

LOVE'S SLAVE



by
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I twisted and turned in the carriage uncomfortably.

“What on earth were they thinking when they pulled this corset so tight.” I muttered, my actions causing some strands of my bright red hair to slide out of the perfectly pinned bun Miss Leslie had put it in, and causing Gabriella beside me to look most ferocious.

“Do keep still child, and it is most improper for a young lady

to speak openly of her under garments.” Ms Leslie scowled.

I glared at her.

“So I guess I would be well out of place to point out that these pantaloons are itchy as well?” I said, her mouth mutated into a shocked O, and I giggled, it pleased me no end to go against the rules and regulations that society took great pains to lay down, especially the really stupid, pompous, aggravating ones. My joy was short lived however; as Ms Leslie rapped me hard on my knuckles with a strong stick she kept for disciplining us girls. I drew back my hand swiftly and fought back a tear, I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing just how much that hurt.

“Have the last ten years at Franklyn's Accomplished and Refined .Training School thought you nothing?” She demanded.

'FARTS by name and FARTS by nature' I thought angrily.

“Of course mame.” I said, using my most submissive voice.

“Your father would be quite upset to see that he has paid handsomely to have his daughter properly trained, only to

see you behaving like a common scullery maid.” Ms. Leslie informed me. I zoomed her out, she would lecture like that for an hour now, it was pointless listening, she had nothing to say that I wanted to hear. Besides, I was on my way home, after ten years of being away from my family, and I didn’t need to spend the last bit of the journey listening to a lecture.

I sighed heavily, remembering the last time I had been home on the plantation. Immediately my mind raced back to Wes. I had been only eight years old at the time, and Papa had brought a new slave boy home, his name had been Wes. I sighed again; Wes had been nothing like the other slaves at home. Honestly, some of the slave boys were pretty cute, I giggled and Ms. Leslie stared at me so I tried to look upset about what she was saying, if she had any idea what I was thinking she’d beat me good for sure. She looked satisfied with my penitent face and continued talking.

Yes, some of the slave boys were cute, but not like Wes. He had only been ten years old at the time, kind of skinny, and short; I smiled to myself at the memory. I remembered when they had first dropped him off at the plantation. He cried so; he hung on to the driver’s leg and wouldn’t let him go, and kept begging for his mom. He was such a wimp! No one bothered with him, when the coach drove off Papa just gave him a sad look and went inside. I had watched the

whole thing from the door, on account of Ma thought that hanging around the delivery of slaves wasn't appropriate for a young lady. Another one of those stupid, idiotic rules society makes.

I had wanted to go to him; I wasn't even sure why, I guess seeing him crying like that, looking so hurt and stuff. When I went to bed that night, I had peeped through my bedroom window and seen Wes, he was outside sitting alone by the barn and crying. I have no idea what had possessed me, but I had climbed through my bedroom window in my night dress and gripped the tree which was just outside my window and then scampered down to the ground. I knew not why I had done it, but I was already down there, so I had headed over to him.

He had stood up as soon as he saw me, and rubbed the back of his hand across his face, looking kind of embarrassed that I had caught him crying. I had planned to scowl him, to tell him he was behaving like a complete baby and that he should be ashamed of himself, but when he stood up and looked at me, my whole heart completely melted.

Wes was a mulatto, a mixture of a white and black parent. I had seem some of them before, but Wes was way different. His skin was this beautiful caramel color, like how they always colored the Greek gods, and totally smooth, even at

eight I wanted to reach out and run my hand along his arm, but I resisted. He was good looking, he was ever so good looking, and again, even though I was just eight I felt sure I now understood what Ma meant when she said how some young men are so handsome that they have ladies swooning at their feet, I definitely felt a swoon coming on. I wanted to smile at the memory, but I knew Ms. Leslie would not be pleased.

That wasn't all about Wes, the fact that his face was so perfectly proportion, everything about him was gorgeous and I could hardly imagine God could create someone more beautiful, no, what was more was his eyes. I gagged even as I remembered them, he had these bright green eyes that seemed like pools that you could just totally lose yourself in, and they were so filled with expression. Hurt, pain, betrayal, and a complete look of hopelessness; to this day I have no idea what came over me, I just ran to him and held him in my arms and pressed my lips against his cheek.

He seemed so surprised, he stared at me for like a full five minutes, and then he kissed me back, it was more of a peck, but it was on my lips! That was when all hell broke loose, because that was when Papa turned up.

I groaned at the memory, my groan must have been well

placed for Ms. Leslie said.

“And indeed you should groan, you have been nothing but trouble from the day you landed at Franklyn’s Accomplished and Refined Training School...”

She continued speaking and I zoom-ed her out again. I rubbed my face with my hands remembering how Papa had stared at Wes and then dragged me by the arm into the house. By morning I was being carted away to the school for FARTS! I sighed, but at least I had seen Wes one more time, as the carriage had turned out of the sight of our home, I had seen Wes, he had been waiting there for me. He had hailed Tom, our house slave, to stop the carriage and he had; and then Wes had run up to us. I knew Tom was quite uncomfortable with the idea, but I suspect he allowed it on account of the fact that we were both children, and he didn’t think that much would come out of us having a brief word.

I remembered that Wes held my hand through the carriage window and I smiled at him, I was crying, I was so afraid of leaving home, leaving my family and now leaving Wes. He slid a chain from about his neck, it held a fine signet ring, and I wondered briefly how a slave would come about something as expensive as that. I took it and pressed my lips to it, and hid it among my stuff. Tom was starting to get impatient, but I didn’t want to leave Wes, then he said, ‘I

love you.'

Oh my goodness, even the memory of those words made my heart race; I glanced through the window anxiously. Just about five minutes before the homestead came into view, before I saw Wes again. I smiled happily, I couldn't help myself, and Ms. Leslie glared at me. The last thing I had told him was that I loved him too, and that I would come back, that I would come back to be with him.

When we reached the homestead, I was so anxious I peered out of the window and felt Ms. Leslie's stick against my knuckles, I drew my head back in swiftly.

"Ladies must not be officious." She said. I nodded demurely, Gabriella had a sickening grin on her face, Ms. Leslie's little pet.

The three of us sat there patiently, well at least they seemed patient, I was so anxious for someone to come and open the door for us. One minute later I saw my father's face as he opened the door. I smiled broadly and threw myself upon him, he laughed heartily.

"Marissa Cegan!" Ms Leslie screeched, but I paid her no mind, with my arms about my father's neck I was sure she

couldn't reach my knuckles.

My mother was making her way towards the carriage; she walked so daintily she looked as if she was practically floating, the very way the teachers at the FARTS school taught us to walk.

I released Papa and gripped her about her neck, she laughed in spite of herself.

"We have missed you." She said, her slender arms surrounding my waist and patting me gently.

"And I you!" I said, grinning happily.

"And where's my welcome, sis?" That was Rex, my older brother; he was twenty five years old and still unmarried, for he was a complete man whore. I hugged and squeezed him happily.

"And who is the lovely young lady?" He asked, his attention already taken with Gabriella. I sighed.

"This is Gabriella Santini," Gabriella curtsied, glancing away modestly in a blush that looked completely false, "She

was one of the young ladies that trained at the FA...School with me. She graduated with honors and having turned eighteen as well, she is enroute to her home, which is just five days ride from here.” I explained, my family bowed politely at Gabriella and Ms. Leslie cleared her throat.

“Oh, forgive my manners. This is Ms. Leslie, she has graciously,” I emphasised the gracious, “agreed to accomodate us to our several homes in the capacity as chaperone. When Gabriella goes on to Fontane, her home town, Ms Leslie will go on with her and then leave her there and head back to the School.”

Ma nodded.

“I thank you so much for taking care of our little girl.”

Ms. Leslie smiled; I could see she was not accustomed to it.

“So how long will you be staying with us, before you move on to Fontane?” Rex asked. Gabrielle did another false blush and turned away.

“We had hoped to stay here for at least a week, we have been on the trail for sometime and we could use the rest before we start out again.” Ms Leslie explained.

“Of course. Say no more, I shall have one of my boys fix a

room up for you.” Papa offered, and Ms. Leslie curtsied politely. I looked around; I had hoped that I would see Wes, that he would have come out to see me arrive. I felt remarkably disappointed as I headed into my home. I hadn’t heard anything from him for ten years. I stopped suddenly and Gabriella crashed into me, oh no, what if he had died? Or what if Papa had sold him off to another plantation? I had to find him; I had to know what happened.

“Really dear, you ought not to walk and stop so suddenly.” Ma said. I apologized to Gabriella but my mind was far away, far away to wherever Wes was.

“Anisha,” Mom called to a young servant girl in the doorway, “Prepare the guests rooms and have someone take our guests up.”

Anisha curtsied from the doorway and then hurried off. When we stepped into the door a wave of nostalgia overtook me and I felt a tear spring to my eye, home after ten years. Rex draped his arm over my shoulder and pulled me to him.

“Welcome home, Sis.” He whispered into my ear, and I hugged him.

I was pleased to see that my room had not been touched; it was exactly as I had left it. I hugged each of my stuffed toys individually, calling them by the names I had given them so many years ago. I smiled happily and stripped out of my traveling clothes and dropped them on the floor, there was already water in a basin waiting for me so I washed up quickly and dried myself.

“Bother!” I muttered angrily, none of the servants had brought my bags up; I had nothing to put on. Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

“Hello?” I called; this was pretty annoying; I shall have to put back on my dirty travel clothes.

“Wes, Miss, with your luggage.”

OH MY GOSH. I thought I was going to get a heart attack right there. Wes, Wes, Wes was right outside my door. OH MY GOSH, I just couldn't believe it. I had waited ten years to see him again. I rushed forward towards the door and then stopped, I wasn't dressed, I rushed back and grabbed my traveling clothes and then stopped, I didn't want Wes to see me in some boring, black, dirty traveling dress so I stopped and tossed it back on the floor and rushed back to the door naked, and then stopped, I couldn't very well open the door to him naked could I, I stopped again and hurried back to

the dress.

“Miss?” Wes’ voice sounded a little impatient.

“Just a moment please.” I muttered, pulling the dress back on minus all the under garments. I hurried to the door and then stopped again for the millionth time; I didn’t want him to think I was desperate or something. I leaned back on my wardrobe and tried to look casual.

“Come in.” I said calmly, but my heart was doing all kinds of back flips. I was so excited to be seeing Wes again, would he want to hold me, or hug me? Would he ask me about the ring he had given me? Oh my gosh, this was absolutely mind racking. The door opened and my knees almost buckled. He strolled into my bedroom, he didn’t even look at me, but I got a completely good look at him.

He was tall, way, way taller than I remembered, in fact he looked as if he could have been six foot three or four, and my head was barely reaching his flipping chest. About which, seemed to be very well developed, I actually licked my lips as I stared at him. I could see the muscle in his biceps tense as he took my clothes trunk over to the center of the room.

“Shall I put it here?” He asked. His voice was so deep and sexy, I held onto the bureau so I wouldn’t fall.

“Wes.” I whispered. He turned around to face me and my mouth dropped open. No one had the right to look that good. He had strong features, handsome, but really strong, and totally kissable lips. His black hair nipped at the nape of his neck, long and curly at the edge, too long in fact and he wore a string about it in a ponytail, it made him look very sexy. But it was the eyes that caught my attention; his eyes were still that beautiful bright green that stirred my heart, only now, they were completely emotionless.

“Wes.” I choked out, racing over to him. I had no idea what he might have been through while I had been gone, but I could see the hardness of life etched in his hard cold eyes. I could change that, I would change that, I would make all the pain he suffered go away. I wrapped my arms around Wes and pressed my face against his chest.

“I missed you.” I whispered. The next thing I know I felt his hands on both sides of my waist and he was picking me up off of the ground and tossing me onto the bed. I gasped, what remained of my bun coming completely undone and my red hair cascading around my shoulders as I stared at Wes in shock.

“What?” I muttered.

“Stay the hell away from me!” He said, and started to walk towards the bedroom door. I sprung up from my bed and gripped him by the arm, fighting to pull him around towards me; he was too strong so I had to dash in front of him instead.

“You said you loved me!” I yelled. He stared at me, that same irritating emotionless look on his face.

“I was ten years old, grow up.” He responded. I glared at him, my breast heaving with pain and annoyance, how could our moment back then seem to mean so little to Wes.

He shucked me out of his way and continued his walk to the door.

“Stop. I order you to stop. You are our slave, and you have to do what I tell you.” I never thought I would have said those words, and I certainly never thought I would have said those words to Wes. He made a laughing sound, but not a pleasant one.

“Ah. So much for love.” He said sarcastically, and then he stopped and turned on his heel and faced me. I hadn't

realized how close I had been to him, my heart fluttered as we stared into each other's eyes, his green and cold. It wasn't that I didn't know that a relationship between Wes and I was bound to be filled with problems, I wasn't stupid, white girls and black boys didn't fall in love, society dictated that. But I didn't care; ten years ago I had found something in Wes that ten years later I had found in no other boy. True, I had only been a girl, but I was a woman now, and I still wanted him. All those feelings were still there, and they were multiplied, in a way that only a woman would feel for a man she was in love with. I knew Wes was the one, and I was ready to fight the world to be with him, the problem was, it seemed I had to fight him as well. But guess what, if I have to fight him too, I darn well will!

I raised onto my tip toe, allowed my arms to encircle his neck, allowed my fingers to entangle in the thickness of his hair, pressed my body against him, so he could feel me, and then pressed my lips against his, allowing my tongue to dart out and lick his mouth before pressing for entry.

Chapter 2

Wes pinned his lips together, blocking entry of my tongue and he clenched his teeth. My; but he was annoying;

however did he become such a jerk in but ten short years. I released my hold from about his neck and stepped back and stared at him.

“May I go now then?” He asked politely. I slapped his face and he stared at me, his face that same emotionless mask.

“You are completely insufferable!” I yelled at him, he just continued to look at me completely bored, I slapped his face again. This time I had the pleasure of seeing that he clenched his teeth just slightly.

“Thank you.” He said drily, and I balled my hands into two tiny fists and fumed. I had no idea that Wes would be so complicated.

“Why are you being so difficult?” I screamed at him, “You know you love me!” I was breathing quite erratically; the entire situation was most upsetting. I had waited ten years to be with Wes, and he was rejecting me. Me! Really; the nerve of it.

“May I leave now?” He asked again. I thought I would scream, I slapped his face a third time. Even though his face maintained that cold, hard expressionless look, I could see he had balled his fist at his side and his jaw stiffened above the firm clenching of his teeth, but he did not speak.

“I love you, and I want you. Why do you resist so?” I demanded.

“I don’t want you.” He answered simply. I reached out my hand to strike his face again, but this time he caught it and glared down at me.

