at the horse for several moments, looking at the bridle, blanket, and saddle, and then threw my arms around Arthur’s shoulders. “You’re too good to me. Thank you so, so much.”

“I’m just hoping that...you know, it’ll convince you to stay.”

I pressed my hands to his cheeks, gently caressing his skin with my thumbs. He was inherently sweet, not just a cold hearted murderer like he claimed he was. The light of the moon was enough that I could see his eyes, the hope, the innocence, that he’d just laid himself emotionally bare in front of me. I pressed my lips to his. “I don’t need any convincing. I’ll follow you wherever you want to go—no matter what.”

He tightened his arms around me, hugging me close, and softly kissed my lips. It was sensual yet teasing, his tongue playing against mine, his lips patient. When he spoke, his voice was a delicious, low growl, “Ride with me tonight, then; lets find a place to get lost in the wild.”

I kissed him again, smiling against his lips. “I’ll ride with you always.”

## Chapter End Notes

Love ya guys!! Your comments make me so happy!!! :) I take no credit for the songs in this chapter--the titles and lyrics are all real songs from the 19th century.

# Take Me

## Chapter Notes

Possible T/W: suicide

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

We rode across fields and across plank bridges suspended over trickling streams. The moon was bright and the night was as clear as glass; the roan was quick and spunky, matching pace with Arthur's horse with no problem. I had no clue where we were going. I was still tipsy from the alcohol but I trusted Arthur.

When he rode in front of me, it was all too easy to lose myself in him. His broad, strong shoulders, the way he rode with one hand on the reins and the other relaxed at his side. Every now and again I'd hear him murmuring to the horse. He'd pat her flank, he'd murmur sweet, kind things to the animal. There was so much kindness in him, so much love. The things he'd done as one of Dutch's Boys...it didn't seem like it meshed together. In other ways, it made complete sense—it had to, and it seemed like he loved harder in part because he knew how bad things could be.

He finally slowed the horse down to a trot and waited for me to guide the roan beside him. "You okay, my lady?"

"Lost, as usual, but fine. I've missed riding. In Washington," I hesitated. I didn't want to sound like I was complaining. "We had to take carriages all the time. And I wasn't allowed to go out by myself."

"You one of those suffragettes? Marching around and demanding rights." He grinned at me in the moonlight. "You're a scrappy girl. I could see you do' in that."

"I know some suffragettes but I never went to a rally. When we were teenagers, my sister was nearly arrested during a march on one of Washington City's taverns. Down with King Alcohol, vote temperance!" I laughed. "I couldn't even say it with a straight face, so they left me in the wagon."

"And now you're running with outlaws."

"Just sinning again."

He chuckled. Maneuvering the horse a little further, he slowed down to a stop and swung to the ground. "This seems far enough."

In the moonlight, I could see scrubby bushes and trees dotted along a wide, sweeping valley. In the distance, I thought I could just see the rise of tall, flat topped mountains. "Looks like..."

okay, I'm joking, I have no clue what it looks like. I have no idea where we are."

He reached out his arms to help me down from my horse. "Me neither."

I must have made a face because he burst out laughing. "I mean, I know we're in the Heartlands. Probably near the Overflow. I wasn't looking for a specific place, just a good place. You want me to set up the tent or you want to sleep under the stars?"

"You ready to sleep already, old man?"

He chuckled and lunged for me, wrapping his arms tight around my body. "That sweet little mouth could be do'in better things than sassing me."

"Mmmm? Something you want, handsome?"

He buried his face against my neck, trailing kisses up to my ear. His bristly, days old beard tickled my skin and I giggled. He started to unbutton my blouse and said, "You acting all sweet and innocent only makes me want ya more, darlin'."

"Don't I look innocent?"

He pulled my shirt open completely and set to work unfastening my corset. In the light of the moon, I could see his soft lips spread into a smile. "Absolutely not."

In between rushed, playful kisses, we took each other's clothes off. It was just starting to sprinkle fine raindrops and I shivered, trailing my nails down his arms. "What if someone sees us?"

"That's part of the fun, my wild sassafras." He caught my hands as I went to pull off my blouse. "Naw, leave it on for now."

I raised my eyebrows. "Just what did you have in mind?"

He pulled me against him, his cock hard against me, and shuffled me backwards until I bumped into a tree. Sliding his hands down my hips, he slid them down to my thighs and hoisted me up into his arms. "Somethin like this."

"Arthur!" I draped my legs around his hips and grabbed his shoulders, holding him tight. "I trust you...just try not to drop me."

He kissed me, tantalizing this time. "I ain't gonna drop ya, my lady. Gonna make ya feel good...very good..."

His fingertips slid down my inner thigh, lightly brushing against my core. I bit my lip and whimpered, it only made my pulse pound harder. "Don't tease me."

"But I like teasin' ya. Touching...and lickin..." He caught my hand in his and slid it between us, urging me to touch his cock. And when I complied, lightly dragging my nails down his sensitive length, he growled in his throat. "I want to take my time with you...explore every inch of your body. I want you to milk every last drop of my seed outta me."

“Then fuck me. I need you...I need to feel you inside me...”

He braced me against the tree, supporting my weight with his hip and arms, and then lined the head of his cock up with my slit. He slid in slowly, his mouth hovering against mine, until our hips were touching. His entire body was still; he just stood here, his cock deep inside me, and held me against the tree. It was erotic; I couldn't even breathe. My hips ached to push against him, to feel him sliding in and out...but he had me pinned in place.

“Arthur.” I gasped out his name, clamping my hands around his back. “You can't do this to me.”

He chuckled lightly, slowly rocking his hips back and forth, teasing, tormenting. “I don't want this feeling to end, darlin, of all the pleasures in life, you're the damn best.”

“Then show me.”

His lips spread into a smile and he kissed me, deep and sensual; his tongue light against mine. Bracing me against the tree, he shifted his weight from one hip to the other and settled into an intoxicating rhythm. He cradled my cheek with one hand, tilting my face towards him so he could better seal his lips over mine. My breath felt like it was trapped in my throat; the way I was pressed up against the tree, my legs anchored around him, and the swirling, dizzying effects of the beer and tequila, I felt like every inch of my body was sizzling. I tightened my arms around him, matching my rhythm to his. We stared into each other's eyes as we made love—awkwardly, clumsily—and I started to feel like my soul was sailing. I felt like my body and my soul were a kaleidoscope: swirling and twisting and waltzing with his.

And he'd been right about leaving the shirt on: I could feel the bark pressing through the fabric, but it wasn't ripping into my skin like it would have if I'd been completely naked.

He made soft groans in his throat as he slammed his hips into mine, the deeper he thrust, the louder he sounded. For a moment, he broke the kiss and snaked his long fingers into my hair, playfully tugging on it. “I been thinking about you these last days...needing ya.”

His rhythm had slowed; I arched my back to try and get closer to him, to get his cock in deeper again. “I was in your bed just waiting for you.”

“Did you touch yourself when you thought about me?”

“My fingers don't feel nearly as good as yours.”

He kissed me again, hungrily, the passion between us so overflowing that I barely felt the drops of rain on my skin. Trailing his mouth down my neck, he murmured, “I wanna try somethin.”

“As long as it involves fucking me, I'm all in.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me away from the tree, patiently waiting while I planted my feet on the ground. His voice was a low growl. “You ride me, darlin.”



In response, I pulled me blouse off and sank to the ground; he followed in an instant. I pressed my hand to his chest and guided him down, then scrambled on top of him. His hands clamped onto my hips almost immediately, urging me to the right spot. I slipped my hand between my legs and grasped his length, lining it up to my slit. I didn't even have the patience to tease him; I lowed myself down, sliding him into my body.

The difference in angle was like to smack right to the face; he touched parts of me that had never been touched. I heard him gasp; cursing low. "Shit, darlin, you are the most gorgeous creature I ever seen. Sit up...let me touch you."

I did what his said; the way he commanded me with his voice, his hips, only turned me on more. I dug my knees into the dirt, holding onto him with my thighs, and rocked up and down. His hands slid up my hips and my abdomen, up to my breasts. The feeling was so welcome: the way he cradled them, kneaded them; just brushing his fingertips against my nipples. Every tantalizing touch made me whimper, the pleasure building inside me.

His hands worked their way back to my hips and he guided me against him, moving my body in time with his. He'd hold me in place for agonizing, tension building moments; crushing his hips to mine—his cock pressing against my most sensitive spot—until I was crying out his name, begging him not to stop.

"My girl." He slid his hands up my back and pulled me forward until my breasts dangled over his face. He pressed his mouth against my flesh, drawing my nipple into his mouth and rolling it, nibbling lightly; his other hand working the other side with equal tensivity. And then he was kissing me again, his arms wrapped around me, his hand curved over my ass. I knew he was getting close—I could feel it in his thrusts, taste it in the urgency of his kiss. He moaned low. "Oh, my darlin."

"Arthur, I lo...." i clamped my mouth shut. I wasn't going to say it; I wasn't going to ruin what we had by blurting it out. Shaking my head lightly, I pressed my lips to his. "Don't stop. Keep going...I need you."

"I need you more." He smiled against my lips. I felt the cold kiss of rain across my back, but still in his arms, locked in his embrace, I was hot. Sweat wetted his forehead; he held me close, gently cradling my face in his hands. "Everything good in my life is right here: you. This...fuck, this...there ain't words for this."

I nuzzled my face against his. He slid his hands back down to my hips, somewhat hastening his rhythm. He cursed low, the groan in his throat betraying what had been composure. He clamped one hand at my low back and one at my neck, holding me in place as his thrusts grew frantic, then erratic. His body tightened and he cursed again; his breath caught in his throat and I felt his release, deep and warm inside me.

His chest was heaving. He gently pressed his lips to my forehead and hugged me close. "I never made love in the rain before."

"Me either."

He set up the tent up quickly and pushed me inside, tumbling in after me. The bedroll was a little damp, but once he'd wrapped us up in the quilt and pulled me close, I didn't notice it. He trailed kisses down my neck and shoulder. "I can't get close enough to you."

"There's no such thing as too close, trust me." I snaked my hand to his face and gently caressed his cheek. "I feel safest when I'm with you."

"You got nothing to worry about when you're with me, darlin. I'd die before I let anything happen to ya."

I snuggled close to him, enveloped in his arms, and just enjoyed the feeling of his skin against mine. The rain pitter-pattered against the canvas tent. In the distance, thunder rumbled like a far off train echoing through the mountains.

And then, Arthur said, "I know you know about Mary."

Shit.

I said, "Umm..." Which I realized, as I said it, wasn't a particularly brilliant response.

"John told me about the letter."

I made a noncommittal noise in my throat. We were naked in his tent, my thighs still wet from his release. I didn't want to talk about Mary. I still wanted to pretend she didn't exist.

"I made a lot of mistakes in my life. She's prolly one of them, 'least the way I was with her. We was gonna get married. She...uh, begged me to change. To leave Dutch and Hosea and all them behind me, well, I couldn't do that."

"Arthur, you don't—"

"Look at me." He waited until I rolled over in his arms to face him, then tethered me close to his body, his hand resting on my low back. "I need to be honest with you. Not just now, but always; I'm never gonna lie to you about anything."

I swallowed hard. Nodded.

"So, she left me. Went off and found herself a respectable man and got married. I didn't hear from her for a few years and then...out of nowhere, she found me. Started writing me all these letters, beggin me to meet her outside of Valentine to 'talk about things.' I went once. Turned out to be just another list of things she wanted me to do for her. And because I'm a fool, I helped her. Helped her corral her little brother. Brought him to her and, again, she left me." He chuckled, but it was bitter. "Cause I'm a damn fool."

He drew in a sharp breath. I stayed quiet, my head tucked beneath his chin and my hands resting lazily against his chest.

"And now another letter shows up. I ain't surprised. Found it under a book in my tent; don't know how it got covered up like that."

“Must have been Hosea.”

He chuckled, bringing my hand to his mouth and gently pressing his lips to my palm. “You’re lucky I lo....that I...uh....anyway, I took that letter and I tossed it in the fire. Don’t care what it says.”

“What if she needs something?” I blurted it out without actually thinking; I didn’t care what she’d do if she needed help and Arthur wasn’t there. She could throw herself in the river.

“Oh, I’m sure she does. But she’ll have to get it from someone else.” He touched his hand to my cheek, gently trailing his fingertips across my flesh. “You mad?”

“Of course not. I could never be mad at you because of your past.”

“My past is awful bloody, darlin.”

“So is mine.”

He didn’t say anything, his fingers just slowly trailing across my collarbones. I cleared my throat nervously, squeezing my eyes shut—which was pointless, because he couldn’t see them anyway. “While we’re being honest...if I tell you something, will you promise you won’t change how you feel about me?”

“There ain’t anything in this world that would change the way I feel about you.”

I exhaled deeply and pulled his hand into mine, lacing my fingers through his, as if it would somehow steady my brain. Nothing made me more ashamed than what I was going to tell him. “After I left my pa in Prescott and went back to Washington, I was very briefly involved with an older...married man. He was in Congress, he made a lot of empty promises. We never were...intimate, but came close. Kisses, touches, pretty thoughts we knew wouldn’t come true. And it was fun, for awhile. And when it wasn’t...I introduced him to my sister.”

“The lady on the train?”

“No, that was Cora. My other sister.” I sucked in a sharp breath. “Emily. She was ten months younger than me, she was ‘a happy accident’ according to my mother. And she was perfect in every way possible: big blue eyes, curly blonde hair. She looked like a cherubim, whereas Cora and I have stick straight dark hair and green eyes and look...average. I was seventeen and she and I competed over everything. Who had the prettier dress, who could get the most names on a dance card, who had the smaller waist. I thought that my relationship—if you could it that—with Barton was just fun. A dalliance. I didn’t take it seriously and just moved on to some Army Captain, whose name I don’t even remember. But Emily took it seriously. I didn’t know how seriously until later on, after it was all over with. After everything came out.”

He remained silent.

“Apparently Barton rented a house just down the street from the congressional halls and it was solely to fuck her. He made pretty promises to her, too, that he was in a loveless

relationship. Once the children were grown, he'd leave his wife. They could be together. But, until then, they had to hide their relationship in carriages and rented houses and locked rooms at parties. And everybody on that fucking street saw it happen—they knew who the tall, fucking gentleman was because everybody in Washington knew him. They knew that the pretty little blonde girl was the senator from New York's youngest daughter. No one ever said a goddamned word. Then...then things changed. She was sad all the time. Moody. She'd say things like she wanted to die or that she often wondered what death felt like. I didn't pay attention to it. I was too self absorbed and convinced it was just another ploy of hers for attention. She always had to be the center of attention. My mother wanted to cheer her up so they bought her all these new dresses and new furniture for her rooms...and she got to pick the color to paint the walls." I shook my head lightly. Even now, I could still see it like it was happening. The way she'd been standing in the middle of her empty room, just staring out the window. "I told her she was a spoiled brat. That...that maybe we really would be better off without her because we wouldn't have to put up with her crying all the time. She never answered. Later that evening, we attended a party. Just a stupid garden party with champagne and laughter and stupidity. It started to rain so we all ran inside; the music was playing, I was dancing and drinking. That's when I heard someone scream. When I looked across the dance floor, all I saw was blood. Just...this flowing ocean of blood and it was so...dark. It melded into this odd, swirl over blue silk and satin and...and..."

My voice cracked, I tried to fight back tears but they trickled down my cheeks anyway. Arthur's arms tightened around me.

"And it was Emily. She'd fallen on the floor and at first I thought she tripped, maybe hit her head or bit her tongue. When I ran over to her, I realized the blood was just...pouring out of her mouth. She was bleeding or vomiting it, I don't know. And she looked up at me, with these empty, emotionless blue eyes, and said, 'I may as well tell you. I have done what I said I'd do; I drank Paris Green.' It was the paint color she'd picked out: it was all the rage until they realized it was killing people. It was full of arsenic...and that's what she took. Barton had moved on to someone else. Cora guessed that she may have been pregnant and when he heard, he moved on to another stupid, innocent girl. And I...I felt that it was my fault. I'd seen that hurt in her eyes and just dismissed it. I told her we'd be better off without her."

He didn't say anything for several moments, just gently stroking my hair back from my face. Finally, he said, "What happened to him?"

"Absolutely nothing. He admitted to everything. But she'd killed herself, no court would convict him. He ended up quietly divorcing his wife anyway and took up house with another woman. It turned out that his wife was having an affair behind his back too. Apparently in Washington's eyes, it's okay for a man to have a mistress who kills herself, but God forbid a married woman take a lover. I was long gone by then. I just left. I went back to Prescott...and then my Pa killed himself too. I couldn't save anyone. And I can't forgive myself for that, not for losing my sister and not for letting down my Pa."

He pressed his forehead to mine, then gently trailed his lips down my cheeks to kiss away my tears. We laid together without speaking for what seemed like ages, the only sound in the tent the noise of the rain against the canvas. I distracted myself with the feeling of his soft chest hair and his strong, ridiculously firm chest beneath. And then he said, "Sometimes..."

sometimes I think it's the wrong choices that push us forward more than the right ones. I've made mistakes, lots of 'em, and I have spent most of my life on the wrong side of the law. I had a son, once. Got his momma pregnant when we were just young and dumb. I saw 'em every now and then, didn't do much as a father to the boy. He was a good boy, though, would have been a good man. Then one day, I went back...and they were dead. Killed over the money she had in the house, all of ten dollars. It changed me. Made me angrier. Mary bled out all the care I thought I had left in my heart. Before you, I...um...it had been a long time since I was with a woman. I figured, if I didn't fall in love, if I wasn't physical with someone, I wouldn't have my heart broken again. No babies to die, no woman to leave me because of who...of what I am."

He choked, his exhale something between a sob and a cough. "When I saw you on that train...when I saw how scared you looked, I thought about Eliza. How she must've felt when those bastards hurt her and Isaac. I couldn't let that happen to someone else. And then, you were this sweet little spitfire, my wild sassafras. No good person, no sweet girl like you, has ever stood up for me. You was willing to let me get off that train, no questions asked, and take the blame for whatever was gonna come next. You looked at me with more trust and understanding and acceptance than anyone ever has. Ever. I still don't think I deserve you—I still don't know what you see in me, an ugly cuss fourteen years older than you—but I'll be damned if I ever let you go. You...you have no idea how much you mean to me."

I leaned in and kissed him, cupping my hands at his cheeks. "I see everything I want, right here, with you. You're stuck with me, cowboy."

He tangled his hand in my hair, anchoring his hand at the back of my head. Touching his forehead to mine, he said, "Good. I feel like everything I've done, every choice I've made, has led me to you. And I wouldn't change that for anything. I'd go through all the hurt and pain and disappointment all over again, just because I'd knew you were waiting for me at the other side."

And as he kissed me, I knew: I'd completely lost my heart to him. If I ever lost him, my heart—my soul—would be broken forever. I'd made my choice. And it was him.

## Chapter End Notes

Smut and fluff--my favorite combo!!!! That sexy cowboy...forgive me father, for I have sinned ;)

Side note: Paris Green is the real thing. It was banned in the late 1880s because people kept dying from the fancy blue-green wallpaper and paint they were using. Some people think it's what killed Napoleon.

# Everything Falls Apart

## Chapter Notes

Hey fam! It's a little (okay, a lot) fluffy in places. But this boah. I need fluffy, sweet Arthur in my life. I hope you all do too!! Also: I'm sure my French sucks later in the chapter, but I will fully admit that it's Google translate. I haven't taken French classes in YEARS.

Thank you SO much for all the support!! It makes me so so happy that you are enjoying my story!! <3

I was warm and snug in his arms all night and, this time when I woke up, he was still there. His face was pressed up to my shoulder, his arm flung over my stomach. He was snoring lightly; in other words, he was absolutely adorable. When he woke up, we stayed huddled under the quilt for what seemed like hours, just laughing and touching and talking. I showed him the scar on my leg where Emily stabbed me with a knitting needle when I was twelve. He showed me his scars from bullet wounds, knife wounds, and the cute little hump on his nose where a break never quite healed right. Exploring turned to kissing and kissing turned to making love, this time, slowly and sensually to the point he left me a quivering, shuddering mess in his arms.

Once we were dressed, he insisted he'd go out and hunt breakfast for us. My only job was to sit and keep an eye on the brewing coffee, basically just coffee grounds shoved in a small linen bag, tucked in a coffee pot, and shoved into the embers. This also entailed fire watch. I was fairly confident in my ability to handle this, thanks to Tilly and Kieran's expertise while Arthur was away. It turned out it didn't even matter—he was back before the coffee had finished brewing.

“You like rabbit, darlin?” He kneeled down by the fire and started skinning the rabbit. “Saw a few squirrels but that's kinda tough, far as meat goes.”

“I like rabbit better than squirrel anyway. The last time Pa and I went squirrel hunting, I got too excited and shot it with the shot gun. Of course, it wasn't as bad as the time I shot a grouse with a shotgun. I swear, the only thing left on the log was these two little legs, right where it had been perched.” I shook my head. “I consider myself a good shot, but damn if I'm not lacking in common sense.”

He was laughing, carefully cutting up the meat into more manageable slices. He said, “If I didn't know how tenacious you are, sweet girl, I'd think the kick from a shotgun would knock you right over.”