“If you would beat me, Miss, at least have the decency to have me tied up first.” His words were said in a harsh growling voice.

“Oooohhhhh..” Was all the sound I could manage at that point. I stood there, suspended, his large hand the captor of my tiny wrist.

“I don’t want you.” He repeated again, then he picked me up by my slender waist with what appeared to be no effort and tossed me onto the bed, the impact caused me to bounce into the air and then land again on the bed. Oooooohhhhhh, but he was such a brute! He did not even look back at me, but started to stroll casually towards the door; then he tugged it open and strolled out without another word.

I laid there on my bed, completely dumbstruck. But life is strange, one sits, stands, sleeps and eats concentrating on a matter, convinced in one’s own mind that a matter will play out a particular way, and then, when the matter occurs every thing is so completely different. I had indeed

imagined many a reaction from Wes when I returned, but in my wildest dreams, and some of them had been pretty wild, I had never imagined that Wes would be so cold towards me. I brushed a tear from my eye and swallowed hard. I was not the crying type, but a broken heart was a most painful thing. I scampered out of my bed and sieved through the trunk Wes had brought in and pulled out a black dress and tossed it on the bed. The dress suited my mood perfectly; I brushed another tear from my eye as I busied myself dressing.

There was another knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I shouted, brushing tears from both eyes now.

“Anisha.” A girl’s voice called.

“Come, please.” I said, brushing away what I hoped were the last remnants of tears. I hated Wes, I absolutely hated him. I didn’t want him anymore, why he could take a flying leap off of the Niagara Falls and I should not care one itty bit – in fact, I shall cheer him on. The thought made me feel less sad. I forced a smile, even as Anisha entered the room.

“I’ve come to help you dress, Miss.” Anisha explained. I nodded at her and turned around, the dress had some complicated lacing at the back that I would need help with to draw it tight about me. She hurried over and started to

pull the laces tightly, bending her knee into the small of my back in order to draw the laces tightly, I yelped.

“My, my, Anisha, but you are strong. What on earth have they been feeding you here?” She giggled, and I liked her immediately.

“Do leave some room for me to breathe my dear; I do have an awful habit of needing air.” I explained, she thought that funny as well, but she stopped pulling against the laces.

“You need none of these corsets and lacings; my lady has a perfectly dainty body already.” She said.

“Do call me Marissa, I do not stand on much ceremony.” I explained, turning around to face her. She was really quite a pretty girl, nice full lips, clean dark smooth skin and bright brown eyes that made one feel she was excited just to be speaking to one. Had she been born a different colour she would have made a fine lady indeed.

“Oh course, Miss, I mean Marissa. Won't your father be upset with me for being so familiar, Miss Marissa?” She asked.

“I hardly see why he should concern himself with such a thing, after all, it is my name, and not his that is being called.”

She nodded hesitantly.

“Will that be all, Marissa?” She asked me.

“Yes please...” I had started to walk away from her and then I stopped. Wes had been most obnoxious to me, why I would be less than myself if I did not even the score with him, and perhaps I could obtain Anisha’s unwitting help in my scheme.

“Wait, Anisha.” I called to her swiftly as her hand had but just rested upon the knob of the door.

“Marissa?” She turned around, a questioning look upon her face.

“What do you think of my room?” I asked her. I could see she was unsure as to the correct way to respond.

“It appears to be a fine room, Marissa.” She eventually settled for a safe response. I nodded in agreement.

“Indeed, though I felt that it might be nice to put away some of the toys, and perhaps put my chair a touch closer to the window.” I mused. She was looking at me thoughtfully.

“A fine idea, Marissa. Shall I summon one of the boys to assist you with lifting?” She suggested. I suppressed a smile; the whole thing is like taking candy from a baby.

“I don’t know many of the boys; I fear I would be most

uncomfortable with a strange boy in my room.” I bit my lip and stared at her, looking as innocent and loss as I could muster.

“All the boys are well behaved Miss, ah Marissa. There is no need to be fearful of them.” She assured me. I nodded understandingly, dear me I thought, I shall have to prod her more into the direction I desire her to go.

“Perhaps if it were one boy, maybe one I have met already, I might not feel so nervous.” I suggested. She looked thoughtful again and I knew she was trying to think of which of the boys I would have met since I returned home. I could feel myself growing impatient at her long deliberation; I did not wish to suggest Wes, although clearly he was the one on my mind, for I did not wish her to believe that there was something happening between us. The less people knew of my feelings for Wes, the better for both of us.

“The only person I can think of is Wes.” She said, rubbing her finger against her lip, I thought it quite a cute habit.

“Well, Wes it is then.” I hoped I didn’t sound too anxious.

“Perhaps I should send another boy with him to help with the moving. Your father doesn’t usually have Wes do much lifting as he has been assigned to handle the books.” Anisha explained. I nodded knowingly.

“I’m sure even a paper pusher would be quite capable of

shifting a few toys and a small chair.” I pointed out. She nodded, curtsied and headed out the door, only stopping to look back and say, “I shall send Wes up directly after dinner.”

I kept my face completely blank, but as soon as she left the room I allowed a huge grin to spread across my face. You are so going to pay, Wes. I said to myself with a grin, this shall surely teach him not to trifle with my feelings. Twenty minutes later I bounced happily down the stairs to participate in my family dinner.

Chapter 3

Dinner seemed to take an inordinately long time. Papa demanded that I tell him all about the School, and Ms. Leslie kept cutting in to add her own stories. Then Gabriella spent much of the evening pretending that she had no interest in my brother while doing everything in her power to attract his attention. Really, I could not see the point, why not tell my brother that she liked him and be done with it! In spite of being at the FARTS school for ten years, I still didn't get why a girl couldn't be more direct with her feelings towards a boy. Why should she have to sit back and wait until he said he cared for her? I shall never understand it.

After an hour and a half at the dinner table I fanned my face lightly, if nothing else, I had learned how to feign fatigue at FARTS.

“Dear me today has been most tiring, I am completely fatigued.” Rex was the only one who looked at me suspiciously.

“Surely you too are not ready for bed so early, Gabriella.” My brother said.

“I dare say I may be encouraged to stay up one more hour.” Gabriella said; Miss Leslie looked at her very disapprovingly.

“I shall stay up as well and keep Ms. Gabriella’s company” She said. My brother looked completely dejected.

“Indeed; you poor child, such a long ride and now us keeping you up so late. You must retire to bed immediately.” Ma insisted.

“Of course.” Papa and Rex stood up from the table as I got to my feet, looking as frail as I could muster. I floated out of the room so daintily I even impressed myself, as soon as I was out of their sight I bounded up the steps two at a time, and there he was, standing pressed casually against the wall of my room. I slowed down immediately, proceeding up the balance of the steps most ladylike. From the half smirk on his face I fear he must have seen part of my crazy dash, I

shall have to disillusion him as to the reason for my hurry.

“Wes, but you are early.” I said “I thought I might be able to change before you arrived.” I lied. Do forgive me for lying, Lord. I prayed silently.

“Anisha asked me to come at six. She didn’t wish me to be in your room too late.” He explained politely, I was still breathing quite heavily from my run up the stairs, and I could see he was grinning at me. Well, we shall soon put an end to that grin.

“Well, come in then. I shouldn’t wish to delay you any further.” I said, bustling into my room, Wes following close behind me.

“Well, I shall like to do some redecorating.” I explained, going to lie on my bed. He raised an eyebrow, his face still expressionless.

“Well, whatever Miss requires.” He said submissively, I grinned brightly.

“I wanted my bed by the window.” I explained. He raised both eyebrows now.

“It is quite a big bed, perhaps I should call Mark and have him come up and assist me.” He suggested. I shook my head ferociously.

"Nonsense," I said, "Why you are as strong as a horse. you picked me up this afternoon as if I weighed nothing, I am quite sure you are able to lift up a simple bed." I finished firmly. "Or are you seeking to depend on the familiarity of our relationship to get out of the job?" I said, staring at him. "For, if we were friends, I might be persuaded to hear your perspective on this moving matter, but if we are just mistress and slave, well then my job is to order and yours is to obey. So which is it Wes?" I looked questioningly at him, he sighed heavily. I could see determination etched on his face and I knew he had no intention of claiming friendship to get out of the task. I smiled to my self.

"Where would you like the bed, Miss?" He asked. I noted how very heavily he stressed upon the word 'Miss'. I pointed next to the window. "Would it be too much, Miss, to ask for you to get out of the bed while I'm moving it?" He asked. I looked appalled.

"But I am tired, where else will I rest?" I asked innocently.

I watched as Wes laboriously dragged the bed across the room to the window. He really was quite strong, he straightened up and glared at me as soon as he was finished.

"Will that be all Miss?" He asked.

"Oh dear, I don't want the head facing that direction, can

you turn it please?" I said. He grunted an answer and then put his back into turning the bed about.

"No, I was wrong, it was most correct the other way." He exhaled a deep breath and then went about adjusting the bed again.

"I trust that you are happy, Miss." He said, wiping a bead of perspiration from his brow. I stifled a giggle.

"Dear me, I fear I prefer it where it was at the start." I exclaimed; he glared at me with unveiled anger, any pretext of emotionlessness completely gone.

"You're doing this on purpose." He accused; I looked up at him wide eyed and innocent.

"My, my, but is this the way you speak to my mother and father? You say there is nothing special between us, but look here, when I give you an instruction you respond to me more as if I was more your girlfriend than your owner." I pointed out. He clamped his hand over his mouth, biting back whatsoever he had desired to tell me, and made his way over to the bed and started tugging it back to where he had taken it from.

"Will there be anything else, Miss?" He asked, but I could see he was breathing heavily, all this lifting was taking its toll upon him, I wanted to smile, but I resisted the temptation.

“As a matter of fact, Wes...there is.” His whole face fell and I had to bite my lower lip to hold back a laugh.

“The wardrobe you see, I felt it might look better by the window.” I explained. He sighed heavily and stared at me.

“Are you sure, Miss. It looks remarkably well where it is.” I giggled.

“And it shall look much better by the window.” I pointed out.

He tugged his shirt over his head and placed it on a chair nearby, it was already becoming damp. I stared at his naked chest and found myself inhaling deeply. That same beautiful tanned caramel colour ran evenly along his body, and the muscles in his chest and abdomen screamed touch me. Oh, but I wished I had some cold water to throw over myself. He took a deep breath and began the laborious task of trying to shift the wardrobe over to the window. I watched with great interest as his muscles flexed and tensed under the strain. I pursed my lips longingly, oh but if I could just press my lips against the dampness of his chest. I fanned myself. How on earth did this boy make me feel so turned on without even trying? A bead of perspiration trickled down his chest and disappeared into the waist of his pants. I found myself imagination my hand following it. I fanned harder.

Oh, but he was stubborn though. Many a man would have

long time begged my pardon and be done with it, but not Wes. He was bent on showing me that I was no different to him than all of the other members of my family.

When he reached the window with the wardrobe he collapsed against it and breathed out heavily. His chest was marvellously glistening, I breathed in heavily, my, but he was soooo hot, and I didn't mean from all the lifting.

"But you should go into interior decorating." I complimented and he looked at me, curiosity scrawled across his face. "For I do believe you were right. It did look much better where it was."

"But of course." He grunted, panting and pressing the wardrobe back to its original position. I had to turn my face and bury it in the pillow, for I could no longer contain myself. My, but I did have an evil streak.

When he had finished he bent his body over, inhaling large breaths. I watched his body heaving with interest, the muscles in his back contracting and releasing.

"I'm still not sure about the bed." I said. His body whipped around and he stared at me, beautiful green eyes widened, I had no idea he still had so much energy in his body. The way he was staring at me; I could see he had definitely reached the end of his endurance, if he had to move another bit of furniture he was sure to pass out.

“You...” He had but just started to speak when he was interrupted by a knock on the door. Bother! I had been so looking forward to see what he should do now, we both knew he had reached the end of his rope, and would have to take some sort of stand.

“It is me, Miss, Anisha. The Master desires to have a word with Wes.” She said politely.

Double bother! Just when I had him totally broken! I watched him press himself up off of the wardrobe and stare at me. He strolled over to where he had cast his shirt and picked it up, pulling it on as I watched with a great deal of interest.

“I must leave, Miss. Perhaps Anisha might find you someone else to help you redecorate.” He said, some of the cockiness coming back to his voice. Darn it. Before I could speak another word he was headed to the door and pulling it open and stepping outside. I could hear just barely a part of the conversation he was having with Anisha. Why he was thanking her for rescuing him, the culprits, they had planned all along to interrupt the time Wes spent in my room. I set my face grimly, that Anisha was a great ally for Wes. It would be good indeed if I could have her become my ally instead. Their voices faded away and I settled down on my bed. I had still managed to drive Wes within an inch of breaking, that was still an accomplishment. I smiled and started undressing for bed. I simply couldn't figure out how

Wes had been able to turn off his feelings for me and I couldn't seem to turn off the way I felt about him.

Even though he treated me as if I didn't exist, I still wanted him, I still loved him. What on earth was I to do? A part of me felt convinced that this whole attitude of Wes's towards me was no more than an act, and behind the mask I would find the boy who had sworn his undying love for me. The boy who had given me his ring and his love, his most valuable treasure. The sound of voices below my window caught my attention. They were not loud voices, but one was laughing. I peeped out of my window, which faced the back of the house, which was quite a secluded area and saw Wes and Anisha standing near the horses' trough. Wes was hanging on to the edge of the trough and soaking himself with water, and then he slumped down and tossed himself into the trough entirely, while Anisha stood there, laughing and laughing and laughing.

I joined in the laughter from my position in the window; both Anisha and Wes looked up. I waved at them and Anisha looked most concerned, for she now knew that I knew that she had lied to me about father requesting Wes' company, though I was not upset with her about the matter. I stared down at them, I watched as Wes hauled himself out of the trough turned to my window and made an elaborate show of bowing to me. Then he strolled off, Anisha running behind to keep up with him.

Aaaaaahhhh, I sighed, you can run Wes, but I shall break down that wall you have built up against me.

Chapter 4

The next morning I woke early, but not nearly early enough, Anisha had already come and left my bathing water to await my rising. I sighed, I would so have loved to have spoken to the girl, but I gathered that she was still concerned that I might be upset with her. I washed myself and dressed hurriedly and headed downstairs for breakfast. Gabriella and Rex were already downstairs, Gabriella wearing a most smug look upon her face.

“Good morning, Gabriella, Rex.” I said politely, giving the slightest of curtsies.

“Morning, Sis.” Rex responded, a huge grin upon his face.

“Good morning, Marissa.” Gabriella said, returning my curtsy delicately. I glanced at the two of them suspiciously, for I did not trust my brother one tiny bit.

“But where is Miss Leslie?” I asked; turning my body about, expecting or perhaps hoping that she would be somewhere

in sight.

“She isn’t accustomed to the fresh country air and such laborious travel; she must have slept in late.” I glared at him, I so hoped he was not playing with Gabriella’s heart. I did not much care for the girl, she was pompous, egotistical and boastful, but in spite of all of that, she was like me, just eighteen and quite inexperienced. At FARTS we were never allowed to see boys, oh, they spoke of gentlemen quite often and never tire of informing us as to how we should conduct ourselves around them, but to actually see one was neigh impossible. The school was completely away from everything, the only male we saw was the delivery man, Old Thompson, and he was not that much to look at. I feared that Gabriella’s sudden exposure to a member of the youthful male species, especially one as charming as my brother, might well be her undoing.

“And Papa and Ma?” I asked.

Rex grinned most wolfishly, my, but I shall have to warn Gabriella about his trifling ways before she gets in over her head.

“Ma has left early to do some mid-wifery and Wes and Papa are having a discussion over the books in his office.” Rex informed me. “I thought it only polite to keep young Gabriella’s company in the circumstances.”

“Dear me, how sacrificial of you.” I said sarcastically; he chuckled and Gabriella gave me a hard look.

“Perhaps I may steal Gabriella away from you for a bit, I believe that we are in need of more flowers to decorate the house.” I explained, honestly, I just wished to get Gabriella away and whisper a discreet warning to her. My brother grinned at me knowingly, completely unabashed. He bowed politely as I tucked my arm through Gabriella’s and he kissed the back of her hand gallantly. I glared at him ferociously and he smiled and ambled off.

“Miss Leslie would tell you, dear Marissa, that sarcasm is not becoming of a lady.” Gabriella informed me as soon as Rex was out of ear shot.

“You would do well to stay away from my brother, Gabriella.” I said, totally ignoring her efforts at correcting me. She looked completely aghast.

“You would feign to correct my behaviour? You? You who have no idea as to what true ladylike behaviour is would dare to warn me of appropriateness?” She demanded. Well, I would never imagine that Gabriella could get so worked up about a matter, it would seem that her feelings for my brother were already beginning to grow quite deep.

“I do not wish to slander the name of my family, Gabriella. But I feel honour bond to tell you that my brother is no

gentleman.” I explained, as I tugged Gabriella along beside me into the garden so that we may pick some flowers.

“You have not seen your brother for ten years; he would have been no more than a boy, and you a little girl when you left here. You cannot possibly know what sort of man he has grown into.” She accused. I scrunched up my face and stared up at her, she was a full three inches taller than I.

“Ma wrote me regularly on the matters that went on at home, and her writings about Rex were not encouraging.” I said, stooping and plucking some daisies from the earth. Gabriella bent down beside me and filled her hands as well, then twisted her head towards me and said.

“But did we not learn that all men are driven my animal desires? Why Rex is no different from any other.”

I sighed heavily, Rex’s boyish good looks and smooth charm I dare say would be quite irresistible to some women, and I was starting to believe Gabriella was one of them.

“That may be so, Gabriella. But I believe that unlike most gentlemen, Rex has no desire to settle down and raise a family.”

Gabriella’s mouth opened wide with shock; then she slammed it shut swiftly.

“That is not what he has hinted to me. Perhaps the right girl can cause him to change his opinions of marriage.” She suggested; pulling two more flowers before straightening up.

“Perhaps.” I conceded, “And perhaps the wrong girl can get herself very hurt and humiliated.” I said. She slapped me across the face, quite hard.

“How dare you suggest that I would act the whore?!” She screamed at me. I stared at her, the side of my face hurting horribly, I was not prepared to accept that, why; I had no reason to warn the foolish girl, I have no care for her. What ever happened would be upon her own fool head. I folded my hand into a tiny fist and swung wide and hard and connected with her tummy. She gasped and bent over, my but she should know not to mess about with me. I was amazed to find that Gabriella was much tougher than she looked; she flew forward at me and gripped my dress so viciously she tore my blouse, exposing the gentle swell of my breast. I screamed with rage; why this was my favorite at home dress; now I shall have to darn it! I gripped her by her shoulder length brown hair and dragged her to the ground and then my hands pummelled her face repeated. I fear I must have gone insane, for as I sat on top of her, arms flaying, I did not even hear her screams, nor did I notice that she had stopped fighting back and was merely blocking her face from my onslaught.

“Marissa!” It was the loud, booming authoritative voice of my father that brought me back to my senses, followed swiftly by the feel of strong arms about my waist hoisting me into the air. I struggled, more as a reflex than to break free, until I heard Wes’ voice say.

“Behave yourself, Ris.” I calmed immediately, feeling myself sink back against the hardness of his body.

“She’s a monster!” Gabriella screamed; jumping to her feet and rushing towards me with fists outstretched now that Wes had me properly pinned. I cringed in anticipation of her lash, but it did not come, for Wes reached out and gripped her hand and lifted her and pinned her to him with just the one hand, while still holding me fast with the other.

“What is the meaning of this?” Papa demanded, his black eyes looking quite furious.

“She started it!” Both Gabriella and I chorused.

“Marissa. What is this matter about?” Papa asked, directing his glare at me. I held my head down shamefully, but I couldn’t tell him that I feared for the modesty of Gabriella, for it would surely cast aspirations upon her.

“She took the flower I had meant to pick.” Gabriella put in; surely they would not believe such a lame thing? Papa nodded, my, either he was quite naïve or he earnestly believed that women had nothing better to do than fight

over flowers.

“There are quite sufficient flowers about; you must not fight over such frivolous things. Why; even now young men are at war, giving their lives to ensure that we have the right to keep slaves, it hardly seems appropriate that you young ladies should fight over something as ordinary as flowers.”

We both held down our heads in shame.

“You may let them go, Wes.” Papa instructed, and I felt the warmth of Wes’ arm release me and I stared up at him longingly.

Rex had now made his way out of the house and was staring at us, I had totally forgotten that my dress was torn and my breast partially exposed until Papa said.

“Go, Marissa, and tidy yourself.” I blushed bright red, putting my hand upon my chest and racing off, but not before I had noted the slightest glimmer of life in Wes’ green eyes. I raced up the stairs, throwing the bedroom door open and rushing inside, I stopped suddenly, for Anisha was there, tidying up my room.

“Miss!” She dropped the pillow she was fluffing and staggered back, I wondered briefly if she thought I would strike her for the part she played in deceiving me.

“Do call me Marissa, and you ought not to look so petrified,

"I would never dream of hitting you." I said, "Well, not that I wouldn't hit you, for I did strike Wes, and Gabriella..." I bit my lip, my, but I was quite violent, Anisha was laughing.

"I do understand, Marissa. And I did hate to lie to you, but Wes instructed me to come and interrupt him." She explained, I nodded, I had thought as much. Anisha made her way over to me, helping me to get out of my dress.

"I should love it if you would be my friend Anisha, we are about the same age." I said, allowing the dress to fall to the floor and stepping out of it. In fact she was about five years my senior and had come to the homestead during the time I was absent.

"I would like that very much too, Marissa." She said, though her voice sounded a bit cautious.

"Thank you." I said, and then turned and gave her an impulsive hug.

"You are most unusual, Marissa." She said, shaking her head slowly.

"I shall take that as a compliment." I watched as Anisha shifted through my trunk for a new dress for me to wear, I had precious little clothes, I had been looked down upon in that fancy school as one of the poorer girls, but I hadn't minded, for I had known from the start that I did not belong there, I belonged with Wes.

“Shall I darn this for you?” Anisha asked, looking down at my discarded dress.

“You have quite sufficient chores; I shall darn it myself this afternoon.” She nodded and pulled a dress from the trunk and made her way towards me.

“What of this?” She asked. I nodded, there were only two other dresses in the trunk and they were for special occasions.

“Marissa.” Anisha said, as she pulled the dress up about me and drew it tight. It was one I had for five years and fitted me rather snugly, it was most embarrassing.

“May I speak boldly?” She asked.

“But of course, isn’t that what friends do?” I asked.

“Do you have an interest in Wes?” I blushed, but shielded my face from her view.

“Why ever would you ask that?” I played with the skirt of my dress, so many questions racing about in my mind.

“Forgive me, I am out of line. Wes is a slave, why would such a fine lady have an interest in a slave. How completely stupid of me to even consider it. I just thought that if you did there was something that you should know.” She said;

putting the finishing touches to the buttons at the back of my dress. My, but Anisha was clever, surely she knew that I should die of curiosity if I did not find out what it was I needed to know about Wes.

“Wes is my friend, any matter of interest to Wes, is a matter of interest to me.” I said, turning around to face Anisha. What information on Wes could Anisha possibly have?

“This information is only relevant, if he means more to you than a friend.” Anisha persisted. I did not care to have my feelings for Wes broadcast about the household, I was no fool, I knew such information on my feelings reaching my parents’ ears would not end well. Father had placed a great deal of his life’s savings to back the southern states in retaining slavery. Rex, who cared nothing for slavery, had refused to go and fight; which drove quite a wedge between him and Papa. I detested slavery; in that matter Rex and I were quite alike, after all, it was the cause for which I could not openly speak of my feelings for Wes. But I wished the war was over, it had been going on for years now, and such bloodshed on both sides.

“Can you keep a secret then?” I asked confidentially. She nodded, crossing her heart most emphatically.

“Okay then, I do have an interest in Wes. I am in love with him.” I said firmly, my head held high as I stared up at her.

“Well then, I promised and so I shall tell you what I believe you ought to know. You ought to know that Wes has a woman.” She said flatly; and I could feel my heart drop right down to my toes.

“And I am she.” She announced. I leaned back against the wall, allowing the bit of information to sink in. I stared at her, somewhat dumbfounded, Wes had gone ahead and married in my absence? I could not believe it! Why, if this was true, I would be honour bond to leave Wes alone. Could I even imagine such a thing, facing a life where Wes was not a part?

“Where is your ring?” I demanded, staring down at her hands, she lowered her head; it appeared my demand had caught her by surprise.

“We...we...are...well...” She stuttered, I glared at her, was this another trick that she and Wes had cooked up to discourage me?

“We’ve been trying to keep the relationship secret...as Wes has not asked permission of your father to have me.” She eventually got out; I nodded, more and more suspicious by the moment.

“So how long have you two been together?” I asked. Pushing myself up from the wall, finding strength in knowing that perhaps this information was not as reliable as Anisha

was making it out to be.

“Aaaaahhhh – three months.” She said. I nodded thoughtfully, facing Anisha directly.

“So Wes loves you?” I asked. She nodded her head and then went off busying herself about the room.

“And of course you should both appreciate it if I should stop making myself a pest by pursuing Wes?” I pressed, she looked over at me guiltily. “Have no fear for my feelings; I can be quite thick skinned.” I said, and then she nodded.

I sat down on the edge of my bed and looked at Anisha.

“You are my friend, yes?” She nodded, “Perhaps you may understand how I feel. I feel so certain in my heart that Wes loves me, and yet my head tells me that surely he cannot if he has such a beautiful woman such as yourself.” Anisha glanced down at the floor shyly.

“What should I do?” I pressed a finger to my lip and looked thoughtful; I could feel Anisha’s eyes upon me. “Why, perhaps I should simply ask him if he loves me or not?” I suggested.

“That seems a mighty fair thing to do, I’m sure if you ask Wes he shall say he is in love with me. But would you accept that?” Anisha wanted to know.

"I swear I shall accept it, and I shall bother you two love birds no more..." I insisted, I could see Anisha nodding her agreement, "Only but one condition."

Anisha stopped what she was doing and stared at me.

"Anything, Marissa, just name it." She said.

"I simply require that Wes gives me a proper kiss first, and then say he doesn't love me. Then I shall never bother either of you again."

"Oh." Anisha's face looked thoughtful, and then she smiled, "I accept. I am not so jealous that I cannot allow my boyfriend to spare a kiss to settle this matter once and for all."

I held out my hand and shook hers firmly.

"And shall we be friends afterward?" I asked.

"Yes." She replied.

"Then you are a bigger woman than I." I confessed and she giggled.

"I shall speak to Wes today, and we shall have this matter settled by nightfall." She curtsied politely and headed out of the door. I stared after her, it all sounded very final, what if I was wrong about Wes' feelings for me? What if Wes really

was in love with Anisha? I had spent the past ten years dreaming about being with Wes. Could I let go, and even if I let go, how could I ever go on, surely my life would lose its entire splendour without the hope of Wes in it?

Chapter 5

For the balance of the day I could think of nothing more than Wes' kiss. I hurried through all of my chores, and only suffered to eat lunch for my parents insisted. I would have begged out of dinner but Papa was looking at me most suspiciously. I suspect it was because he had caught me sticking my tongue through an O I had made with my fingers. One of the girls at the FARTS school had told us, and she was well respected as an authority as she had joined the school at sixteen years old and claimed to have experience with boys, why she had told us that a proper kiss required that you stick your tongue into the mouth of the boy. I couldn't imagine how such a thing would work, but I felt bond to practice, for I did not wish to fail at my last chance to win Wes' love.

I toyed with my food all throughout dinner, completely ignoring the fact that Gabriella and Rex were playing footsies under the table right under Miss Leslie's nose and

she appeared to have no clue. Every once in a while Gabriella would hit my foot by happenchance and then giggle most guiltily. I had long decided I was through with warning her about Rex, she was making her own bed, and she would have to lie in it. Besides, far be it for me to judge Gabriella, was I not bent and determined on pursuing a boy as well, and one who did not have the standing which Rex had behind his name. I pushed a forkful of food into my mouth as I believed Ma was about to make a comment about my eating, she turned back to her food immediately and I went back to twirling mine upon my plate.

Rex's foot struck mine and I glared up at him angrily, what, was it only I that the two could find to mistakenly strike. I would have so loved if they should strike Miss Leslie's foot that would serve them both right. I suspect the whole matter bothered me because I was so concerned about the matter with Wes. Surely dinner would be over any moment now.

"I fear I shall have to beg for an early night." Miss Leslie was saying, and she looked at Gabriella quite pointedly, who immediately got up from her seat, Papa and Rex rising at the same time, and begged to be excused.

I watched Miss Leslie and Gabriella leave the table, followed swiftly by Rex.