“My Pa had an old ’53 Enfield rifle he’d carried during the war. He taught me to shoot with that old bastard when I was fifteen and, let me tell you, that was a nightmare. It weighed all of eleven pounds at most. And there I was: short and scrawny—much like this frail physique you see before you, but a flatter chest—and could barely hold the damn thing level. My arms were too short I guess. Or weak. Probably both. My shots mainly hit the bottoms of hay bales, leaving many, many survivors.”

He winked at me. “You might be skinny, darlin, but there ain’t a more perfect, beautiful woman out there.”

I blushed.

He smiled shyly, setting the rabbit meat on a branch he’d suspended over the fire. “You’re so damn pretty when you blush.”

“You’re too sweet to me.”

He scooted closer and put his hat on my head, sliding it back so he could look at me. “I have a hard time sayin how I feel. I’ve spent most of my life tryin to stay numb and just...block it all out. But with you...I don’t know, I’m willing to let myself. Even if it scares me. And...I...uh, want you to know, that just because I don’t say somethin, don’t mean I’m not thinking it. Or that I don’t want to say it. Sometimes I just can’t.”

It seemed like he’d said more to me, between now and last night, then he’d intended on revealing and I knew without a doubt it was because he’d been drinking. His hurt ran deeper than he admitted. He hated himself; the things he’d done, how it had hurt other people. I understood that feeling. It flowed through my veins.

I didn’t know what to say to him, so I stayed quiet. Instead, I just leaned over and rested my head on his shoulder, snuggling close to him. He sat stiffly for a moment, but then relaxed; his body curving into mine. Dipping his head down, he pressed his lips to my temple and then touched his head to mine.

And I felt safe. Sitting there at the fire with him, no expectations or plans or places to run off to. He very slowly, very timidly, slid his arm around me and pulled me closer. The silence was comfortable. I let my eyes flutter closed and listened to the rhythmic sound of his heart, breathing in the musky scent of his shirt. I fit in his arms so perfectly. We were like to halves of the same soul.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, letting his hand trail down my cheek. “What’cha thinkin?”

“That I’m happy.” I tilted my head to his and kissed the corner of his mouth. “Because of you.”

His cheeks reddened. “Naw, I didn’t do nothing. Just bein me.”

“Maybe, but, you treat me differently than other men. You’re genuinely interested in what I say. You talk to me like an equal, not like a piece of property. Not all men are like that, Arthur. I learned that at a young age.”

“My pa was a no good bastard. Watched him die and it weren’t soon enough. I don’t remember my ma all that well.” He fingered the open collar of my shirt, idly trailing his fingertips across my collar bones. “She died when I was a kid. But I do remember, for all the shit my pa did, he always took care of my momma. I aim to do the same for ya...though I ain’t been so good at it in the past. If anything happened to you, Christ, I don’t know what I’d do.”

“You’re a good man.” I touched my fingertip to his lips before he could say anything. “To me.”

“I’ll always be good to ya, darlin. Better than good.”

“My step-father beats my mother. And Owen hits Cora, I’m fairly certain, and threatened to force himself on me once we were in New York.” I swallowed hard. “The world may be changing as we head into a new century, but I assure you. Still too many men think women are property. They treat their horses better.”

“I like ya being my free spirit, my sassafras. You can be damn sure I’ll never hurt you, darlin. And I’ll handle anyone who thinks they can.” He brushed his lips against mine. “No one touches Arthur Morgan’s girl and comes away still livin.”

I snuggled up against him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. He held my waist gently and leaned backwards until he was flat on the ground, with me positioned on top of him. “You’re damn beautiful in this position too.”

I giggled, casually unbuttoning another few buttons on his shirt. “Have I thanked you properly for my horse?”

“Your smile and that big ole hug was enough, but I ain’t gonna complain about last night.” He kissed me. “Or this mornin.” Another kiss. “And if you keep lookin at me like that, I may not be able to wait until tonight.”

“I’m just seeing what it takes to wear an old man out.”

He burst out laughing, quickly burying his face against my exposed upper chest and throat, tickling me with his scruffy beard. I started laughing too, only half trying to pull his face away from my skin. “I’m teasing you, Arthur, stop!” I could barely breathe, between the tickle torture and the occasional, soft brush of his lips. “Very well then, I give up. Do with me what you will.”

He scooped me up in his arms and rolled back up into a sitting position, keeping me firm against him. “Well, for starters, I’m gonna keep ya.”

“Fair.”

He kissed my forehead. “You give in too easy.”

“It’s your big blue eyes.”



He chuckled, gently drawing my hand to his mouth and brushing his lips across my knuckles. "You're too good to me."

"Guilty, but I don't plan on changing." I grinned. "So don't ask."

"I don't deserve you. Not someone so sweet and beautiful."

I slid my hand to his cheek and gently cradled him, touching my forehead to his. "I want to be with you, Arthur. Not some senator in Washington. Not John Marston. You."

His eyes softened and he kissed me, softly, before gently setting me on the ground. "My girl."

He walked over to the fire and checked the cooking meat. "Just about done, beautiful. Hope you're hungry."

"I'm always hungry. Not gonna lie."

He chuckled. "You gonna name that horse over there? Think the man at the stable called her Ole Pete, but that ain't fitting. Especially because she's a girl."

"I was thinking Skylark."

"Pretty name for a horse."

"What do you call your horse?"

He chuckled. "Her name's Winny. Short for Winchester. When I got her, her name was Rifle but...I don't know, didn't seem fittin for a horse."

The more I got to know Arthur, the more I realized that he took things to heart, far deeper and more complex than he pretended to be. Things like a horse's name were incredibly important to him.

It just made me want him more.

We ate breakfast, which was delicious, and then spent a little more time just enjoying being together. I could tell he didn't want to go back to camp. We didn't have much a choice, though, and before long he tore down the camp. He caught me a very, VERY passionate kiss; then we saddled up on the horses and headed back to camp.

The ride took far less time than I really wanted. Arthur called out to John, hidden back in the brush, as we trotted past, and then we were solidly back. Camp was already awake and bustling. Chores, laughter, Miss Grimshaw storming after Mary-Beth complaining about who knows what now. It was exactly what I expected.

Arthur swung me down off my horse, stealing another quick kiss, then hitched Skylark next to his Winny. "We should run away like that more often."

"Damn right."

I fell into step next to him and headed into camp. He swayed against me as we walked, his hand brushing against mine and fingertips reaching out to my palm. It was so damn sweet: just the constant, kind reminder that he cared. I was quickly becoming addicted to his discreet touches in camp; he kept most of his affection for when we were alone. And I liked that: nobody else really needed to know how passionate things were between us.

As we walked past Dutch's tent, I heard Molly talking to him. "I love ya Dutch. I really do."

"That's nice, Molly girl, thank you."

It made me uncomfortable. I'd seen how she looked at him as we drank around the camp fire the night before: like he was Christ himself. She worshiped the ground he walked on, she acted like he could do absolutely no wrong. And he just treated her like a damn accessory, no different than the watch chain on his vest.

Arthur slowed down considerably before we were past Dutch's tent. I followed his line of sight to see what had made him hesitate—

Micah.

I hadn't seen him since the night Arthur brought me to camp. His face was twisted in a sneer, his eyes locked on me. "Still parading your prize from the train heist on your arm, eh Morgan?"

"You mind your own god damned business."

Arthur's hand was firm at my waist, guiding me towards his tent. Micah was faster: he slunk around us alike a coyote stalking prey and slammed a piece of paper down on the table usually reserved for poker. His voice was loud—louder than it really needed to be for the whole camp to hear him. Maybe he wanted Valentine in on the conversation. "See what I found in Rhodes, Dutch? They're already lookin for her and it ain't gonna be long until they find her."

Arthur had stopped so that his body blocked me from Micah. I peered around him to see the paper, as did everyone else at the table: Tilly, Hosea, Miss Grimshaw, Dutch. And what I saw made my jaw drop:

By order of the President

REWARD: for information leading to the safe return of New York Senator Daniel H. Skiles daughter,

Miss Elizabeth Anne Dorsey, aged twenty

Last seen aboard the Cornwall Steam Engine, Meteore, in Granite Pass

Possibly in company of outlaws Morgan, Mathews, Van der Linde

\$10,000

Miss Dorsey was last seen wearing a burgundy traveling dress and a dark purple cloak. 5'5" tall, brown hair, and green eyes.

I swallowed hard. That was a hell of a lot of money coming from a bastard who refused to let me keep my horse because of the cost to board him while we were in Washington. The

picture they'd picked for the poster wasn't particular good quality and was a few years old. I recognized it immediately: it was from the year Emily died.

Arthur's voice was a low growl. "You're so damn proud of yourself, ain't ya? You got the law after us already just so you can get the bounty money?"

"The fuck I did, you damn well know that I was there too." Micah held his hands up in a pitiful sign of submission. "Her damn sister saw me just as well as she saw you two together."

"Now let's calm down. Hand off your pistol, son." Hosea stepped between Arthur and Micah, holding his arms out to either side. I wasn't sure that he would have actually stopped Arthur from bashing in Micah's skull, but the effort was there.

Dutch picked up the poster, holding it out delicately in front of him as if it might bite at any moment. "And what do you have to say about this, Elizabeth?"

"It's not me."

"It's clearly you." Micah snapped.

I shrugged noncommittally. "I mean, it's a likeness. But that girl is seventeen. She's prideful and petty and she had two sisters. I only have one sister. Besides, my pa is just an old soldier who can't farm for shit. Makes me pretty insignificant in comparison to a senator's daughter."

"Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money." Dutch glanced at Arthur and then at Hosea. "Even for an insignificant girl."

"Now Dutch—"

Dutch held out the poster to Arthur and held up his free hand to silence him. "I'm going to leave the decision up to you, son. Whatever you think is best for us. All of us."

"She stays." Arthur crumpled up the poster with one hand and jammed his finger into Micah's chest. "And if anyone—especially you, you fucking cocksucker—rats her out to the Pinkertons or to the law, they're gonna have to answer to me."

Dutch nodded. Hosea chuckled and then patted Arthur on the shoulder, guiding him back a few steps from Micah. "First thing tomorrow, we'll send the ladies out to get Elizabeth some different clothes. We'll burn these. Did you have anything else with you, dear?"

I shook my head.

"See, it'll all be fine. Funny how things work themselves out so easily." He patted Arthur's shoulder again and then stepped away.

Arthur was still glaring at Micah, but without uttering another word, he put his hand on my back and guided me away from them. He led me back to the tent, past the critical eye of Bill and the somewhat more concerned gaze of Javier and Charles. And he was pissed, I could tell by the furrow in his brow and the slight curl of his upper lip.