"I think I shall assist with the washing of the wares and then head on to my bed as well." I informed. My parents nodded and I hurried about tidying the wares and headed into the kitchen. When I had been a child, the plantation had much more slaves, we had slaves in the house that did all the shores, Ma had practically nothing to do but act a lady. But now I realized that they were fewer slaves and mainly male. Just two females who assisted Ma with cooking, cleaning about the house and such like. I found myself wondering if Papa might be going through a hard spell. I knew he had spent quite a bit on the School, and then with helping with the war and all. I sighed as I put the finishing touches to the wares and headed up the stairs, I wish I could ask him, but again, money matters were one of the many things thought to be too complicated for women. I pushed open my bedroom door and was pleased to see Anisha had already left a wash basin for me. I cleaned myself and put my dress aside. I picked up the dress Gabriella had ripped earlier, Anisha had darned it for me, she was such a darling girl. I slipped on the dress, I recognized that I would need Anisha to fasten the back of it for me, but I was not concentrating on that right now. Right now I was concentrated on the fact that Wes would be coming soon, and we would share a kiss, I breathed heavily, perhaps the last kiss we might ever share.

I sat on the bed nervously twisting my fingers, sticking my tongue out for practice and then drawing it back in. I really couldn't imagine what it was about a tongue that could make a kiss more special. I had been pondering this when I heard lowered voices outside of my door. I got up discreetly from the bed and pressed my ear against the door so I could hear more clearly. It appeared to be Wes and Anisha and they were arguing, although quite softly. I could barely but make out Wes scowling Anisha and insisting that something was a bad idea, and Anisha appeared quite offended by the matter, insisting that it was worth it to bring the matter to an end. When they knocked upon the door it startled me and I scurried back to my bed to sit innocently.

"Enter please." I called, and watched as Anisha strolled in with Wes close behind her. My, but to look at him just made my heart totally melt.

"Well, I've brought Wes." Anisha said, stating the obvious. I got up from the bed, stumbling forward slightly; I hadn't realized how nervous I was.

"You should know I am here under protest." Wes said; his eyes looking coldly at me.

"I imagine you would be." I responded, determined not to be daunted by his apparent disinterest.

“Well, shall we get this over with then, Marissa?” Anisha asked. I nodded solemnly and stood before Wes. I braced my fingers together and stretched them out, then I lurched from one side to the next, then I bent and then I reached up to the air on tip toe. Both Wes and Anisha were staring at me as if I had gone completely mad.

“One must warm up for such a big moment.” I pointed out, and Anisha giggled, Wes just glared at me coldly.

“Well, so much for an ice breaker.” I muttered, staring up at his hard cold face, my, but he could be quite intimidating when he tried.

“Is he not required to look pleasant for this exercise?” I asked, tilting my head just slightly to look at Anisha, she simply grinned at me.

“I fear that is as pleasant as Wes will get today.”

“Dear me, but I believe I’m starting to get cold feet.” I confessed.

“Can we get this over with, Ris?” Wes demanded, his voice sounded so angry. I felt tears sting the back of my eyes. Was he upset because he was being forced to kiss me,

when he would rather be kissing Anisha?

“Well, of course.” I stiffened my back and drew myself up to my full five foot four inch height – which made me feel quite tiny in front of Wes. I had asked for this test and I would carry it out, whatever the circumstances. I inhaled deeply and then spoke, fighting to calm the nerves that threatened to overpower me.

“Should I kiss you then, or should you kiss me. I’m not too partial; I am quite willing to go with whatever you might decide. I guess I should kiss you since I did request the kiss, but if you prefer, you can of course, I have no preference, except that perhaps I would wish to have my eyes closed during the kiss, I find opened eyes can be quite distracting, but if you are more com...” My babble was completely halted when Wes pulled me into his arms and pressed his lips hard against mine. His large hand spread across my back, his fingers grazed the top of my backside and pressed me hard against him, so that I could feel his hardness press against my body. I could feel the tenderness of my breast pressed against his chest and feel my heart racing most alarmingly. When his tongue plunged into my mouth I groaned most unladylike and my fingers found there way to his hair where they tangled into the soft black curliness there of. My, but I had no idea that a kiss could create such need; I could feel my entire body grow warm with desire for him. I found myself barely able to

contain myself and then he drew away from me, his hand still holding me against him.

“I love you, Ris.” He whispered and I completely melted into him.

“Oh Wes, my love. I wanted so much to hear that. Oh tell me again and again.” I whispered; pressing soft princess kisses across his face.

My joy was interrupted by a punch which landed on Wes’ shoulder, and which had been delivered by Anisha.

“Oh, I dare say you must be upset with me?” I said, I was remarkably saddened, for I had really liked Anisha.

“Wes is not my man, I told you that because this jerk asked me to, so that he could get you off of his back because he didn’t want your attention.” She glared at Wes most fiercely, “And now he spoils the whole thing by telling you he’s in love with you.”

“In my defense, I told you that this was a bad idea.” Wes explained. I looked from one to the other in confusion.

“What, you couldn’t utter five simple words? I. Do. Not Love. You? I could say those words in my sleep!” She yelled.

“So you’re not Wes’ woman then? I did suspect something was...” My words were drowned out as Wes focused on Anisha and pointed out.

“I told you this would be complicated.”

“You didn’t say you were in love with her.” She said.

“Why are you two arguing?” I demanded. I was completely lost, if Anisha was not Wes’ woman, whatever could the problem be?

“We’re arguing because I can’t be in love with you.” Wes explained, turning his attention back to me, I scrunched up my face.

“Why ever not? I’m in love with you.”

“I’m a slave, Ris. What kind of life could we have?” Wes demanded. I drew back from him slightly to take a good look at him. He was handsome, tanned skin, dark hair that hang past the nape of his neck which he wore in one, making himself look quite roguish, and brilliant green eyes. I knew that Wes had a negro parent, but to look at him, none could tell.

"A beautiful life, Wes. If you'd just give us a chance." I begged. He pulled me towards him.

"I can't, Ris. We were barely children when your father caught us, and look how angry he got. Can you imagine how much more upset he will be if he realizes that we're all grown up and still drawn to each other?" He asked.

"It's not that I can't imagine how my father would react, it is that it does not matter as much to me as having your love, Wes." I whispered; my voice hoarse with need for him.

"I'm sorry, Ris. I do love you, but I can't do this. For me, there's just too much to lose." He said, his arms slid from around my waist and he stepped back. "It took me ten years to build up my resistance against the day you came back, Ris; and in three days you've broken it down." He pressed his lip just lightly against mine and stepped back. "Now you know how I feel, if you really love me; stop pursuing me." He said and walked out of the room.

I flung myself on my bed immediately and wept. I couldn't believe it, Wes loved me, but he had set me the most impossible ultimatum, not to pursue him if I loved him. I did love him, and I did want to honor his wishes, but I wanted to be with him. I felt so confused, I wasn't sure if it was worst believing that Wes no longer loved me, or knowing that Wes loved me but being told not to pursue him. He had

said there was too much to lose, and I could understand what he meant. He was a slave, and Papa would surely kill him if he was to find out that Wes and I were involved. Wes had more to lose by loving me; of course I could lose my reputation, my status as a white lady, but none of those things mattered to me. I would give up my life willingly to be with Wes.

“Marissa.” I jumped up from my bed suddenly and turned around, drying my tears shamefacedly, I had not realized that Anisha was still in the room.

“I’m sorry; I am not usually so emotional.” I muttered.

“Why, it is quite natural to be emotional about matters of the heart.” She soothed, coming to sit upon my bed and patting my shoulders gently.

“I wish to do as Wes requires, I just find it so hard to imagine myself without him.” I sobbed.

“May I make a suggestion?” Anisha asked. I sniffed and nodded my head.

“You appear ready to sacrifice all to have a relationship

with Wes, perhaps if you gave Wes a little...space, he too might realize how important you are to him?" Anisha suggested. I stared up at her face blankly.

"But he has had nothing but space for ten years." I pointed out.

"Yes, and in those ten years he has worked hard at trying to forget you, but now you are back, he realizes he was not successful, he realizes that he still wants you. Perhaps he would need some assistance in finding out just how much he wants you." She said. I scrunched up my face; in the few days I had been home I had learnt to respect Anisha's cleverness.

"I don't understand." I admitted.

"Perhaps if there was someone else, another man. Right now, with you chasing down Wes, why he can be quite confident that you shall have no other man, so it gives him a sense of comfort in refusing you. But if he were to believe you had moved on..."

"Make him jealous?" I gripped her about her shoulders and

hugged her tightly. "But you are a genius." I cried happily and she giggled.

"Don't get too excited. It only works if he's jealous enough to realize that he doesn't want to lose you, and he's prepared to risk all to be with you. If he's not, he might just be happy to see you find someone else to love." Anisha explained. I tried to give my most serious face, but I knew in my heart that Wes loved me, and he would be most unhappy to see me with another guy. Oh course, the only problem was; there were very few guys about, what with the war and all.

"Where shall I find an eligible gentleman?" I questioned.

"Wes has to drive into town the day after tomorrow; he's usually gone for about three days. You must see if you can convince your father to let you ride into town with him. Sometimes your brother will travel with him too; so you may have a chaperone."

I nodded my head agreeably, why the very idea of spending three days alone with Wes without my parents was positively stimulating.

“Anisha.” I said, suddenly coming down to earth.

“Yes.” She looked at me puzzled.

“Do you love, Wes? I mean, even if he is not your man, do you have feelings for him?” I asked. I had to know, Anisha was such a good person, and I would feel so absolutely awful if I were taking away the love of her life from her.

“I can see why Wes loves you, Marissa. You are one of a kind indeed.; and no, I’m not in love with Wes. But we are very close, but if you dare to look at Luke, I shall be most upset.” She said. I giggled happily, my, but that was a weight off of my shoulder, now I had only but to concentrate on getting Wes to accept that we belonged together.

I hugged Anisha and pressed my lips against her cheek.

“Thank you.” I whispered, she kissed me on my forehead and headed out of the door.

Chapter 6

It turned out that getting father to agree to let me go to town was not as difficult as I had imagined for Gabriella wanted to go, Miss Leslie wanted to go and Rex was going as well, it appeared clear that I too would wish to go. Papa informed us very strictly that it was a business trip and we would not be allowed to carry large trunks of clothes, to which Gabriella was most upset, for she could not abide the idea of wearing one frock for three days. It bothered me little, as I only had four dresses, and it was good to have a reason for appearing to be very unfashionable.

Papa also went to great lengths to point out that the trip would not be commodious, for Wes would be driving the open backed wagon and if we were to travel with him, we should all have to pack into the back. That bit of news seemed to have discouraged Miss Leslie quite a bit, but in light of the fact that Gabriella seemed quite determined to attend, Miss Leslie made the ultimate sacrifice and agreed to attend with us.

The next day I was quite excited, I had barely caught a glimpse of Wes in the distance since the night we had kissed, I rather suspect he was doing his best to avoid me, and I; trying to follow Anisha's instruction had fought the temptation to summon him. I comforted myself in knowing that over the next three days I should see him quite

frequently.

Quite early Anisha came to my room and helped me to dress, I hugged her happily.

“Oh, but I am so excited.” I dragged the ‘o’ in ‘so’. It was like a gift come through, to spend three days with Wes without my parents present. Miss Leslie would be placing all her focus on Gabriella, and since Rex was quite a poor chaperone, I would be free indeed.

“Do remember, Marissa, you have a tendency to be a little pushy.” Even though her words were harsh she said them in such a kind tone that I could not possibly be upset with her.

“You find so, Anisha?” I asked seriously, and she laughed at me.

“Yes. I definitely find so. So don’t be too pushy, let Wes do the pursuing.” She said. I nodded my head.

“Though I should point out that I did that yesterday and he did not pursue me.”

She grinned.

“You have been away from Wes for ten years, Marissa, perhaps you need to take some time to learn about Wes. Don’t make this trip only about getting Wes to face his true feelings, make this trip also about facing your own feelings. Asking yourself why you love Wes so.” Anisha said; she was brushing my hair as she spoke.

“I know why I love Wes.” I said.

“Why?” She asked. I sighed heavily. I understood what Anisha was asking me. I understood how someone could think that these feelings I had for Wes were no more than infatuation, after all, it was true that I had not seen him for ten years, and he was but a boy when I had seen him. How could one transfer the love one felt for a boy to a man.

“When I met Wes, he was crying.” I said.

“You love him because he was a wimp?” I giggled and shook my head.

“No, silly. Although that was how I thought at first, but then when I went to him, and looked into his eyes. It was as if God had given me a clear shot into his soul. His eyes told me he was gentle, caring, loving, devoted and strong

enough to cry.”

Anisha stared at me and then laughed.

“Wes is none of those things. If that was Wes ten years ago, I can assure you it is not Wes today. He is hard, cold, calculating – and he doesn’t have a woman because he has no interest in settling down. The only thing about Wes that still remains true, Marissa, is that he is strong. None of those other things are true anymore.”

“Why, if he were so hard, he would never have said he loved me.” I pointed out. She made a face.

“Indeed, that did surprise me. Still, I do not wish you setting all your heart on Wes, then to discover that he is not the man you believe him to be. Take time, Marissa, and get to know the real man that you say you love.” I nodded slowly, though I did not wish to hear her warning I knew that she was saying it for my own protection, I kissed her cheek and hugged her firmly.

“I shall do nothing rash, and I shall be quite careful.” I promised.

“I almost wish that I could go, just to keep an eye on you.”

She said, hugging me back and scooting off of the bed, “I have brought a skirt and two bodices that you might take with you, the Mistress instructed me to give you out of her clothing.”

I nodded happily, I had been quite prepared to rough it, but I must admit to a sense of relief that Ma had thought to pack a change of clothes for me.

“Thank you so much.” I said hoisting the bag with the few tacklings Anisha had packed.

“And I’ve packed some of your overnight necessities in there as well.” She added. I nodded; and flashed a bright smile as I headed towards the door with my bag.

“Let me take that, the Mistress would find it too strange if you go struggling down the stairs with a bag and I follow with my hands empty.” Anisha explained, pulling the bag out of my hand before I had opportunity to protest and strolling through the door. My but she did make the bag seem quite light, I should definitely not wish to enter into a fight with her, I must surely remember to stay far away from her man Luke.

When we reached downstairs by the open backed wagon everyone was already standing about, waiting to board, Gabriella and Miss Leslie wearing some very unpleasant faces.

“But really, must we ride in the back of this thing? Why it looks as if it carried produce?” Miss Leslie declared.

“I see why you are a teacher, Miss Leslie. You are quite discerning.” Papa said sarcastically and I could see Wes try to hide a grin. I snickered and Miss Leslie glared at me.

“But surely you can’t expect fine ladies such as us to travel on the back of a turnip wagon.” She said, aghast.

“Well, the choice is completely up to you, Miss Leslie. I send my boy Wes to the towns on business. This is not a joy ride, the wagon is the work wagon, either you travel on it or you stay here. There are no other options.” Papa said bluntly.

“I do wish to go, Miss Leslie. Please say we won’t have to stay, it mightn’t be the cleanest, but surely if we were to spread something on; it would be better.” Gabriella put in;

she looked so desperate to go that I feared this trip would be more interesting than I might be anticipating.

“Fine, fine. We shall go then. Child!” She was shouting over to Anisha, who hurried over quickly. “Go find a cloth or something that we may spread on the back of the wagon.” Anisha nodded and hurried off, she returned with a few pillows and a large cloth which she spread out to the back of the wagon and placed the pillows so that we might each sit on one.

“Thank you.” I said, for clearly Miss Leslie felt no inclination to show appreciation to Anisha for her thoughtfulness.

“Well, let us go then.” Miss Leslie declared.

We nodded and headed towards us.

“Would you ladies like a hand?” He asked politely. The wagon was close to two feet off of the ground, I suspect that I might have been able to climb into the back of it on my own, but I would likely look quite unladylike doing so.

“But of course we need a hand, why the step is almost as tall as I am.” Gabriella declared, oh but she did like to pretend to be so dainty.

“Allow me.” Rex offered, rushing forward and clambering onto the top of the wagon and taking hold of Gabriella’s hand. “I shall pull you up; just raise your foot to the level.” He instructed. She nodded; and I watched as she lifted her skirts and hoisted her leg onto the wagon floor and Rex tugged her up, she stumbled forward awkwardly; her back leg hitting the edge of the wagon floor and causing her to wince, she would have fallen but Rex grabbed her, his hand brushing against her breast in the process; she blushed; and it did indeed seem a real one this time. Rex just grinned sheepishly.

“Okay, who’s next?” Rex asked. I was about to step forward but Wes interceded.

“Perhaps I could help the other ladies up, Rex. Maybe you can keep the horses steady until I come to the front.” Wes suggested. Rex nodded, climbing over the front of the wagon tray to take the horses’ reigns and settle himself in the driver’s seat. I glanced up at Wes expectantly and he stepped to the side until he was standing more than a foot behind me.

“Turn around.” He ordered; I spun around immediately, amazed at how authoritative he spoke for one that was a slave. He placed his hands at both sides of my waist and

hoisted me into the air as if I were an infant and then planted me in an upright position on top of the wagon.

“Oh.” I muttered, why he had taken me totally by surprise.

“Perhaps you should sit; I wouldn’t want you to fall.” He said. I nodded dumbly and holding on to the side of the wagon I settled down on a pillow next to Gabriella, she looked most jealous, I grinned happily at her. Wes had stepped aside and was now facing Miss Leslie.

“May I, Miss?” He asked politely.

“I dare say I shall be too heavy for you to hoist me up there.” She said, looking quite embarrassed, she was easily twice my size.

“I can’t imagine why that would be so, Miss.” Wes responded, why charm was practically dripping from his voice and poor Miss Leslie looked quite taken in by him.

“Well, go on then.” She said, still looking quite doubtful, but the words had hardly left her lips before Wes was lifting and planting her safely atop the wagon.

“Oh my, what a sturdy boy.” She giggled, her face flushed

and looking all shades of red. Wes had not hesitated to receive her glowing compliments but strode around the wagon and was now standing to the front of it.

“Do you wish me to drive, Rex?” Wes asked.

“Tell me one thing first.” Rex said. Wes looked up askance.

“How do you get not only the black but white ladies to go so crazy over you?”

I watched as Wes flashed a bright smile at Rex, climbing onto the wagon and shooing Rex around.

“Maybe, it’s because I don’t try so hard.” Before I could ponder the comment the wagon was racing forward and Ma, Papa and Anisha were waving their hands at me. I grinned happily and waved back, as did Gabriella and Miss Leslie.

The journey to town proved to be quite tiring and my butt was so sore when we reached that I could barely stand up without it hurting. I was pleased to see that I was not the only one who suffered such indignity for Gabriella and Miss Leslie were gripping the sides of the wagon to stand up.

“Oh, my butt feels as if it could use a massage.” I muttered grumpily.

“Miss Marissa, young ladies do not refer to private parts of their body.” Miss Leslie insisted, looking most embarrassed on my account, but Wes and Rex were already laughing.

“It takes a little getting used to Sis.” Rex said, stepping aside to allow Wes to lift us out of the wagon. I noted that Miss Leslie held on to Wes’ shoulders rather lingeringly after he had planted her on the ground, my, and she was supposed to be our chaperone.

“Why, we’ve spent the whole day traveling.” Gabriella observed with no little disappointment in her voice, “We shan’t be able to buy anything now, why all the good stores are closed.”

“They shall reopen tomorrow. Tonight our job is to find somewhere to rest. You will find that the streets are no

place for a lady after dark. Caspel Town is a thriving merchant hub, but it has precious few laws, most are a law unto themselves here.” Wes explained, taking the horses by the reigns and starting to lead them away.

“Perhaps you should take the ladies by the hotel and have them settled in; I’ll take care of the wagon.” Wes instructed and Rex nodded. I had to admit that Wes’ words had me a bit nervous, having spent most of my life in a girls school, I felt remarkably exposed on the streets of a town that Wes described as lawless.

“Was it wise for us to come?” Gabriella asked, her voice reflecting the nervousness I was feeling.

“I shan’t let anything happen to you.” Rex assured her, tucking his arm through hers and leading us to the nearest hotel.

It turned out that there were no rooms available at the hotel and Rex recommended that we head over to the saloon, for apparently they also let rooms above the place. Miss Leslie looked completely horrified, why, if she could drive the wagon herself she would have surely taken Gabriella back home.

"I refuse to bed down in a saloon. I have a responsibility to this young lady's parents to present them with a daughter as innocent and pure as the one they sent. I can not have her sleeping in a saloon. Why, what if such a thing should get out?" She demanded.

"She's not working in the saloon; she is simply going to be staying for one night in a room over the saloon." Rex pointed out.

"No." Miss Leslie insisted, "If you insist upon dragging your sister there that is a matter purely for you, but Gabriella will not be staying in a saloon."

Rex looked quite exasperated, quite frankly I was none too happy about spending the night in a saloon either, though I fully understood that I was bond to do whatever my brother dictated.

"It's either the saloon or the street." Rex repeated between clenched teeth; Miss Leslie glared at him and the two of them stood there staring each other down while Gabriella and I looked on helplessly.

"I shall wait and hear what the young man Wes has to say about the matter." Miss Leslie advised.

“You would take the word of a slave over mine?” Rex demanded.

“He does have a point.” Gabriella put in; but Miss Leslie gave her such a look that she shut up immediately.

“Don’t think you’re fooling me, boy. Your sort doesn’t even begin to know what being a gentleman is about.”

Gabriella grasped her mouth in shock and I snickered, that old bat Miss Leslie was not nearly as blind as she appeared. I glanced over at Rex, to see what he might respond but Wes arrived at the same time, disrupting the argument.

“What, you haven’t booked the ladies into a hotel as yet?” He asked, and Rex and Miss Leslie both glared at him.

“The hotel is fully booked, we’re going to have to sleep above the Saloon, but Miss Prim and Proper old maid doesn’t believe that would be appropriate for the girls.” Rex snarled. We all gazed up at Wes, awaiting his decision. He sighed heavily, and ran his hand through his hair.

“Fine. Perhaps I can call in a favor, have one of the families just on the outskirts of town put up the three ladies for the night. You, Rex, can sleep at the Saloon and I’ll sleep in the wagon near the ladies, in case there’s a problem.”

Miss Leslie nodded in agreement but Rex looked fit to be tied.

“I can’t control where Gabriella and the old bag sleeps, but my sister sleeps in the saloon with me.” Wes was about to say something but Rex cut him off, “Papa told me to look after Marissa, not you. I’m her family, not you. I say she sleeps in the saloon with me.” Rex declared, gripped my arm and tugging me towards the saloon with him. I glanced back at Wes pleadingly, I did not wish to stay in the saloon, I had heard bad things about such places, and if this was indeed a lawless town, would not the saloon be more lawless than most? Wes’ eyes were quite cold, did he not care that I was afraid? Did he not love me enough to care?

“Rex.” Wes said, and my breathing stopped momentarily.

“What?” Rex snapped; he was still sore at Wes taking authority over him.

“Might I impose upon you first to stay with Miss Gabriella, while I bring the wagon about?” Wes asked. Rex looked ready to refuse, but reconsidered.

“Well, for Gabriella’s sake I shall stay.” Rex agreed grudgingly and Gabriella looked quite pleased with herself.

Wes looked at me, a glimmer of something in his eyes that I could not decipher.

“I shall be back shortly.” He said and disappeared. We all stood there, in the corner of the street, an awkward silence hovering over us. I had no idea how this night would end, but a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach was warning me that it would not end well.

Chapter 7

We waited there quietly for Wes to return, and I noted that the street appeared to be coming alive as the night grew darker. Admittedly it was mainly men which we saw about, two of them passed right by us and tipped their hats most gentlemanly, I was quite sure I saw Gabriella wink at the younger one. My, but she was bold. Perhaps I should need to be bolder too if I were to carry out this plan that Anisha

had determined, after all, how would I find a beau to make Wes jealous if I did not flirt with a young man? I glanced about me; there were quite a few men about now, most of whom were headed towards the saloon. I considered trying to catch the eye of one but looked away far too quickly, my, but I was quite horrible at flirting. I had never paid much attention to such things, I had already determined who my husband should be when I was just eight years old, of what use could flirting be to me. I would never have imagined that Wes would give me such a trying time to capture and hold his heart. My thoughts were interrupted as a young man pushed between us and headed towards the saloon, Miss Leslie made a mean face at him.

“Watch it, buddy.” Rex grunted, and the young man turned about; and to my surprise he was holding a gun directly at Rex’s stomach.

“Oh dear?” I muttered, as both Gabriella and I huddled closer to Miss Leslie.

“Did you say something to me, friend?” The young man demanded. Rex shook his head warily. The man pushed his gun back into a socket by his waist and strolled off as if he had merely wished us good evening.

“Good grief!” Miss Leslie exclaimed, and for once I believe

she was echoing all our emotions.

“The town is a little rough around the edges. The war has pulled away much of the strong upright citizens, mostly the old and lay-a-bouts remain.” Rex explained, totally missing the fact that he was numbered among those that remained.

“He would not have shot you, would he?” Gabriella asked; her eyes quite wide.

“Perhaps not.” Rex conceded. That comment relaxed us somewhat, until another man approached our group, he had the slightest of limps, a rough face and graying hair. Gabriella turned up her face at him immediately.

“Good night.” He said; I was surprised at his politeness in light of his exterior.

“Good night, Sir.” I responded, and immediately recognized that I was the only one who had done so.

“May I interest one of you ladies in a drink with me?” He asked; and I cringed back immediately.

“No thanks.” It was Rex who answered.

“Funny, you don’t look like no lady.” The Stranger said, a

half grin on his face, though in fact it looked more like a sneer than a grin.

“We don’t want any trouble.” Rex said.

“You’re pretty greedy for a young un, why three ladies and one man seems a mite greedy to me.” Rex glanced down the road to where Wes had disappeared earlier; I could see in his face that he was anxious for Wes’ return.

“I assure you these ladies are not all mine, but they are all spoken for.” Rex explained. The Stranger looked about askance.

“Seems to me you’re the only guy I see them with. Why, any man that would leave his woman alone on a street at night has a right to lose her. That’s what I say. So you chose one, and I’ll choose one, and we’ll let those other guys work something out over the old one.”

Gabriella stepped quickly behind my brother, gripping his hand most possessively.

“Well I guess yours has chosen, kinda glad, cause I had a bit of a hankering for the little red haired beauty.” The

Stranger said, staring right over at me. I gulped heavily and felt Miss Leslie put her arms about my shoulder.

“You’ll have to kill me first before you take any of these young ladies...” Miss Leslie’s words were stopped cold as the stranger pulled a gun from his side and pointed it straight at her. I truly had not realized how many people carried guns, back at our plantation why Papa alone seemed to have a gun.

I was pleasantly surprised when Rex pulled a gun from his boot and pointed it at the Stranger’s head.

“I told you I didn’t want any trouble.” He said firmly, the stranger only smiled and I was amazed at how calm he appeared with a gun pointed to his face, Miss Leslie on the other hand looked as if she would wet herself. Pretty soon I realized why he was so calm, for two men stepped up from the shadows with guns outstretched.

“Please. We’re southern ladies, we wish no trouble.” Gabriella said, surprising me at her own boldness, I shall have to look at her quite differently.

“Aren’t you a little close to the northern border?” The stranger asked.

“We’ve come on business. We shan’t be here long.” I explained.

“Nothing wrong with mixing a little business with pleasure.” The Stranger said. I gulped. Dear me, but he was persistent.

“There are plenty of whores in the saloon, why bother decent women?” Rex demanded.

“Decent women don’t walk about by themselves at night.” The Stranger explained.

“They are not by themselves, I’m with them.” Rex responded.

“One man ain’t enough.” The Stranger said.

“What about two?” I looked around hurriedly, it was most definitely Wes’ voice but I had no idea where it was coming from.

The stranger chuckled.

“Well perhaps if you show yourself, we can negotiate

something with the women.”

Wes stepped out from the shadows, I could only imagine that he must have perceived what was going on and came about the back, for he certainly had not left in that direction, nor were the stables in that direction.

“I like to negotiate. You go ahead and tell me your terms.” Wes suggested and Miss Leslie caught her breathe.

“Well, there are three women and two men. I figure we can call it fair, we’ll take one and leave each of you boys with one. Why, we boys ain’t even greedy. We’d take the old bat off of yer.” He offered. I gripped Miss Leslie’s hand, they would surely have to kill me before I should let them take away Miss Leslie, and Gabriella looked equally stubborn about the matter.

“Well, I had somewhat different terms in mind.” Wes said politely, “I figured that you guys move along and leave the ladies, and...I let you live.”

The Stranger threw back his head and laughed.

“You think you could kill the three of us?” He demanded.

“Five is usually my favorite number, but I could work with three.” Wes responded.

“You got a lot of talk for a young un.” The Stranger said, and he spat a black substance onto the ground that made my stomach lurch.

“Well, you get to put a value on your life tonight, is it worth the chance for a free roll in the hay or is it worth more than that. Frankly, to me, it ain’t worth a plum nickel and I’d just as soon shoot you as spit.”

The Stranger chuckled again, but this time he waved to his friends to lower their guns.

“I like a young un with a sense of humor. We weren’t going to harm these nice ladies. We were just having some fun, that’s all.” He holstered his own gun and was giving that smile that could hardly be graced with such a name.

“Well, in future, just remember that these ladies represent a no-fun zone and you’ll live long enough to have young uns of your own.” Wes advised. He chuckled again and the three of them walked off, headed for the saloon.

“What took you so long?” Rex demanded as soon as the

three men were out of earshot.

“I had to hitch the wagon again.” Wes explained.