I was terrified to say anything, because it was clearly all my fault. As usual. I walked over to his cot and quietly sat down, drawing my knees up to my chest. A reward. They'd put a fucking reward on my head for someone to find me and drag me back to Washington.

He sat beside me on the cot, leaning heavily against the wagon wall. "I will put a bullet in his head if he brings the law here. His pride is so damn hurt because his 'plan' fell through on the train and now he wants to piss me off? Shit. If he so much as looks at you the wrong way, darlin, his own momma won't recognize him when I'm done with him."

"I'm sorry."

"You ain't got nothing to be sorry about darlin, this is on Micah."

"But it's my fault your name is on that poster."

"Darlin, my name's been on a thousand wanted posters. It don't bother me none." He playfully nudged me. "Though I ain't had a ten thousand dollar bounty on me."

"I'm an overachiever."

He chuckled and pulled me to him, sliding me up onto his lap. "You trust me?"

"You know I do."

"Then you got nothing to worry about. You're worth more than ten thousand dollars to me and I ain't lettin anyone march into this camp and take ya. Hell no."

I ran my fingertips along his jawline, then pressed my lips to the scar on his chin. "I just...I don't understand why they'd put a reward that high on me. ME. It pissed them off that I stayed in Prescott with my pa and it pisses them off that I got away from that train. I am not worth all this fuss."

"You are to me."

It was enough to make me melt. I snuggled down in his arms, tucking my head against his chest, and sighed happily. The thought of getting dragged back to Washington was absolutely terrifying, but, it was a lot easier to not worry when I was in his arms.

We sat together in silence for several minutes. He hitched up my skirt up over my knees and slid his hand to my thigh, just gently caressing my skin with his thumb. He was almost like a sleepy puppy, his anger and frustration with Micah having melted away.

And then someone outside the tent cleared their throat. "Arthur?"

He sighed, but didn't adjust my skirt. "Yeah, Abigail, what do ya want?"

"Can you take Jack, fishin? I hate to ask, 'specially after what Micah did, but—"

"But I'm your favorite nursemaid."

“No, that ain’t it. It’s just...he seems so sad and John is worthless. Hosea’s busy with Dutch and can’t read to him...and you know I can’t...so...”

Arthur sighed again, dipping his head down to me. “You wanna go fishin, darlin?”

“Sure. I’m refusing now to fetch worms for you boys, but I’ll go and get in the way.”

He chuckled. “Sure, Abigail, we’ll take him.”

It took a lot more preparation to go fishing than I’d anticipated, mainly because Arthur also took the time to arm himself: bandolier across his chest, a pistol at each hip, and a rifle slung over his shoulder.

I cocked my eyebrow up. “What kind of fish do you think we’ll run into? One of those big whales like Moby Dick?”

He held back the tent flap and, as I passed, gently swatted my ass with his hand. “That was a damn complicated book.”

“I wasn’t particularly fond of it myself.”

“You ain’t surprised I read it?”

I glanced at him as we walked over to where Jack was sitting, near the clearing where the chickens were, just...just pulling grass it looked like. “Why would I be surprised? I mean, it was a dull book. I’d have been more surprised if you’d like it because...well, really, did we need that many pages about an Englishman hunting a fish? Tedious.”

“Mary always thought I couldn’t read and...never mind.” He rolled his shoulders forward, a nervous tic but oddly attractive, and called out to Jack. “Hey, boy, you wanna go fishin with me?”

Jack’s face lit up. “Yes, Uncle Arthur, that sounds fun!”

“You got a pole?”

“Yes, Uncle Hosea made me one.”

“You go fetch it and meet me and Aunt Lizzie over by the horses. Let’s go see what we can catch out there.”

He jumped up, a cloud of grass fluttering down from his clothes, and scampered off to Hosea’s tent. Arthur chuckled. “He’s a good kid. Damn shame John avoids him like he’s some kinda sickness.”

“Abigail told me some of the other girls don’t think he’s Jack’s dad.”

“Sometimes John don’t think he’s Jack’s dad. I seen that kid throw a fit though and I can tell ya for a fact: he’s John’s boy. When I met John, he just a skinny kid, covered in dirt and blood, and he bit Hosea. He ain’t much better now, but at least he don’t bite.”

I laughed. “You must have been quite a sight, the four of you. Sullen Arthur, rabid John.”

“We ain’t much different now.”

“Well, you’re not so sullen because you have me to kiss the pout off your lips.”

He chuckled and pulled me close, roughly brushing his mouth against mine. “And you do a damn fine job.”

While we waited for Jack, Arthur got some treats for the horses and I spent a little time grooming Skylark. She nosed against my shoulder, nickering softly. I hadn’t seen such a lovely horse since my old boy Fleetfoot. The horse and I took to each other instantly, which was good since I was fully prepared to ride anywhere with Arthur.

When Jack finally wandered over to us, Arthur scooped him up with him on his horse and we rode to the river. Arthur hitched the horses in a shady spot and then we all trudged down to the water together. As we walked, Arthur leaned over and picked a blue flower, gingerly tucking it behind my ear.

Jack ran ahead. “Is this a good place, Uncle Arthur?”

“It’s a fine place, Jack, you done much fishin before?”

“Only with you and Uncle Hosea.”

“Well, come here. I’ll show ya how to bait the hook. I got some nice cheese here we can use.”

Jack giggled. “Cheese?”

“The smellier the better.” Arthur baited his line and then did the same to Jack’s. “Then, you cast the line. Here, like this, just a quick little toss.”

They stood side by side at the water line, just quietly waiting for some kind of...something on the line. It didn’t take long for them to get a bite.

“You feel the tip of your finishing rod twitching?” Arthur looked at me and winked. “Don’t reel it in yet. It’s just nibblin. If ya feel a hard tug, that’s when you give it a yank.”

Jack was concentrating so hard that his tongue was sticking out the side of his mouth. His eyes lit up. “I got one, Uncle Arthur, I got one!”

“That’s a boy, now you hold tight. Just wear him out first before you reel him in, or you’ll break the line.”

Arthur’s reached over and covered Jack’s hands with his, helping the boy better grip the rod. It caught me off guard, the sight of this tough, mean outlaw so gentle with his best friend’s son; tears pricked the back of my eyes. He’d have been such a good father. He hadn’t wanted to be one, but he’d done what he could—and because he didn’t do more, didn’t save them, he was never going to forgive himself. In some ways, he and I were too much alike.

“Look Jack, it’s a rock bass. Almost as small as you.” Arthur pulled the fish off the hook.  
“We should throw him back and give em a chance to grow up a bit.”

Jack flashed me a brilliant smile. “Ya see, Aunt Lizzie! It’s a bass. He’s kind of cute.”

I wrinkled up my nose at the fish writhing in Arthur’s hands. “Cute...well, he’s tasty. I’ll give him that.”

Arthur chuckled and leaned over the water, gently letting the fish swim away.

“Uncle Arthur, I’m tired of finishing. I want to make something.”

Arthur groaned. “Go on, now. Give Aunt Lizzie your rod.”

Jack did as he was told and skipped off down the shore, heading to some little red flowers further down. Arthur called after him, “Don’t go no further than that. You stay where you can see us.”

Jack waved.

“You wanna learn to fish too, little girl?” He playfully nudged me and then recast his line.  
“Mighty relaxin. All you need is patience and bait—and I got plenty of cheese.”

“Well, regrettably, I’m lacking in patience, so I’ll just stand here with you for moral support and companionship. I’d rather shoot things.”

“My wild sassafras.” He chuckled; something tugged on his line and he reset his feet, carefully reeling it in. “I been thinking. Charles brought it up and I have’ta agree: we need to get you a good knife. Teach ya how to defend yourself for times you ain’t got a gun.”

“You think I’ll need to?”

“Hopin not, but if I’m not there and can’t protect ya,” he glanced at me. “I wanna be sure you can protect yourself.”

“Fair enough.”

“You just bein’ agreeable to me because you agree? Or because you’re still worn out from this mornin?”

“It was the best start to any day I’ve ever had.”

“Could finish our day that way, too.”

I pursed my lips together coyly. “I fully agree to that kind of routine.”

“You’re blushing again.”

“You have that effect on my body.”

His lips curled up into a smile and he playfully nudged me. “Darlin, I like all the effects I have on your body. ‘Specially those bites I left on your neck.”

“I’ll have to wear my hair loose or everyone will see.”

“Let ‘em. I like everyone knowin’ you’re mine.”

Heart swirled through my chest, my heart setting off into a rapid cadence. We’d been intimate and the attraction was impossible to deny, but hearing him say that I was his...well, that made all the difference.

He finally reeled the fish in and carefully took it off the hook. “Another one of them ‘cute’ rock bass. This must be the prime spot for ‘em. Once they’re grown.”

“Fishing is tedious.”

“It’s relaxin. Nothing to worry about but running out of cheese and how long til the sun sets.” He grinned. “I can teach ya.”

I couldn’t resist that lopsided smile. “Okay.”

“Come here.” He slid another piece of cheese on the hook and opened his arms to me. I tucked in perfectly against him; he wrapped one arm around my waist and nudged the rod into my hand. Sliding his hand over mine, he said, “Hold it up and flick it...just like this.”

The line zipped out into the water. He dipped his head close to mine and guided my hand forward. “Now you just wait. Fish’ll be along.”

“I don’t mind if they don’t.”

“Naw, you’re doing just fine.” He moved his hand from my waist and cupped it over my free hand, urging it up to the reel. “You just gotta wait...stay still...”

My heart was pounding in my chest: something about his tone and touch and just how tight he had me pressed against him. “You’re distracting me.”

“I ain’t doing nothing.”

“You are. You being you...it’s just, absolutely the best.” I jumped slightly as the line twitched. “Is that a fish?”

He chuckled. “Just wait, like I told Jack, let it wear itself out first. Then you won’t have any problem reeling him in.”

I fought against the fish for what seemed like a good five minutes, likely far less, and then with Arthur’s guidance, started turning the reel. The fish splashed out of the water, flipping and flopping around.

“See? That’s my girl.” He swung the line to him and carefully pulled the fish off the hook. “It’s a bluegill.”



The fish's gills were flaring as it tried to breathe. I smiled at Arthur and touched my hand to his. "You can just let it go. Let it grow some; maybe rethink a diet of cheese."

He smiled at me and let the fish go.

"Uncle Arthur! Aunt Lizzie, come here! See what I made!"

Arthur draped his arm around me, taking both his rod and Jack's rod in his free hand, and guided me across the shoreline. Jack was sitting in the middle of a splash of tiny red flowers. He held up a chain he'd made: weaving the flower stems into a necklace. "See? I made it for Momma."

"Aw, Jack, that's nice!" Arthur gently tousled the boy's hair. "Your momma is gonna love it."

I said, "You're really good at making those. Can you teach me?"