“Where is it?” Miss Leslie asked.

“When I saw the attention you three were attracting I thought it better to leave it a bit down the road.” Wes said. We started to walk towards the wagon; I hurried up so I could walk next to Wes.

“Why did you come from this side, I was quite sure the wagon was housed over there.” I said, pointing.

“Indeed. But I had some private business I needed to take care of before I could return.” He said, his voice sounded very much as if he did not wish me to pursue the matter. I nodded thoughtfully, mentally promising myself to find out what business it was Wes had that he preferred not to share with anyone.

The journey to the outskirts of town took less than twenty minutes. The house was certainly not fancy, it was no plantation, but it was habitable. A pleasant middle aged white couple came out to greet us, the gentleman was quite

tall, with friendly green eyes that reminded me of Wes immediately. His wife was tall too; her eyes a shy brown and she seemed completely dominated by her husband. Wes introduced them as the Martins and having introduced us as well and explained the circumstances he went off to the wagon to gather our things.

“Not Marissa’s things. I already told you that Marissa and I will be staying at the saloon.” Rex insisted.

“Surely you do not still intend to follow that plan?” Wes seemed quite exasperated.

“Nothing has changed. I merely accompanied you here to see the ladies safely in, as I believe it my duty – as the senior member of this trip.” Rex explained.

“A saloon is no place for Ris, Rex. You may be her guardian on this trip, but that doesn’t give you the right to put her in danger.” Wes said, and I could easily tell that he was becoming quite aggravated.

“I’m not going to allow anything to happen to my little sister. I shall be there as well.” Rex pointed out. I could feel my heart begin to race fiercely; I much preferred to spend the night with Miss Leslie and the nice middle aged couple.

“Why don’t you go back to the saloon, and leave Ris here?” Wes suggested. Rex grinned most wolfishly.

“Yeah, you’d really like that, wouldn’t you Wes? I’m not blind you know, I’m a man too. Men see things women don’t, especially young vibrant men.” Rex chuckled wickedly and I blushed.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Wes denied; his eyes cold and emotionless as he looked at Rex.

“You don’t fool me one bit, Wes. I see how you look at Marissa when you think no one is watching.” I looked from one to the next curiously.

“Fine. Stay here and keep an eye on me then.” Wes offered.

“There’s no fun here on the outskirts of town, the fun is at the saloon. I didn’t travel a whole day to be cooped up in a shack with a bunch of old people.” Rex pointed out. I was relieved that the Martins had already gone inside with Miss Leslie, for that would have been too embarrassing if they had heard Rex.

"Rex. I would much rather stay here, please." I said, adding my voice for the first time to the conversation.

"No." Rex's voice was firm and unwavering. "If you do not obey me Marissa, I shall tell Papa and he shall surely whip you. And he shall be none too pleased with Wes either for encouraging you to disobey me."

I so did not wish to get Wes in any trouble.

"Fine. I shall go with you." I said, before Wes could utter another word.

"I will go back to town with you then. Miss Leslie and Gabriella should be quite safe here." Wes said, and I was pleased that he would be accompanying us, Gabriella came running over the very time, looking quite bothered.

"You are all leaving? I shall be left in a house filled with old fuddy duddies?"

"We shall return first thing tomorrow and you shall all have an opportunity to shop and explore the town properly. It is quite a different place during the daylight hours." Wes explained, swinging me onto the wagon and then jumping into the driving seat himself. I watched as Rex spirited Gabriella away and out of our hearing for a few brief moments and then he pressed his lips to hers very briefly. Miss Leslie came out of the door at the same time and glared at both of them.

“Young man, they are ways that one courts a young maiden, and kissing in the dark is not one of them.” She said, her voice sounding quite ferocious. But both Rex and Gabriella were still grinning foolishly as we rode away.

I tossed and turned most of the night, I could not seem to fall asleep in the bed. The place was worst than I had imagined. Downstairs was a bar and hosted several young ladies who were scantily clad, as soon as we walked in they hurried towards Wes and Rex and started to press themselves against them, asking them if they were interested in buying them a drink. Rex fondled one of the girl's breast and she said that would cost him at least a drink, I gripped Wes' hand at the very thought.

“Should we get our rooms first, Rex.” Wes suggested, already making his way forward and towards a door in the corner, Rex had followed grinning. The door housed an office, if one could call it that, it seemed more like a dressing room for it was filled with several costumes, all of which had ‘whore’ written all over them.

“Three rooms please, just the night.” Wes said, the

bookkeeper nodded and Wes handed him some money. I found myself wondering how often Wes had stayed at this place and how often he had partook in its treats. It disturbed me to know how upsetting it was to imagine Wes with one of those girls.

The bookkeeper passed us three keys without looking up.

“Are these rooms side by side?” Wes asked.

“Sorry, no adjoining rooms available. But there are no more than four doors apart.” He explained, still not looking up.

When we had left the room, another scantily clad lady had rushed up to Wes, offering to ‘do him’ for free; I gripped his arm so possessively that she chuckled and walked away muttering something about not knowing that he would be already getting ‘some’. I blushed brightly, relieved that Rex had already hurried forward and was making his way up the stairs and could not have seen or heard the exchange.

Wes insisted that I take the room at the far end of the corridor, Rex had one just two doors away from mine and Wes’ was over to the other side. I tried to show a bright face as I wished the boys goodnight and headed into my room but I was quite nervous. I had always believed that

when men drink they act foolishly, but tonight I had seen men act most foolishly before they had even entered the saloon, I shivered to think how they would behave after they had been drinking.

Chapter 8

I guessed it must have been close to midnight when I heard a noise outside of my window. I hurried up out of my bed and peeped outside. There were two men; dancing in the street with a scantily clad female, one of them looked up and saw me and waved his hand. I hurried away from the window; the scene had quite unsettled me. I wasn't too proud to admit I was quite nervous; I did not like much sleeping in this room on my own. I believed that I would be much savor sharing a room with Rex. I pulled my housecoat about me and hurried to the door, I hesitated at the door for a moment. Why, if there were men about the street, could there not be men about the corridor outside of my door? I swallowed hard, perhaps I should stay put, but I did so fear sleeping alone in the room. I pulled the door open and stepped out into the corridor; right in front of my door lounging most casually in a chair with his long legs stretched out and a hat covering his face was Wes.

“Why aren’t you in your room?” He asked as soon as I took a step towards him. I glanced about and saw an elderly looking man hustling a young girl into a room and the door closed behind them. I swallowed.

“I...I...couldn’t sleep. There were men below my window. I was afraid they...they might be able to climb up.” Now that I said it out loud I felt like such a coward. “I thought I might share Rex’s room.”

“Rex isn’t in his room. He went down to the saloon almost three hours ago.” Wes said getting up from his position on the chair and walking over to me.

“Oh?” I made a shocked face and covered my mouth. How could Rex leave me upstairs alone in a place like this?

“You don’t have any reason to fear, Ris. There’s no one that’s going to go into your room to do you any harm that would be coming out of there alive.” Wes said and I rushed to him and threw my arms about him.

“Oh Wes, what if you hadn’t been here?” I said.

“That’s like asking what if the wind didn’t blow. I’ll always be

here for you, Ris. That's just a given. So you can go back to bed and sleep like a baby."

"Stay in my room." I begged.

"I couldn't do that. "

"I don't mean like that, just so you'd be near." I said.

"I know what you mean, Ris, but if you're father heard I stayed in your room, he'd skin me alive." Wes said.

"He'd probably skin me alive too, but I don't care. Please, Wes." I pleaded.

"Fine, but at first light I have to leave; before you get a reputation." He said. I grinned happily and headed back to my room; it suddenly seemed so much safer with Wes there.

I hadn't realized how tired I was, by the time my head touched the pillow I was fast asleep, completely oblivious to everything going on around me. Why, the last thing I said before I drifted to sleep was,

“I love you so much, Wes.” And frankly, I was not awake long enough to hear his response. When I woke the next morning Wes was gone.

By the time I had cleaned up and dressed there was a knock on my door, it was Wes. I smiled happily.

“Good Morning.” I said. He tipped his hat at me.

“Would you like to accompany me on the trip to collect Gabriella and Miss Leslie?” He asked and I nodded excitedly.

“Rex won’t give any trouble, will he?” I asked.

“I believe he is still sleeping, by the time we return he will be none the wiser.”

“He shan’t panic if he doesn’t find me?” I persisted.

“We shall leave a note for him.” Wes assured me and I nodded my head quite satisfied.

We took the scenic route to the Martins home, and while Wes told me of all the sites we were passing I spent my time watching him intently.

“You’re starting to make me self conscious.” He said finally. I giggled, I had no idea that he had known that I was watching him so intensely.

“I love looking at you. You have a marvelous face, very symmetrical, why, if I could draw I would definitely draw you. You have features that ought to be caught on canvass.” Wes tilted his hat to a side and partially concealed his features.

“You’re embarrassing me.” He said. I giggled.

“You are a great deal of fun to embarrass.” I confessed and he grinned.

“Aaahhh, so that’s why you do the things you do.” He said, as if a bell had gone off in his head.

“But you love the things I do, why life would be completely boring without me around.” I said. He glanced at me briefly and then looked at the track ahead of him.

“Nothing’s wrong with boring.” He said.

“How philosophical of you. I think a great deal is wrong with boring. Why, if we have but one life to live on this earth, why should we settle to make it a boring life?”

“Sometimes boring can mean long.” Wes suggested.

“I would rather die young, having lived, than to live long with only regrets.”

“How philosophical of you.” Wes said and we both laughed.

“I love you.” I said, and twisting my body so that I could reach his lips I pressed my lips to his.

“This can’t work, Ris. We can’t work.” He said firmly. My, but he was ever so stubborn. He loved me, he said he did, and all his actions said he did, why did he resist so?

“Yes it can, Wes. I want you.” Why did he have to be so annoying? I had but just considered the thought when Wes brought the wagon to a sudden halt, causing me to jolt forward.

“Why ever are we stopping, Wes?” I demanded. He jumped

off of the wagon and onto the ground.

“Get down, Ris.” He instructed. Why was he behaving so puzzling? I stepped to the corner of the driver’s seat and allowed him to lift me down. As soon as my feet had landed on the ground Wes pressed me up against the wagon and pressed his lips against mine and I responded immediately, arms going up to encircle his neck; one hand entangled in his hair causing his hat to fall unnoticed to the ground and my body pressed against his. When he lifted my skirts and allowed his hand to rest upon my pantaloons as though he would remove them I pulled away immediately and slapped his face hard.

“Goodness, Wes. What ever do you take me for? I’m not that kind of a girl!”

He bent down lazily and picked up his hat from the ground and dusted it against his leg.

“You think I don’t know that, Ris? You think I have more to offer you than this? I don’t even have a flipping name to give you. I’m a slave; I have no money, no home, and no name. I can’t marry you, Ris. I can’t do anything for you except make love to you, and I know you want more than that.” He

said. I stared at him, trying to figure out what to say, but I didn't know; I didn't know.

"Don't worry about it." He said, then lifted me and plunked me in the back of the wagon and climbed into the driver's seat. "Better you sit back there, then we won't get our roles mixed up."

The balance of the journey was in complete silence. Both Wes and I had a lot of thinking to do about our feelings for each other. It was one thing to know you were in love, it was quite another thing to ask yourself what you intended to do about it.

Wes' point of view

When we arrived at the Martins' homestead I knew immediately that something was wrong, before I could lift Ris off the wagon Miss Leslie came running outside, still dressed in her flannel nightgown, and based on my assessment of Miss Leslie that would not have been a ladylike thing to do.

“Oh gosh, Wes, Wes. I’m so glad you’re here. Gabriella’s gone. Gabriella has completely disappeared!”

“What happened.” I asked, already starting to unhitch the horses from the wagon.

“She went into bed last night, this morning I woke up and she was gone. Oh gosh, someone must have taken her. Oh dear.” Miss Leslie looked as if she had been crying and looked ready to cry again. Right then the Martins hurried out of the house, looking quite frazzled.

“I’m so sorry Wes.” Mr. Martin said. I nodded at him, saddled my horse and lifted Ris out of the wagon.

“Stay here with Miss Leslie.” I said firmly and she nodded, I didn’t know what had happened to Gabriella, but I knew I darn well didn’t want it to happen to Ris.

“I’m serious, Ris. Don’t leave here not even if your brother comes for you.” She nodded again. I wanted to pull her into my arms, just to reassure myself that she was there, and she was safe, but I didn’t, because I didn’t have the right to.

“Be careful Wes.” She said, and tiptoed and pressed her lips to mine. I was amazed that Miss Leslie didn’t say a word.

“You ladies stay inside the house until I get back.” I said, and Miss Leslie drew Ris to her and nodded at me knowingly.

I rode around the house a couple of times, looking for a sign of forced entry or of someone leaving the house. Pretty soon I saw what appeared to be the very delicate footprint of a young lady, and I followed it. About ten minutes ride away I found signs of a struggle and my heart sank. There’s something really bitter about seeing a dead girl, I hoped with all my heart that wasn’t what I was going to see.

One minute later there was evidence of a horse and rider. It looked as if someone had grabbed Gabriel and dragged her onto their horse and took off with her. I followed the horse’s hoof prints for almost twenty minutes until they led me to a large stream. That wasn’t usually a good sign; it would be difficult to track the horse through the water. But pretty soon I realized that I didn’t have to, for behind a small bush I could see Gabriella’s naked body.

I groaned inwardly, as I hurried over to her, the sight of Gabriella almost brought a tear to my eye. Why, if that had been Ris, I swore, I’d be rubbing the blood of the scoundrel

that hurt her off the bottom of my shoe for years.

Gabriella was lying there, completely naked, her legs spread and bite marks on her private parts, her stomach, her breast and between her legs was bleeding.

“Gabriella.” I called her name gently and bent down beside her and she immediately started to try to fight me off with her hands.

“Its okay, sweetheart. It’s me, it’s Wes.” I said, and then she started to cry. Not the gentle sobs that fancy ladies cry, but dry, racking, heart breaking sobs that a true sufferer cries.

I held her close to my chest and allowed her to cry for a while, then I took off my shirt and helped her into it. I lifted her from the ground and mounted my horse with her and headed back to the Martins’ homestead. I had to figure out what to do next, Ris’ father had sent me on this trip for business, I knew how important the collection of money was to him right now, but I was pretty sure Gabriella would want to go home, then there was all the other business I had planned to fix as well. How on earth would I get everything worked out? And did I want to go on to another town and transact business and leave Ris here, in a place where some animal had done this horrible thing to Gabriella?

Chapter 9

When Wes returned with Gabriella I screamed and Miss Leslie fell to a dead faint beside me.

“She’s been hurt, bad. We’ll need a doctor.” Wes was saying as he slid off of the horse with Gabriella in his arms and headed towards the house.

“Oh my gosh, oh Wes.” Tears were flowing freely down my eyes. I raced forward to hold Gabriella’s hand; she was crying so and clinging most desperately to Wes. Even when he tried to lay her on the bed she refused to let go of his neck and he spent a good five minutes coaxing her off of him. I felt so sorry for her, I couldn’t help crying and Mrs. Martin shooed me out of the bedroom on account that I would just make Gabriella sadder.

It was a full half an hour before Wes came out, telling us that Mrs. Martin was cleaning the wounds. I sniffled again at the thought, oh poor Gabriella.

“I’ll go in and help Mrs. Martin.” Miss Leslie who had not long before come to herself advised and hurried into the bedroom, her bravest face on.

“Oh Wes, who would do such a thing to a fine girl like Gabriella?” I asked and Wes pulled me into his arms and

shook his head sadly.

“I don’t know, Ris. But I have to go back to town and have a message sent to your father about the matter. He will be completely pissed.” I buried my head in his chest and wept until he pressed me away from him.

“I have to go, I have to get a doctor and contact your father.” He said firmly.

“Take me with you.” I said. I did not feel safe there, in this house where Gabriella had been so brutally assaulted, I had expected Wes to argue with me but instead he took my hand and headed to the door just as Miss Leslie came out with a basin of bloody water and a cloth.

“You’re taking Ris with you?” She asked, just as we prepared to exit the door.

“Yes.” Wes replied and his voice brooked no argument.

“Perhaps that would be best; being away from this environment would be good for her – help to calm her a bit.” Miss Leslie agreed, much to my surprise, and then added, “No funny stuff now, Wes.” I blushed brightly and hurried out of the door.

“I shall never feel safe in my home again.” I said sadly as

we headed away from the house.

“Who ever attacked Gabriella did not take her from the house. She left the house on her own.” Wes said, his voice sounding reflective.

“But how can you be sure?” I asked, twisting my head so I might stare at him.

“Well, there was no sign of forced entry. No one heard a commotion and there were one set of footprints leaving the house, and they belonged to a lady.”

I nodded, my, but Wes was quite clever.

“Did Gabriella speak of the ordeal? Does she know who did this thing to her?” I asked. Wes shook his head, his face focused on the path ahead.

“Ris.” He said, his voice more hesitant now.

“Yes.” I said, still staring at him, though I noted that he did keep his eyes fixed ahead.

“When I saw Gabriella, like that, on the ground. I thought about you. I thought about how I would feel if it had been you.” His voice was a great deal hoarser as he spoke.

“Why, if that were me, I would kill myself.” I said adamantly. Wes brought the wagon to a stop immediately and I jolted forward.

“Never say that, Marissa. Never say that you would kill yourself.” His voice was quite stern.

“But who would want a woman that another man has done such things to?” A tear trickled down my face at the thought, “She shall be branded as a slut, and people shall say she begged for such a thing to happen to her and no decent man would take her and call her his. Why not even an outcast male would wish her.”

Wes pulled me to him so hard that I had to grip his shirt to steady myself.

“If a man loves a woman, such things would never change his feelings towards her. If anything they would make him more possessive and protective. If such a thing should happen to you, Ris, I would still want you, and I would die if you were to kill yourself.” He spoke so passionately that I pressed my lips against his and hugged him closely.

"I love you." I said as we broke apart, both of us gasping for breath. Wes pulled me unto his lap and looked directly into my eyes, his bright green eyes clear and sincere.

"I tried so hard not to love you, Ris. Honestly I did. I told myself we were children and childish things pass away – and I said that everyday for ten years; but the feelings just wouldn't go away. I told myself that you would come back a fine lady and have no place in your heart for a slave-but you didn't, you came back more beautiful, more refined and more in love with me than you'd ever been. And I should have been happy, I should have been ecstatic..." He held down his head and looked away, "But I was scared. I was scared that the hate for what I was and what you are would destroy us. That it would hurt us, and I didn't want to see you get hurt. But then I saw Gabriella, and it just opened my eyes. There will be hate out there all the time, what that man did to Gabriella was nothing more than hate. Hate will always be out there; it might disguise itself as hate because I'm negro and your white, or it might disguise itself as hate because a man is poor, or because he's too short, or because he's ugly. None of us make ourselves, and the shame is if we allow the haters to decide what we can or cannot achieve in life." He stared at me now, bright green eyes determined. "I know it won't be easy, but I love you Ris, and I'm prepared to face the consequences to be with

you; cause I know they'll only be pain and emptiness without you."

"Oh Wes, my darling." I pressed my lips against his and then nipped his neck playfully. He chuckled and held me close. "Make love to me, Wes. I want you now. You told me that you have only yourself to offer me, and that is all I desire. Take me Wes, make me yours." My fingers trembled nervously as I made a great job of unbuttoning his shirt, but he placed his hands over mine and pulled them away.

"No." He said; I was so hurt at his rejection that I pulled myself away and slapped his face hard.

"Why do you say you love me and reject me so?" I demanded, tears springing to my eyes. I wanted so desperately to feel Wes, to be closer to him than I had ever been to any other human person, why did he not wish that too? He pulled me close to him again and his lips claimed mine and I struggled against him, still angry that I had gifted myself to him and he had refused. But soon my struggling subsided and I was tangling my hand in the thick soft richness of Wes' hair and enjoying the feel of his lips against mine. When he pulled away from me I stared up at him pleadingly.

“I can’t make love to you, Ris. Not now, not here and not like this. You feel vulnerable; this whole mess with Gabriella losing her virginity to a stranger has totally offset your reasoning. I would not wish to make love to you while you are so tender, and find tomorrow that you wished that I had not.” He said.

“I would never wish that.” I insisted, although a part of me that had been nervous at the prospect felt somewhat relieved.

“You waited for me for ten years, Ris. I can wait until you are truly ready.” He said, then lifting me back into the seat beside him; he clicked his tongue and the horses took off running again.

The town was a so much different place in the light of day. There were stores with attractive dresses in the windows, which I swore I had not seen the previous night and men and women were bustling about the streets going about their business with a cheery hello to whomsoever they came into contact with.

“It is amazing how different it is in the light of day.” I said, walking beside Wes.

“Darkness has a way of bringing out evil.” Wes responded, then took my hand and headed up some steps. A young man in my way bowed politely and I remembered briefly my plan with Anisha to flirt, my, but that seemed a lifetime ago.

We entered what appeared to be a telegraph station and Wes went straight over to the gentleman there. I watched him scribble a letter and instruct the gentleman to organize to have it taken to the Cegan Plantation.

“What did you tell Papa?” I asked as we walked out of the place.

“I told him all I knew, and asked him to respond as to what his wishes were. Should we return immediately or should I continue with the planned money route.” Wes explained, I nodded and walked beside him, we were headed to the saloon.

“You’ll tell Rex?” I asked and Wes nodded.

When we reached Rex’s room he appeared to be still resting for Wes had to knock several times before he eventual came to the door and when he did, he had a

mature looking woman hanging onto his waist. She giggled and went back into the room when Wes looked at her.

“Maybe next time, Tiger.” She said, as she returned and pushed past Wes and I to head off to what I assumed was her own room.

“Why the hell are you waking me so early in the morning, I was in the middle of something.” Rex said, his face still having that old drunk look.

“Gabriella’s been raped.” Wes said flatly and Rex looked from me to Wes with a surprised face.

“Who?” He asked, turning into his own room and starting to pull on his pants and shirt.

“We don’t know.” Wes explained as Rex came hurrying out of his door and pulling it in behind him.

“Well we need to find out and put a stake through that sucker’s heart.” Rex said as he scooted past us and headed towards the stairs.

“I sent a letter to your father, to find out if he wants me to try tracking the guy or if he wants me to continue on the collection trail. I probably won’t get a reply from him until

sometime tomorrow. Knowing the boss I think I should assume he wants the collections done until I hear otherwise.” Wes explained, as we hurried down the stairs behind Rex.

“I’m going over to the homestead and see Gabriella. Did you call a doctor?”

“I’m on my way now; I thought you might want to know first.” Wes said and Rex nodded. I hurried along beside the two men, having to run a mite to keep up with their longer strides.

We went up a few steps and I noted a ‘Doctor Glyne’s Office’ sign and Wes knocked on the door.

“Come.” A firm voice called from inside and we entered.

“Wes. How are you boy?” Doctor Glyne said, a huge smile spreading across his face as he pumped Wes’ hand as though he would break it off.

“Fine, Doc. We have a spot of trouble down at the Martins homestead.” Wes explained, though Doctor Glyne seemed keener about examining Wes.

“When last have you had a check up boy, next time you are in town you must come and see me for a check up; on the house.” He said; smiling. Wes grinned.

“I feel fine, people don’t go to a doctor unless their sick.” He pointed out. Doctor Glyne smiled. He had a very friendly and warm smile and I liked him immediately.

“Never mind that, boy.” Doctor Glyne coaxed.

“I’m twenty years old; I’m not a boy anymore. I hardly think...” Wes was saying but Doctor Glyne cut him off with such authority I stared at him in surprise.

“This is not a suggestion; it’s an order, Wes. You come in here for a check up before the end of next month or I’ll speak to Mr. Cegan about the matter myself.” I watched Wes’ eyes grow serious and I knew that this Doctor Glyne was not someone Wes wanted to get on the bad side of.

“Of course, Sir.” Wes said and Doctor Glyne smiled again, his soft warm look returning.

“Now what did you want?” He asked.

“One of our traveling party; a young lady, has been...well assaulted and she looks in pretty bad shape.” Wes explained. Doctor Glyne’s face wrinkled in concern.

“You want to get a posse together and see if you could find the attacker?” The doctor asked, pulling a few items into a black bag on the table.

“I’m waiting to hear what the boss wants me to do. But the girl doesn’t seem to want to talk about it; I don’t think she wants us to find the guy. I think she’s feeling kind of ashamed about the whole thing. She wants everything kept secret.” Wes explained. Dr. Glyne nodded knowingly.

“That’s normal, but if a dangerous animal is out there, our women and children could be in danger. Although; even if we catch him and she refuse to testify; a fat lot of help that will be to us.” Dr. Glyne opined as he gathered his bag into his hand, pushed his thick black hair away from his face and headed towards the door.

“You can go ahead with Rex; Doc, Ris and I will come later, I have one more errand I really need to do today.” Wes explained, I watched as Dr. Glyne’s soft brown eyes narrowed suspiciously at Wes.

“Don’t you go getting yourself in no trouble boy.” Dr. Glyne said and I was surprised to see Wes blush, did Dr. Glyne think we would make love? I blushed a bright red, but realized the good doctor was not considering me at all.

“I won’t sir, Doc.” Wes said and I glanced at him, why he was as respectful as a young man to his father. Hmmmm. I shall have to speak to Wes about some matters.

“I won’t do anything you wouldn’t do in my position.” Wes offered. Dr. Glyne chuckled and headed out the door, locking it as the last of us slipped out.

“Very smart answer. Very clever boy, but clever boys can get themselves in lots of trouble.” He wagged his finger at Wes sternly and changed the subject. “I can’t stay with the young lady long, but I will try to do for her what I can. I must leave town tonight and journey to Taylor Town to look in on Mrs. Taylor. She’s taken a turn for the worst and her husband is insistent that I come quickly. Though there is precious little I can do for her at this stage.”

“So I shall not see you when we reach the homestead.” Wes said.

“Perhaps not, but I shall leave instructions. If the matter is more complicated than I perceive then I shall visit her again before you all travel home.” Dr. Glyne promised.

Rex took the wagon with one horse and headed out to the homestead with the doctor and left one horse for Wes and me so that we might follow at a convenient time.

“Dr. Glyne seems nice.” I said; Wes merely nodded. I followed Wes into a store. This one appeared to be a sweets store, I licked my lips, I had not eaten a sweet since I was eight – the FARTS school frowned upon sweets.

“You think Rex was very upset by the news?” I asked.

“He should be; it was his stupid idea to split up from Gabriella.” Wes pointed out as he made his way into the store and greeted the owner.

I circled around the store as the two of them spoke. The store owner seemed a quite pleasant man, and from where I stood appeared to quite like Wes. Licorice. I stared into the bowl longingly. Papa had given me no money to take with me on the trip, I licked my lips just once and moved on. I could see Wes was wrapping up his business and he was putting some money into the small bag he carried over his shoulder. He was saying his goodbyes now and I found I

had made my way back to the licorice bowl and was staring in it again.

“I do believe your young lady is interested in a piece of candy.” The store keeper said cringing up his face quite merrily, I blushed on account of the fact that I had been so obvious about the candy and at the same time I realized that this town apparently perceived Wes to be a white free man. Wes chuckled and placed a coin on the counter for the candy.

“No, no, no.” The store keeper looked quite offended, “Your money is no good here. Any lady friend of yours is free to help herself to candy from my store.” My eyes grew wide with glee, but Wes looked at me so sternly that I only took the licorice I had been yearning for at the beginning. As we left the store, me chewing upon my licorice quite joyfully, I found myself pondering about Wes and his relationships in the town, and how people came to accept him as a free man here and where did he get money to offer to buy licorice, surely it had not been money taken from father’s sack? I popped another piece off of my licorice and chewed upon it, receiving a very hard glare from an old lady that was passing by.

“Dear me.” I said to Wes, feigning concern. “I do believe ladies are not supposed to walk the street and eat.” Wes laughed.

Chapter 10

We made a few more stops in town collecting money – a few store owners pointing out that they were having some cash problems and begging Wes to come again the following week to collect their funds. I listened without appearing to be listening, for that would have been quite unladylike, and noted that Wes was able to negotiate an arrangement with most of them, so that he was able to collect much of the money due or at least half, the balance to be collected on the next trip. I could see why Papa favored Wes to handle his finances; he had a good head for such things.

“I need to make one more stop before we go back to the Martins.” Wes said and he was looking at me quite curiously.

“Of course, one more stop can make no difference.” I pointed out, pushing the balance of the licorice into my mouth.

“It’s out of town.” He said, still giving me that curious look.

“Goodness, but how far out of town, Wes? I had no idea that Papa sold produce such distant places.” I commented.

“It’s not your father’s business that I need to handle; it is business of my own.” He said.

“What sort of business?” I asked.

“Perhaps I can tell you on our way there.” He suggested. I nodded, it was true that Wes was behaving most suspiciously; but I trusted him, I trusted him completely with my life and with my person. I was well prepared to go where ever he desired to take me.

We went about to the stable and claimed our horse, Wes saddled him and climbed on and pulled me up in front of him, his palm flattened about my stomach to hold me securely in place. I glanced up and back at him and pressed my lips against his lightly, he smiled and then we headed out of town.