"Yeah. It's a lot funner than fishing." Jack looked up at Arthur and squinted. "Sorry, Uncle Arthur, but fishing is really boring."

Arthur laughed.

"What a fine young man."

The voice from behind us made me jump. Arthur whirled around, immediately positioning himself between the two approaching strangers and me and Jack.

"In such...complex circumstances. Arthur, isn't it? Arthur Morgan?" The first man was squirrely looking, wearing a tidy suit and a bowler hat. He was followed closely by a stockier man. The second man held a shotgun; he pumped it to the ready.

Arthur's hand dropped to his holster, but he didn't touch the gun. "Who are you?"

"Yes, Arthur Morgan. Van der Linde's most trusted associate. You've read the files." He motioned at the man with the shotgun, who nodded in seeming agreement. "Typical case. Orphan street kid seduced by that maniac silver tongue and matures to into a degenerate murderer. Agent Milton, Agent Ross. Pinkerton Detective Agency, in employ of the President. Nice to finally meet you. We know a lot about you."

Oh shit.

Arthur didn't even flinch. "Do ya?"

"You're a wanted man, Mr. Morgan. Five thousand dollars for your head alone."

"Five thousand dollars? For me?" Arthur chuckled. "Can I turn myself in?"

"We want Van der Linde."

"Dutch...Van der Linde? I ain't seen him in months."

“That so? I heard a man fitting his description robbed a train owned by Leviticus Cornwall up near Granite Pass.”

Shit. Granite Pass....that was the way our train went. I felt like I was going to throw up; not only had the President sent them, but they knew about Granite Pass. They knew about the train and the holdup. I slid my arms around Jack’s shoulders, pulling him close to me. It felt like we were standing in a box of dynamite and someone had tossed in a lit match.

If Arthur was bothered, he didn’t let on. He said, “Ain’t that a little old fashioned nowadays?”

“Apparently not. Listen, this is my offer, Mr. Morgan. Bring in Van der Linde and you have my word you won’t swing.”

“Oh, I ain’t gonna swing anyways Agent...Milton.” Arthur stepped forward, broadening the distance between us and the agents. “Ya see, I haven’t done nothing wrong, ‘cept for not playing the games to your rules.”

“Spare me the philosophy lesson. I already heard it from Mac Callender.”

“Mac Callender.” Arthur stiffened. I heard the catch in his voice; anger that he was trying to suppress.

Agent Milton’s lips spread into a slimy smile. “He was pretty shot up by the time I got to him so, really, it was more of a mercy killing. Slow, but merciful.”

Arthur threw down the finishing rods. His hand went for the pistol but at that moment, Jack gasped. His hand jerked away from the weapon and he snapped, “You enjoy being a rich man’s toy, do ya?”

“I enjoy society, flaws and all. You people venerate savagery and you will die savagely. All of you.”

Arthur snarled. “We’re all gonna die, agent.”

“Some of us sooner than others.”

I tilted Arthur’s hat down lower over my face. Shit. Sure, they were talking about Dutch now; sure, they were trying to bribe Arthur into giving him up, but that didn’t mean the next barrage of questions wouldn’t be about a runaway. Micah had already showed us the wanted poster. Agents on the train had known it was Arthur—they’d called him out by name—and it was only a matter of time before they put all the puzzle pieces together, before they figured out that I was with Arthur, of my own accord.

The older of the two agents, Milton, took a few more steps toward me; Arthur blocked his way. It didn’t seem to phase the man. He said, “I do beg your pardon, miss, if we...intruded on your romanian day with this, oh, lets say outstanding citizen.”

I clamped my lips closed. I could feel myself trembling, but I had to stay quiet; I had to stay calm and composed for Jack—because if I panicked, Arthur was going to go off.

But the agent didn't let up quite that easily. "I don't think I caught your name, my dear. We haven't been properly acquainted; Arthur, who is this fetching lady here with you?"

My brain whirled. Arthur had a rifle slung over his back and two pistols in his holsters—this could get nasty very, very quickly. I blurted out, "Parlez vous francias?"

Milton stopped walking. There was a brief moment of hesitation and then he said, "What was that?"

I said, "Parlez vous francias? Je suis la jeune fille. Je suis avec cet homme parce que mon coeur est le sien. Tu devrais partir maintenant. S'il vous plaît. Pour nous tous." (I am with this man because my heart is his. You should leave now. Please. For all of us)

Neither Milton nor Ross said anything for a moment. Finally, Milton chuckled and turned back to Arthur. "I didn't know you entertained the company of French whores."

Arthur's voice was a low growl. "She ain't a whore."

"I hardly think a woman would be with you because she wanted to...like, Mrs. Linton, perhaps? She wasn't fond of your proclivity to violence. Why should this one be any different?"

Arthur was trembling, his body stiff with clearly confined rage. I slid my hand through the crook of his arm and held him, pressing my opposite hand to him. Even though I knew he wouldn't understand, I murmured in French, Ça va. Il le fait pour vous rendre fou et n'a aucune idée de combien je vous aime. (It's okay. He's doing it to make you mad and has no idea how much I love you)

I bit my lip. Well, it was a damn good thing he didn't understand French, if that's what I was going to ramble off without thinking.

Agent Milton chuckled. He waved his hand dismissively and turned away from us. "We'll meet again, Arthur Morgan."

I heard Ross release the hammer to half-cock. He said, "Enjoy your fishing, kid. While you still can."

Jack huddled closer to me.

And in the next moment, I heard the thunder of horse hooves on the ground: they were gone. Arthur tipped the hat off my head and cradled my face in his hands. "You okay, darlin? And Jack—you too?"

"I'm fine." I cupped my hands over his and tried to smile at him. My bottom lip quivered. "I thought they were here for me."

"I damn well wouldn't have let them."

"Who were they?" Jack asked.

“No one. Let’s get our things and head back. It’s gettin late and your Momma’ll be worried.”

“Why did you lie about Uncle Dutch and where he is?”

“Because those are disagreeable men and they want to hurt him.”

“What did they mean about Mac? Is he in jail?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so. I hope he’s fine where he is, look, don’t worry about them. The world is full of disagreeable men. That’s why you got us, to protect you.” Arthur roughly pressed his lips to mine. “That goes for you too, darlin. You’re with me and I’m gonna keep ya safe. We’re gonna get all those posters from around here and we’re gonna burn em all. Be done with it.”

I was still shaking, but I smiled at him. I wasn’t ready for him to let me go, but I knew that being clingy was either going to irritate him—or make him more worried than he already was. He’d told me about Mac—and Davey and Jenny—early this morning after we woke up. And the fact that Milton killed him? It was salt in the wound; I could see the struggle in his eyes, a combination of heartbreak and rage.

He hoisted me up on to Skylark’s back and then easily swung up on his horse. The moment Jack was secure in front of him, we rode off; faster this time: no casual riding, no cheerful conversation. I noticed though, that he always kept me in his line of sight, he always made sure that I was right next to him.

Abigail saw us ride back into camp and made a beeline for Jack. “Did you have fun, honey? Did you catch anything?”

Jack offered up the necklace. “I made you this.”

“Why, ain’t that pretty? I sure am the luckiest momma to have you.” She hugged him. “Did you thank Uncle Arthur?”

“Thank you, Uncle Arthur.”

“It’s nothing, kid. You keep practicing.” Arthur motioned towards the heart of camp. “You run along and give Uncle Hosea your rod to keep safe.”

Abigail watched Jack run off and then turned to Arthur. “Something wrong?”

“Just...ran into some men out there.” He rolled his shoulders forward, a dead giveaway of his nervousness. “I gotta speak to Dutch; come on, ‘Lizbeth.”

Abigail and I exchanged a glance, but I followed Arthur without offering comment. I didn’t have one. I didn’t trust myself to speak and not sound absolutely terrified. My past caught up to me entirely too fast: it was easy enough for them to find me in Prescott, since that was the house we’d all been born in. Leaving with Arthur, though...that was supposed to be the finality, of me walking out of that life forever. I was tired of being the green-eyed child of fortune, the one who’d let her sister die. Senator Skiles ‘other’ daughter. The embarrassment.

Arthur slid his arm around my waist and tugged me to him, pressing me against him. “You go on back to my tent. I’ll be along.”

I nodded. Tears were searing against the backs of my eyes and I was trying so damn hard not to let them fall.

He must have noticed. He cupped my chin in his hand and held me steady. “It’s gonna be okay, darlin’.”

He didn’t sound convinced.

I offered him a smile—at least, I hoped it was a smile and not a grimace—and continued walking to his tent. In a way, it felt like home already. More than Washington. But this could all very easily be taken away from me. All I could think about was the ten thousand dollars; it was so easy for someone to think they’d done it out of concern and out of care. It was the exact opposite: it was just another power play. My step-father. Owen. And fuck, I couldn’t even imagine what Cora had told them. How’d I’d boldly flirted with an outlaw, how I let him touch me in improper ways and how I’d left—holding his hand!—while she cried and writhed on the floor. And the biggest fucking sin of them all: I’d shot Owen to protect Arthur Morgan. Elizabeth Anne Dorsey. The outlaw’s angel.

I snorted. God, she had no fucking idea. My entire life, she’d lorded over me just as badly as Mother. Stand up straight, Elizabeth. Don’t giggle so much, Elizabeth. You’d be so much more fetching and feminine, Elizabeth, if you stopped chattering and just listened to men. They don’t care what you think. It’s not their personality that matters, it’s the size of their billfold.

Maybe Emily and I really hadn’t been that different. She just hid it better than I ever could.

Arthur stormed into the tent, shoving through the tent flaps and letting them snap shut behind him. He was angry. He didn’t even have to say anything; I could see it in the way he was standing, nervously rolling his shoulders forward. After a moment, he shoved his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigarette. “He ain’t even taking those agents seriously. All he wants is more money—more security that we can get out of here and just disappear. We’re goin’ out on a job tonight...I ain’t sure if I’ll be back tonight or tomorrow or...later than that. Hard to tell.”

I nodded.

He held the cigarette between his lips and lit it, taking a long drag. “Javier, Bill, and Kieran will stay behind to keep an eye on things. And on Micah and, if something happens...just...after today, I want to make sure you’re safe. If they come in shootin’, you shoot back. And if they don’t, you run—get as far away as you can an’ I’ll find ya. I swear.”

“I just...” Tears pricked the back of my eyes and I looked away from him. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you because of me.”

He ground out the cigarette on the bottom of his boot and set the butt on the table. Pulling me into his arms, he pressed his lips to my forehead. “Something has happened to me because of

you. I'm...uh..."

He swallowed hard. Sliding his hands back into my hair, he cradled my face and held me, staring into my eyes. "Nobody is gonna take you away from me darlin, I swear it to ya. I won't let them. I...um...I'm..."

There was that shoulder roll again. He shifted his weight from one hip to the other and sucked in a sharp breath. "I'm...falling in love with you."

My heart was pounding in my throat. I slid my hands up to his wrists and held onto him; he'd said it. It was enough to take my breath away. "I love you, Arthur Morgan."

His eyes lit up and he pulled me into a tight hug, wrapping his arms around my waist and tethering me to his body. "I will fight for you until the day I die, darlin. And I will never stop being in love with you."

# Make Me Bad

## Chapter Notes

Hey fam! This chapter is weird, like, some kind of transition chapter or something. Idk...action packed though!! Hope you enjoy!!!!

He didn't come back that night.

Or by morning.

After a breakfast that tasted something like grilled squirrel, but looked a little like boiled pork, Hosea sat me down at the poker table and started telling me his plan. He seemed relaxed and that made me feel better. A little. Still, between Micah and the Pinkertons and being a wanted individual, I was a few worries away from sheer panic.

"Javier will take you to Saint Denis and so you can get new clothes." Hosea cocked his head towards Javier, who was standing a little ways away, just staring at us. "Molly was gracious enough to donate a dress for you to wear there and back, seeing as how sending you into town wearing the very clothes we're trying to get rid of would be...a poor choice."

He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a wad of dollar bills. I gently pushed it back, "No, no, you don't have to do that. I can pay for them."

"Arthur made it perfectly clear that he'd buy you what you needed."

"I have jewelry I can sell." I motioned to my ears. "A ring, too."

He raised his eyebrows. "Are you sure? You do realize that those are worth far more than a dress."

"It's not my life anymore. They were gifts from my mother and step-father." I shrugged. "And you all are more of a family to me in this short amount of time than they were in twenty-one years."

He nodded, then looked over his shoulder. "Javier, take her to the fence before heading out to Saint Denis."

Javier nodded.

"Get what you need and head on back. I've sent Kieran out to Rhodes and Van Horne to find what posters he can, Tilly and Karen headed up to Valentine." He reached over and squeezed my hand warmly. "We're going to take care of you, Elizabeth. We'll get it sorted out."

“I just don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me.” I looked away. “And you’ll make sure these clothes are burned?”

“I’m going to tend to it myself.” He stood up and motioned towards Arthur’s tent. “Go on and get changed. Molly should have left the dress in there for you. Javier will be ready when you are.”

“Thank you, Hosea.”

He patted my arm, smiling warmly. “No need to thank me. We take care of our own—and you’re one of us now. Plus, I know how...important you are to Arthur.”

There was a hint of a smile on his face and I knew—KNEW—he somehow was completely aware that I’d told Arthur I loved him; that Arthur loved me back.

Ducking my head down so he didn’t see me blush, I headed back to Arthur’s tent. Molly’s dress was in a rumpled heap on his cot, but, whatever. She’d unceremoniously just dumped it there. It was faded blue with a ruffled bodice and flounced skirt and smelled heavily of wood. I was pretty sure this wasn’t a dress that she wore too often...if ever. It was clearly a work dress, about ten years out of style, and Molly didn’t work. At least, not that I ever witnessed.

The dress was a little long but other wise fit well. I piled up my skirt, petticoat, corset cover, silk stockings, and cloak on Arthur’s cot, then quickly tied my hair up in a chignon. I considered abandoning my corset too...but Arthur enjoyed it too much. It was the only thing from my past I wanted to hold onto—and only for his benefit.

I gathered the clothes in my arms and headed out of the tent. Hosea and Javier had moved to where the horses were hitched, so, I walked to them, clearing my throat as I approached so they knew I was coming. I didn’t want to interrupt something private. Or, worse yet, something about me. I said, “I’m ready now.”

“And just as pretty as always.” Hosea took the clothes from my arms and then turned to Javier. “Try to get back before dark. With O’Driscolls out there, I don’t want you two out on the road late.”

Javier nodded, adjusting the pistols in his holsters. He gave me a boost up into Skylark’s saddle and then swung up onto his horse. “If Arthur comes back, tell him I stole his girl.”

Hosea snorted. “I’m not scooping up bits of you from around camp, Javier. I’ll pass.”

Javier burst out laughing. “Come on, pretty lady, let’s ride.”

He took off like a shot. I nudged Skylark’s flank with my heels and she burst into a quick gallop; she was by no means a dumb horse. I’d seen dumb horses in Washington: no drive, no connection with their driver. Skylark seemed to anticipate my action. She was a damn good horse—and Arthur knew it from the moment we saw her at the stable.

Once we were well outside camp, Javier slowed down to an easy trot. He cocked his head at me. “You been to a fence before?”



“Um...no.”

“Illegal trading. Buying, selling; that sort of shit. Seamus, the guy who runs the fence at Emerald Ranch, he’s a bastard but he’ll give you a good price. If you want me to do it, I will.”

“No, I’m fine.” I was a little disappointed that it wasn’t going to be an actual fence, but I wasn’t going to say that to Javier. “So...I really enjoy listening to you play the guitar. You’re very talented.”

He stared at me for a moment, clearly suspicious, but then smiled. He said, “Music is part of my soul.”

“I’ve never heard anyone play like that before.”

“I’ve played since I was a kid. Back in Mexico, there ain’t a lot of demand for playing guitar, and there ain’t no money in it.”

“I took piano lessons for eight years.”

“You any good?”

“No. I mean, I can plink out a couple songs, but I hated practicing and I can’t read music. That limits what you can do with the skill.” I shrugged. “Oh, and also, I’m a woman and couldn’t earn a dime playing music if I wanted to. It’s not ‘lady-like.’”

“Arthur said you went to fancy lady’s schools.”

“Yes, because no one wanted me at home.”

He chuckled. “You like it with us?”

“Very much.” And I especially liked being with Arthur, but I wasn’t going to say that.

“You got a damn big bounty on your head.”

“I hear it happens.”

“We all got bounties on our heads.” He fell silent for a moment, but then added, “So, Hosea’s right: you are one of us. Not just a pretty face hiding in a tent.”

I knew he was talking about Molly. He didn’t have to say it for me to figure it out.

We chatted about music and of nothing in particular for the rest of the ride. He reminded me a lot of the boys I knew in London: the poets and musicians, the painters and writers. There was a dreamy sensitivity to him that bled out only when he talked about his guitar and pieces of music. He seemed wistful when he talked about Mexico, but moreover, he was passionate and inherently good natured. Maybe not quite like Charles or even Arthur, but was soft and sensitive, once you got past his rough exterior.

Emerald Ranch looked like just about every other place I'd seen in the Heartlands: lush green grass, large farm fields, and dusty roads. The 'fence' as it was called, was basically just nervous looking, grizzled man stationed next to a barn. He had beady little eyes and a huge nose; somewhat like a rat.

He looked me over, his eyes narrowing, and crossed his arms over his chest. "She ain't one of Dutch's Boys."

"No, but she's Arthur Morgan's girl." Javier lit a cigarette and took a deep drag, blowing the smoke out of the side of his mouth. "So you'll treat her right."

Seamus looked a tad bit less suspicious, but still critical. "So, what brings you here, Arthur Morgan's girl?"

"I have a few things to sell. Jewelry." I unfastened my earrings and handed them to him, then gave him the ring. "The ring is emerald. The earrings are jet."

"Awfully nice jewelry to be giving up."

"I'm not giving it up. I'm selling it because I don't want it."

He studied the ring. "Stolen?"

"Gifts, actually, from a lifetime ago."

He was more critical than I thought he'd be, holding the earrings up to the sunlight and feeling the weight of the ring in the palm of his hand. He finally said, "I'll give you fifty for the lot."

"Bullshit. The emerald is half a carat."

"Don't bullshit me, you little minx, I have a business to—"

Javier casually cocked the pistol hammer. "You watch your mouth, puta. She might be Arthur's girl, but all of Dutch's Boys got her back. I'll blow your head off and not even think twice."

Seamus sighed, uneasily glancing between me and Javier. "The highest I can go is two hundred. You want 'em gone, that's what you'll get."

It still wasn't what the ring was worth, but I'd manage. I just needed it for a new dress and hopefully a little to set aside for camp funds. Despite Arthur's assurances, I didn't want to be a burden.

Seamus handed over the money and then shoved the jewelry into his pocket. "Always a pleasure, Mr. Escuella and...uh...you."

Javier chuckled and nudged me back towards the horses. "I'll be sure to give Arthur your regards."

“Yeah, well, you tell him she ain’t getting this jewelry back if she changes her mind. I got a buyer in St. Denis who will snatch this up.”

“She won’t change her mind.” I fluttered my eyelashes at him and fell into step with Javier, walking the short distance back to the horses. He boosted me up on Skylark’s back and then, without so much as a glance back to the fence, he was back on the road.

He was still laughing. “I can’t believe he went all the way up to two hundred. You’re quite a negotiator.”

“Well, it helped you were waving a gun in his face.”

“Maybe.” He kept his horse paced with mine, one hand resting on his holster. “He knows Arthur and Hosea; they did some work for him recently. Trust me though, mi amor, once someone finds out you’re with us, they’ll leave you alone.”

No one had ever offered me such security and protection. When in New York or Washington, I was relegated to staying in the house if I wanted to feel safe. And back in Prescott with Pa...well, he was usually too drunk or high from laudanum that I was the one overseeing things. It wasn’t like here. I felt wanted. I felt like I belonged.

And it was the best feeling ever.

By the time we got to St. Denis, Javier was singing me songs in Spanish and whispering things to me that I couldn’t understand at all. I begged him to tell me what it meant, but he declined, just laughing and continuing to sing.

St. Denis, in many ways, reminded me of Washington: the outskirts were muddy and derelict, while the inner most streets were gilded and sparkling and sophisticated. Javier offered to take me to one of the fancy dress boutiques towards the center of the city, but I declined. I wanted something easier to ride a horse in, something more comfortable and less gaudy. I was sick of being the painted porcelain doll.

We found a ready made dress shop that looked nice enough, not too fancy but not worn, used, and raggedy. Javier hitched the horses and then offered me his arm. “Miss Dorsey.”

“Thank you, sir.” I blushed. “Mr. Escuella.”

“You can call me Javi, mi amor. I don’t give that honor to many.”

I smiled at him.

A middle-aged woman rocketed into the storeroom the moment we walked in; she was smaller than me: a small frame, a tiny waist, and likely shorter than five foot. Her gray hair was frizzy and she was dressed in a tidy, blue skirt and crisp white blouse. “Can I help you two this afternoon?”

“Yes, um.” I wracked my brain. “I’m in need of a new dress...stockings...you see, my... husband and I just arrived and I lost my trunk on the way here. Silly, really, but I need a few things before we head out into...the...uh...wilderness.”

“Well, of course now, you come with me and I’ll get you measured right quick.” She directed me to a little room off the main store. Her hands were quick with the measuring tape: she determined my weight, height, the size of my frame; the measurements of my waist, hips, and chest.

She was frowning at her notes. “My dear, you ain’t a ready made size. Too short, too skinny; you’re like some kinda fence post.”

My cheeks heated up; part of me hoped Javier wasn’t listening.

“That, said, though, I got two dresses here I made for myself. Now I’m willin’ to sell one to ya—if you can pay. I’ll need to fix the bottom hem but it would work.”

I swallowed hard. “How much do you want?”

“Seventy-five.”

“That’s fair.” I hesitated. “I’m sorry, but I need a petticoat and stockings too.”

“Make it ninety, then.”

I didn’t exactly have a choice, so I said, “Deal.”

She nodded, then walked out of the small room; after a moment, I could hear her feet plodding up a staircase just on the other side of the wall. Just a quickly, I heard her cross the floorboards above, hesitate, and then retreat back down the steps. As she walked into the room, she thrust two dresses into my arms and said, “Price is the same for whichever you choose. I think either would look lovely with your eyes, just my saying.”

One dress was a mossy, sage green and the other deep burgundy. I started with the green dress: I’d just gotten rid of burgundy and didn’t want to be seen in that color again anytime soon.

It fit perfectly, albeit a little short: tight at the waist, with the bodice bloused out and sleeves loose. The skirt was somewhat flounced at the bottom, but looser and a softer material than my traveling suit had been. I stared at myself in the mirror. It would do...and I had a feeling Arthur would love it. Maybe. I mean, maybe he didn’t care about that kind of thing but he was so sweet—

“Are you gonna show him?”

“What?” I stared at the woman. Of course I was going to show Arthur, once I was back....oh. Right, she meant Javier. “Yes, um, thank you!”

I stepped back out into the main storeroom, awkwardly swinging my hips to show off the skirt. “So...uh...do you like it?”

His jaw dropped a little, but he quickly recovered. “Si, mi amor....your eyes. My god, they... um...they’re beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

I blushed. “Thank you, Javi.”

Shuffling back into the back room, I nodded. “This one, please.”

“I knew he’d like it.” She nodded her head to a basket of stockings. “Cotton or wool, take your pick. I’ll let out the hem a few inches and have this done in about, oh, fifteen minutes? That decent?”

“Yes ma’am, thank you.”

She took the dress and disappeared back upstairs. I picked through the rolled stockings, not entirely sure what was best for camp life—I’d never had this problem before—but finally settled on black cotton. They’d show dirt less. Plus, I didn’t want to be stuck in wool in the heat.

The woman was back in likely less than fifteen minutes, the dress and a petticoat draped over her arm. Once I had the petticoat and dress on, I glanced in the mirror: perfect. Javier paid her while I put on the stockings and my boots; then we were off.

On the road out of Saint Denis, he sidled his horse up close to mine, his leg brushing against mine. “Arthur will love you in that.”

“Well...I hope.”

“He cares a lot about you.” Javier hesitated. “You make him happy. I never seen him like this...happy and all that shit.”

“He makes me happy.” I felt the heat in my cheeks again. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“I can’t help it, mi amor. You ain’t like the other women. Arthur’s a damn lucky man.”

We were riding faster this time. Even though the stop in Saint Denis hadn’t been long, it seemed we were chasing the sunset. Javier reminded me of a hunting dog: on edge, his eyes and ears alert and focused on everything around him. I tried to ignore it; I tried to pretend that there wasn’t a bounty of sorts on my head. And as safe as I felt with Javier...I’d have felt safer with Arthur.

In a lonely stretch of isolated land—some place I didn’t recognize—Boaz stumbled. Skylark snorted loudly, dancing to the side and away from him.

I looked over at Javier. “What happened?”

He leaned forward in his stirrups, glancing at either side of the horse. “Not sure.”

I watched him. Concern was etched across his face, his dark eyes wide.

“We’re gonna have to stop, mi amor.” he leaned over further, carefully studying his horse’s stride. “I think he picked up a rock.”

“Okay.”

I guided Skylark off the road behind him and awkwardly slid off the saddle and to the ground. I was as graceful as a turkey; if Javier noticed, he didn't say anything. He was already inspecting the horse's front right hoof.

"I need you go hold him steady." Javier glanced up at me as he slid his hand into his sheath and pulled out his knife. "It's a fucking big rock."

"Of course." I gripped the bridle, steadying the horse's head like it might distract him. I wasn't sure it would actually work, but it was worth the try. Javier was firmly holding the horse's hoof in one hand and gently picking at the shoe. It took a few moments, but he gradually worked the rock loose.

"Need any help there?"

I looked up from Boaz and almost gasped out loud. Two men, both astride on tall chestnut horses, were staring at us. Black frock coats, black trousers, brocade vests and jaunty cravats. They had to be Pinkertons. Nobody that well dressed was going to stop and casually see if we were okay.

"Just finishing up." Javier walked around Boaz, planting himself in front of me. "My lady and I were just out for a ride. Horse got a rock in his shoe."

"Your lady?" The man closer to us snorted, cocking his eyebrow upward. "Either she's a whore or she's blind."

Javier's hands dropped to his holsters; I snaked my hands around his arm and tugged him back a step. "We should go, really. I want to go home."

The second man was staring at me. His gaze made the hair on the back of my neck stand up; it was like he was estimating the weight of a side of beef. He ran his hands down his scant beard. "You look familiar, Miss, I'm sure I've seen your face before."

"I'm sure you haven't."

"No, no, those eyes. Green, I'd say you're about five foot five." His eyes narrowed. "I've seen you in Washington before, Miss Dorsey. A girl like you shouldn't be with a man like him."

"You don't know anything about me."

"He'll swing when your father finds out he took advantage of you." The other Pinkerton chuckled. "And Arthur Morgan? Well, he'll be lucky if all he does is swing."

Javier pushed me backwards; at the same time, practically the same movement, he slapped the horses's rears and sent them scrambling away. The Pinkertons were screaming at us to stop and step back, but Javi wasn't listening. He wrapped his arms around me and shoved me to the ground behind a group of rocks.

He muttered in Spanish as he yanked out his guns. "You ever killed anyone, mi amor?"

I shook my head.

“If you want to live to fuck Arthur Morgan again, you’d better be ready to kill one now.” He shoved the pistol into my hand. “I know you have damn good aim. You take the one on the left, I take the one on the right. Then we get the hell out of here.”

I stared at him. It was one thing to shoot a cup out of Micah’s hand, but another to take someone’s life.

“Hey.” Javi clamped my chin with his hand, forcing my head steady. “You have to do this, mi amor. They ain’t leavin alive. And if they take you, Arthur’s gonna put a bullet in my brain and we don’t want that, right?”

I nodded, blinking back tears. I didn’t even know how to respond to him; these men had families. They had lives in Washington...

...but on the other hand, they’d hang Javier. They’d hang Arthur—or worse—and I couldn’t let that happen. I wouldn’t let that happen.

A bullet impacted with the boulder in front of us. Bits of rock and dirt flew into the air and flung in our faces; with it, a biting sear of pain sliced across my cheek. I cried out.

I lifted my hand to my face—blood.

“Shit. Shit, he fucking shot me!” I ran my tongue on the inside of my cheek. Well, no, my face was still there. Maybe not shot or maimed but...bleeding. A lot.

Javi leaned around the rock and fired, then rolled back to me. He ran his fingertips across my cheek. “A scratch, you’ll be fine. Unless they shoot us both, which will happen if you don’t help me out.”

The Pinkertons had to have heard him. One yelled out, “Come on, now, Miss Dorsey. These men aren’t worth it. This Mexican and that imbecile you left the train with? Your sister told it everyone: the newspapers, all of Washington and New York. Everyone knows you’re his whore. Is that what you want? An outlaw who has murdered and robbed and destroyed?”

I yanked the hammer back all the way. My cheeks blazing hot from the implied shame, tears and blood were flowing down my cheek. It’s what they all wanted: me to be the laughing stock of Washington and New York. To be so humiliated that I’d crawl home and beg for their forgiveness. And I’d rather die than leave Arthur or any of the gang.

I sucked in a sharp breath and exhaled slowly, until the shaking in my hands stopped. Javier had his hand over the rock, firing at the Pinkertons. When he slouched down to reload, one of them yelled out, “They aren’t worth this, Elizabeth, and you know that. That man doesn’t love you.”

I peered around the rock. One of the Pinkerton’s had dismounted, he had his shotgun lowered and was taking his sweet time reloading. I kept my eye on his face, the best area for a fatal shot—I didn’t want him to suffer. I wasn’t sure I could handle that.

With another sharp inhale, I leaned out just enough from the rock that I could steadily stretch out my arm. I breathed out.

I barely squeezed the trigger.

The gun fired with such force that my wrist snapped back from the kick. The Pinkerton immediately pitched backwards to the ground, a quick final twitch before he stopped moving. The other Pinkerton started cursing, badmouthing me and Arthur and Javi and everything around us, right down to the air we were breathing.

I ducked down close to Javier, squeezing my eyes shut. I didn't want to hear the things he was saying about Arthur. He could say what he wanted about me—I knew they weren't true—but the things he said about my friends...I couldn't take it.

He started firing. The shots were indiscriminate, hitting the rock and flinging bits of glass-like shards into the air. Javi pressed my face to his shoulder, covering the top of my head with his arms. I heard him counting out loud with each gun shot, “tres...cuatro...cinco...seis...siete...ocho...”

And when he reached twelve, when the firing stopped, he eased away from me and leapt to his feet. He had both guns now and held his arms out in front of him. He fired. Shot after shot, a burst of bullets fired so close together that it sounded like one, long explosion. The air was filled with the sulfury stench of gunpowder. My cheek throbbed.

Then it was silent.

I looked up at Javier. He was standing tall, his bowler still perched on his head. Straightening out his frock coat, he walked around the rocks and towards the bodies.

I eased up onto my knees. “What are you doing? Shouldn't we get out of here before the law shows up?”

“They'll be along. That's why we have to cover our tracks 'best we can.” He was rummaging through their coats, shoving money and valuables into his pockets. He ripped the badges off their coats and then cocked his head to the horses. “Steady them. We'll take them to the fence and Seamus can get rid of 'em.”

I listened to him without hesitation, anxious to get away from this stretch of road as fast as I could. “What are you going to do?”

He pumped the shotgun taken from one of the bodies. “Make sure no one knows who these puta were. Turn away, Elizabeth. You don't want to watch this.”

I led the two horses towards the tree line, where Boaz and Skylark had stopped. As soon as my back was turned, I heard the shotgun go off. I flinched. I knew what a shotgun blast could do to a man's face—and I knew that if I turned around, I'd be sick.

After a few moments, Javier was at my side, tucking the shotgun into his saddle. “Are you okay, mi amor?”



I nodded. I wasn't sure I was, but I didn't want to give it much thought. I'd killed someone. I'd shot a man for no other reason than the fact that he was what was separating me from Arthur. They'd have taken me away; they'd have killed Arthur and Javi and the others.

He hoisted me up onto Skylark and then abruptly grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Arthur would be proud of you, Elizabeth. You may have been born a society girl, but you're a damn good outlaw."

"Thanks, Javi."

He brushed his lips across my knuckles. "If you ever get tired of Arthur Morgan..."

"I won't."

He chuckled. "He's a lucky man, mi amor. Damn lucky."

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I thought Hosea was going to have a stroke when he saw me and Javi walk into camp.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to your face?" He reached his arms up to help me slide off the saddle. "Are you okay? Kieran, get water—Dutch, are there any towels over there? Bring them, now, she's hurt!"

It was an immediate uproar. Dutch, who barely ever acknowledged my presence, Hosea, Pearson, Kieran, and Miss Grimshaw were flocking around me, elbowing and pushing to look at my cheek. Javier chuckled, casually standing off to one side and pulling out a sleeve of cigarettes.

"I'm fine, it's just a scratch. It just bled a lot, but I'm okay. Really." I patted Hosea's hand and smiled broadly at him. "I think you're more upset than I am."

Dutch chuckled, pushing Hosea down into the chair next to me. "We've been Arthur's fathers a long time, Elizabeth, and neither of us want to see him mad. Go ahead and ask John what it's like."

Miss Grimshaw pushed past Dutch and shoved a glass of water in my hands. "You poor thing, we'll get you some bandages and warm water to clean that off. Pearson, get her some whiskey. Kieran, you said you can stitch."

I held up my hands, nearly dumping the water down the front of my new dress. "Nope, no one is stitching me. It's fine."

Kieran leaned over, peering at my face. "Can I touch your cheek, Miss Elizabeth...ugh, Miss Morgan, er, Miss Dorsey?"

"Yes." I tried to hold back a grin. "Elizabeth is fine, really. You don't have to be formal, Kieran, I'm nothing special."

"But you're Arthur's—" He dropped his voice to a considerably softer volume. "I ain't gettin Arthur's wrath against me again, Elizabeth, and I ain't tryin to get too familiar with ya. He'd

have a fit and I seen his fits. Almost got me with gelding tongs.”

“To be fair,” Dutch interjected, “That was Bill.”

Kieran touched my chin with one fingertip, applying barely enough pressure to tilt my head to the side. “I don’t think it’s deep enough to need stitches. You in much pain?”

“I’m fine, really. It’s just a scratch—from rocks, not even a bullet or anything.”

“It looks like a damn massacre.” Kieran glanced at me. His eyes were surprisingly soft, his demeanor a lot sweeter and shyer than I thought for someone who looked as rough as he did. “Arthur ain’t known for being soft. I’m glad I ain’t the one who did this to ya.”

“We took care of them.” Javier lit a cigarette. “Elizabeth’s a damn good shot. Don’t let that sweet face fool you.”

Kieran shook his head, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. “I don’t wanna know what he’s gonna say.”

“You might as well ask him.” Hosea nodded his head towards the front of camp. “He’s back.”

Kieran’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit. God damn it an’ shit.”

Hosea hustled over to Arthur’s side, evidently to warn him before he walked into what apparently looked like a blood bath. I saw Arthur’s head snap towards us, clearly looking for me, and then wrenching his arm out of Hosea’s grasp.

Javier snorted. “Better hide the gelding tongs, Kieran.”

Arthur stormed across camp, nearly knocking Kieran completely over. He had fresh bruises on his face; a wildness in his eyes I hadn’t seen before. “The hell happened out there, Javier, you tryin to get killed? Get her killed?”

“She’s fine.” Javier exhaled a mouthful of smoke. “Pinkertons found us on the roadside and started asking too many questions.”

“Pinkertons?” Arthur’s eyes widened, his hands brushing against his holsters. He looked at me. “The ones from the river? Milton and, uh, Ross?”

I shook my head.

He glared at Javier again. “You handled it?”

“Of course I fucking handled it.”

“They dead?”

Javier nodded. “I got one, she got one. Sold the horses at the fence. And your girl is a master there, so ya know, she won’t take shit from anyone. I’ll ride with her anytime.”

Arthur was shifting back and forth, his anger practically steaming out his nose. He cradled the side of my face with his hand, inspecting the cut on my cheek. “You okay?”

I nuzzled against his hand. “I’m fine. It was just a ricochet from a rock.”

“We ain’t gonna be able to stay here much longer.” Arthur’s brow was still furrowed, his glare shifted from Javier to Dutch. “They’re getting too close, only a matter of time until they come ridin into camp and take her—and hang you.”

Dutch crossed his arms over this chest. “God damned Pinkertons. They’re backed by Cornwall’s money, they got the chatter of the President. This Milton...he’s not going to stop until he rips us apart.”

Arthur looked at me again, his eyes intense. “I ain’t gonna let that happen.”

“Take Charles and head south towards Rhodes.” Dutch scratched his chin, more like a nervous habit than an actual motion related to thought. “Pinkertons have their eyes on the roads to the west. We move, cover our tracks. Be done with all of them; a few more scores and we’re set.”

Arthur huffed through his nose, rolling his shoulders forward. “At first light—“

“No, not at first light. Now. We got Pinkertons breathing down our necks and that damned Colm O’Driscoll still out there. You’re my red right hand, Arthur, I need you out there on the front lines.”

I wasn’t sure I liked the thought of Arthur being the ‘red right hand.’ He looked exhausted, literally beat to the bone. But, like he always seemed to do, he nodded. “Lemme just get something to eat and we’ll ride.”

He stepped away from the campfire, waiting while I fell into step beside him, and then headed in the direction of his tent. “I’m sorry darlin...”

“I can get you some soup from Pearson, if you’d like. It was something with potatoes and venison...and actually pretty good. I mean, comparatively. Other than the carrots being crunchy, god, I hate crunchy carrots in soup.”

He chuckled, his fingers stretching out and brushing against my palm. “I don’t need anything. I just wanted a few minutes alone with you.”

My heart swelled in my chest, shooting out like flares of light down my arms and spine. I wanted more than just a few minutes; I wanted all night. I wanted forever.

But I didn’t say that.

He sat on the cot, leaning forward and rubbing his face with his hands. “Christ, I don’t want to leave you.”

I crawled behind him, sliding my arms around his strong, broad chest and held him tightly. Resting my uninjured cheek against his back, I breathed in deeply. He smelled like sweat and

musky cologne; a smell I was quickly attributing to home. “Dutch...he, uh, seems to have a very specific plan in mind.”

“Somethin like that.” He sighed, trailing his hands down my arms. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t know if my heart’s in it anymore. He wants to get enough money to disappear, but I don’t think it’s gonna be that easy. Not now. Not when people don’t want us no more.”

“I want you.”

He chuckled. “That’s because you’re my sweet girl. And...you look damn beautiful in that dress. Makes your eyes even prettier than what’s seared in my mind.”

“I was hoping you liked it.”

“I like anything you wear.” he lifted my hand to his lips, individually kissing each fingertip. “I like it when you wear nothin’. But this...damn.”

“You should see the stockings I got. Horribly ordinary.”

“On these gorgeous legs, they’re extraordinary.” He slid his hand to my leg, slowly sliding the dress fabric up. “You know I don’t want to leave ya tonight, right?”

“I know.” I hugged him tighter. “Do you need me to do anything while you’re gone?”

He tugged me around him, urging me up into his lap and into his arms. “Just stay as sweet and beautiful as ya are now. No more gettin into shootouts with Pinkertons.”

“I was scared.”

“I know.” He touched his forehead to mine, his fingers gently brushing against the cut on my cheek. “This damned well isn’t what I wanted. I’m supposed to be the one keeping you safe.”

“You are.” I guided him to me, very softly kissing his lips. “Go and find us a new, safe...uh, safe-ish place to live.”

He sighed deeply. “If I was gonna find a safe place for you, darlin, I’d take you away from all this. Just take my money and run away together.”

“Someday.” I pressed my lips to his forehead. He looked so damn sad, like he’d found himself on a precipice and was torn between turning around or jumping. “Hey. I’m going to be here when you get back. I’m not going anywhere.”

He smiled faintly, wrapping his arms around me and holding me tight. “This life...the things we do...just digs us deeper into hell. This ain’t the life I want for ya, sweetheart. I don’t want ya having to worry about me or be scared they’re coming for ya.”

I pulled back just enough so I could cradle his face in my hands, gently running my fingertips across his faint beard. “I love you, Arthur. Nothing will change that, not if we live here or some other camp or some big fancy house in Washington.”

He looked up, his eyes shiny and wide like they were about to fill with tears. And he kissed me: fierce, passionate; a hunger that arched from his mouth to his hands, tightly cupped at my waist. When he spoke, he stayed so close that his lips brushed against mine with every word, “I love you, too, ‘Lizbeth. Promise me you ain’t gonna forget that.”

I shook my head. “Never.”

He kissed me again, his lips parting instantly and caressing my lower lip; it deepened further—hungrier, more frantic—

And then he pulled away. “What I wouldn’t give just to sleep next to you tonight.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, gently running my fingers through his closely cropped hair. “I don’t think we’d sleep much.”

“Fuck no we wouldn’t.” He chuckled and then gazed at me intently, his smile turning shy. “You sweet, young thing. Here I am getting older and uglier and you’re prettier than anything I ever seen.”

“The word you’re looking for is handsome. Fucking handsome.” I pursed my lips together coyly. “We can negotiate over the ‘old’ part.”

He laughed and again held me close, kissing me and cradling me and whispering the sweetest—and most delightfully dirty—things to me. We both knew he was on borrowed time, so when he picked me up and gently set me down in front of him, I fought every single muscle in my body to try and look relaxed and pleasant. I didn’t want to make him feel worse than he clearly already did: his eyes were downcast, his brow furrowed in a deep scowl. He said, “I’ll be back when I can, darlin. I swear it to ya.”

I raised up on my tiptoes and gently kissed him. “You stay safe.”

He looked at me with longing; with this fleeting grimace of anger that made me think—just for a split second—that he’d stay. But he didn’t. He couldn’t.

And long after he left, I laid in his cot with my face pressed to his pillow, and sobbed. Every time he left was just another reminder that he might not come back. That thought, that horrible shadow in my mind I refused to let take hold, scared me more than anything. I knew what I’d gotten myself into, I fully realized the lifestyle and the risks that came with what he did. I could look the other way. But I was never going to be the same.

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