We had travelled a full hour out of town and I felt compelled to ask.

“Are you kidnapping me, Wes?” He chuckled and pressed his lips against my neck.

“Would that be so bad, Ris?”

“No. But it would be nice to know.” I pointed out and he laughed.

“I have missed you, life has been far too sensible without you.”

“Are you implying I am nonsensical?” I asked, twisting about on the horse so I might stare at him.

“I would laugh, but I fear you would slap me. So I shall exercise great wisdom and say that I should never dream of implying such a thing.” I twisted my legs about, trying to turn upon the horse so that I could sit astraddle of it and I could face Wes.

“What are you doing?” He asked, appearing to be quite surprised.

“Do help me, I wish to face you.” I said. He stopped the horse and allowed me to hold on to him and turn myself about. His palm was pressed against my back now and he pulled me against him.

“Comfortable?” He asked.

“Very.” I responded and then slapped his face. He folded his bottom lip in and bit on it and said nothing.

“It is not in saying that someone is nonsensical that you offend, but it is even thinking that someone is nonsensical.” I said.

“You slap me for thinking you’re nonsensical?” He demanded and I slapped his face again.

“Yes, and that was for agreeing that you were thinking that I was nonsensical.” I pointed out.

“Perhaps I would be better off if I kept my mouth shut?” He suggested.

“I believe you are right, and I have the perfect way to assist you in doing that.” I responded and pressed my lips against his, my arms encircling his neck.

“I like your plan.” He whispered as we broke apart to catch our breaths.

“I rather like my plan too.” I said, and pressed my lips against his once more. We spent the next hour riding along

quite slowly and necking until Wes suddenly stopped and pressed me gently away from him.

“Are we there?” I asked and he nodded.

“Well, almost. But promise me you shall tell no one of any of this.” He said. I nodded swiftly without hesitation and he dismounted the horse and lifted me down.

“Why, out here looks rather deserted nothing to speak of anyway.” I was saying when five Negro men suddenly appeared in front of us and they were all brandishing primitive weapons – only one had a gun.

“Are they thieves, Wes?” I whispered, gripping his hand fiercely. I remembered what had happened to Gabriella and my stomach tensed into tight little knots.

“No. These are unofficial soldiers.” Wes said.

“You should know better than to bring a white here, this is a no-white zone, the only good white here is a dead white.” A tall, muscled dark man with a scar that ran clear across his face and caused his eye to slant said.

“This is my wife. We ran into problems and I had to bring

her with me.” Wes said.

“I’m gonna have to kill her.” Scar face said, “No offense.”

“Jokes like that could get you killed, Mac. You got one second to drop your gun – One.” Mac must have anticipated that Wes would have started to count immediately for his gun was on the ground before Wes could finish the sentence.

“I’m just joshing with you, Wes. I wouldn’t shoot your woman. And a fine pretty little woman likes that too. Why, that would be a great loss to all menkind.”

Wes gave him a hard look.

“I need to talk to Stephenson.” Wes said and the five men hurried ahead, Wes following with my hand gripped quite firmly in his.

We entered the mouth of a cave, which I had not noticed previously, and walked a full fifteen minutes arriving on another side, where there were some trees and an almost dried up stream and about five more men.

“Stephenson.” Wes said and the two men slapped each other on their backs casually.

“Marissa?” Stephenson asked, and I blushed to imagine that Wes must have told him about me while I had been away. Wes nodded.

“I’ve got a problem. I’m carrying some passengers on this trip with me and I’ve run into a spot of trouble. The long and short of the matter is I can’t carry a load this trip.” Wes explained.

Stephenson looked completely devastated. He was quite tall, well built and goodlooking, his skin was dark and apart from a few scars on his arms he looked in good condition. He could have been at least twenty five or six years old and was clearly the leader of the band there.

“We’re practically stepping on each other in this place now, Wes. We need at least five of these guys moved out to the frontline. And another five are going to me coming in tomorrow.”

“Sorry, Stephenson. If I could do different I would.”

“Sure you can do different, White Boy. Just go get your little

wagon that massa gives you all the rights to ride where ever you want to and take some of these flipping men out to the north so they can join the army proper!” Mac yelled. Wes didn’t look around at him.

“You watch your mouth, Mac. Or I’ll kill you myself. If it weren’t for Wes, we wouldn’t have a hope in hell of smuggling guys over to the other side. So you shut your trap.” Stephenson yelled and Mac went quiet.

“Could you come again tomorrow Wes, with the wagon?” Stephenson asked, he was almost pleading.

“I doubt; we’ll be looking to head back to the plantation in a hurry. One of the girls been raped.” Wes explained. Stephenson half smiled.

“That why you traveling with Marissa? Keeping her close?” Wes actually blushed and tugged me closer to him, although I hadn’t imagined that would have been physically possible.

“A guy can’t be too careful.” Was all he said.

“Hmmm, when can you come again?” Stephenson asked.

“The next business run isn’t due until another three weeks –

end of month.” Wes explained.

“Damn Wes, they’ll be another five guys in by then.”
Stephenson muttered.

“I might look white, but I’m not in charge at the plantation – I’m just another slave, Stephenson. But if I can come sooner, I will. I just came to let you know what happened so you’d not go looking for me.” Stephenson nodded his gratitude.

“I really appreciate your help. I know if old man Cegan found out what you were doing he’d kill you for sure.” He embraced Wes briefly and then broke away.

“So do I get to hug the little lady?” He asked his voice a little lighter now.

“If you do I’m gonna have to shoot you.” Wes warned and they both laughed.

Wes nodded and pulling my arm gently headed out of the cave, Stephenson following close behind us.

“You found the guy who raped the girl?” Mac asked.

“Not yet.” Wes admitted.

“Well, you know if you don’t get on top of those things early you completely lose the trail.” Stephenson advised.

“I know. But its the Boss’ call, got to do things his way.” Wes explained.

“Hey, Red. If you ever get tired of Wes you can look me up, I like white meat too.” Mac shouted after me as we mounted the horse. Wes was about to say something but I cut him off.

“Why sure Mac. I’ll remember you’re available. If I get tired of Wes, and I lose my mind, and my eyes get plucked out and every other man in the entire world is gone and your the last man alive, I’ll remember you then – and then I’d hang my flipping self!”

There was a round of raucous laughter and Mac looked as if he was about to sink right through the ground; his face looked so embarrassed.

He glanced up at me briefly, the slightest tinge of new admiration on his face, then he turned and walked off as the others ragged him.

“My, you kiss your mother with that mouth?” Wes asked as

he turned the horse about and we headed back to town.

“And I kiss you too, are you complaining?”

“Oh course not, mame, not if I know what’s good for me.”
He teased and I craned back so I could press my lips against his.

Chapter 11

“Wes.” I said, after we had traveled about half an hour’s ride back to town.

“Uh huh.” He said. His hand lovingly rubbing against my stomach, and I found I enjoyed the feel of his hand immensely. I daresay I was quite sure that I should truly enjoy the feel of his entire body. I blushed at the thought and put down my face so he wouldn’t ask what I was thinking.

“Tell me of your parents.” I said.

“There’s not much to tell.” He responded but his voice sounded immediately hoarser.

“Why, Wes, are you lying to me?” I demanded. It hurt to thing that Wes would speak an untruth to me.

“Not lying.” He hesitated as if he were wrestling with the matter internally. “I guess I would rather not speak about it.”

“Would I seem very demanding if I insist?” I asked. He chuckled softly.

“Would seeming demanding deter you from insisting?” He asked. I twirled my hair thoughtfully, would it?

“No. It would not.” I said, coming to a final conclusion on the matter. He laughed.

“I didn’t think it would.” He confessed.

“Then tell me, and I shan’t have to insist.” I suggested.

“Aaaahhh.” His voice sounded tired and hesitant.

“I was glad that you brought me to the hideout with you. We shall have many challenges in our love, Wes. But we can overcome them all, as long as the challenge does not start between us.” I said, I glanced back at him and saw he was staring down at me.

“We can’t effect what other people say or think, but we can effect how we treat each other. How honest we are to each other and how loving. I don’t wish there to be any secrets between us, Wes, please?”

“I wish the same as you, Ris.” He hesitated a moment and then pressed his lips against my lips and I moaned softly.

“I don’t hesitate to tell you because it is a secret; I hesitate to tell you because it hurts.” He said.

“I’m sorry, my love. I should never wish to see you hurt. Why we shall speak of happier things, like how many babies we shall have when we are married.” I said, smiling up at him brightly.

“I saw them kill her.” Wes said and his voice was solemn.

“Oh my gosh, Wes, that’s so sad.” I whispered, my heart breaking for the pain he must have been through. “You need not speak of it any more my love.”

“No. I want you to know.” He paused again and I pressed my lips against his, but I knew his mind had gone pack to the past, and my darling Wes was no longer with me.

“Mother was beautiful. She had lovely skin. Like chocolate, smooth and rich. Not a blemish, not a mark, completely clean. She had the most beautiful black eyes, but very stern, when she said it was the end of a matter, it was the end of a matter; I dared not tangle with her. But she was also very loving; I admired her a great deal. She had no man to take care of her – it was just she and I, but we lived a good life. I would ask her about Pa sometimes, I would ask if she missed him, if she missed having a man about. And she would say no, she would say she didn’t because I was her little man, I was there and that made her safe. It’s amazing how seriously a ten year old takes things like that.” He muttered, as much to himself as to me. “I helped her take care of our few crops, there were sufficient for us, and anything else we needed Ma bought when the delivery guy came around once a month. We lived about a day’s journey from a town, but I never went there – nor did Ma, our world was just that forest and up until I was ten years old, I didn’t even know the world was so big and that there was something called slavery.”

“Was your Ma a runaway slave?” I asked. He shrugged and then looked thoughtful.

“I suppose she might have been. I don’t rightly know. I just know that living with her was so completely perfect, I never imagined that there was a different world waiting for me out here. Every year on my birthday she made me a beautiful

cake, and gave me a gift. She said she always tried to give me something special, so I would know how precious I was to her. Usually, it was a letter, expressing her love for me., except on my eighth birthday, when she gave me that ring, the one I gave to you, told me I was a young man now, and responsible enough to receive it. It was a gift that my Pa wanted me to have, to show the world I was his, and that he loved me.” Wes smiled. “I cherished that ring. It brought a dead father alive in my heart and made him more real to me than anything. I used to think about him all the time, look at my ring and imagine if he was still alive what he would look like, how he would take care of me and of Ma.” I sighed and leaned on Wes; imagine that, going from free to slave at ten years old. I could see why he had been crying so when I had first seen him. I pulled the ring out from the top of my dress and twirled it lovingly in my hand, Wes had given me a precious gift. I smiled as I remembered how I had spent the past ten years keeping the ring concealed after one of the teachers had discovered it and insisted it was quite valuable and tried everything to get it from me. She had no idea that the ring was worth to more than its worth in dollars, it was precious to Wes, for it had been a gift from his father and to me for it was a gift from Wes.

“How did your Ma died?” I asked, now remembering that he had said that ‘they’ had killed her. Had her owner found her and punished her for running away? He inhaled a deep breath and then exhaled slowly.

"We were sleeping." He shook his head and started over. "I was sleeping, Ma was in the kitchen preparing for our meal for the next day. She was making something special, it was my birthday." He paused, breathed hard again and then went on. "I'm not sure if it was the sound of horses that woke me or if it was my Mother. I just remember being out of bed and hearing her yelling at me, telling me to leave the house." He stared ahead angrily for a moment. "She told me to run to town. I'd never even been to town. She said 'climb through that window Wes and you just keep running straight, don't turn back; don't ever turn back until you reach Tensor Town.'" Before she'd finish speaking well I could hear someone breaking down the front door." He heaved a sigh and then plodded on. "She ran outside, into the main room where they were coming in. I looked outside my window and I could see there were three horses tied outside there. Then I heard a loud noise and I heard Ma scream, I ran to the door and peeked into the main room. A white lady had hit mom with a large stick and she'd fallen to the floor and her head was bleeding. Then one of the men with the woman kicked her, and then the two men kept kicking her and kicking her, and then the white woman struck her with the stick again and again, and I could see her blood..." His arm tightened about my waist but I knew it had been more of an involuntary reaction to the memory. "I wanted to go out there, to help her, to be a little man that protected her. But I was so scared; I just stood there, glued to the spot. I couldn't move. I couldn't run, I couldn't. I could

see Ma's blood come rolling towards me in the door way. I guess I must have made some kind of sound then, because they all looked around at me. I saw my Ma alive for the last time then." He said, his voice hoarse now. "Her head lolled to a side, and she stared straight at me and those black eyes looked so stern and she said 'Run boy, I told you to run.' And I ran. I can still hear that white woman screaming, she was telling them to kill me."

"Oh Wes, my sweet darling Wes. I should have nightmares for the rest of my life if I saw such a thing." I confessed.

"Indeed." Was all he said.

"Did you make it to the town?" I felt compelled to ask.

"No, I ran until I could run no more and then I hid. I could see them searching for me. They searched for hours, but it was dark, and they eventually had to give up. I was exhausted, but I headed back to the cabin. I guess I hoped that somehow she would still be alive. But when I got back there, there was just blood every where. On the walls, on the chairs, on the tables, all around the floor, her body looked like...like..." I could see his hand that held the rein shake slightly, "I guess they must have beaten her with the stick until she... I couldn't recognize her. I just stood there and stared at her, it was like she didn't have any skin on her. I

guess I must have fainted, because the next thing I remember I was in the back of a wagon and headed to your father's plantation to be sold to him as a slave. I tried to tell them that someone had murdered my mother. But all the guy would say was that she was a slave, and there are no laws against murdering a slave."

I glanced up at his face, I felt I would see anger, hurt and bitterness there against my people for the injustice and pain he had suffered. But only hurt was there; and I loved him more.

"Did you think of avenging your mother's death, Wes. Of finding the people who did that to your Ma?" I asked.

"Yes. I thought about it. I thought about growing up and getting big and strong enough to do something about what they had done to Ma. And then the war began, and I realized that this was my opportunity to fight not just those three who had murdered my Mom, but to fight the system that gave them the license to do something like that. I don't know if I'll ever see those men again, but I imagine they'd be a lot better off if I didn't."

I breathed heavily. No boy should ever have to go through what Wes had been through, and my heart grieved for him. I

swore to myself that I should love him so much that he would never remember such a horrible day.

“How did you get the ring?” I asked and Wes shrugged.

“I looked in the small bag they had tossed into the wagon with me and it contained all that I had left of my life, Pa’s ring, mom’s letters, two shirts and an extra underpants and pants. Her last note, the one she had written for my birthday was in there as well, I guess they must have found it and stuffed it into my things.” Wes seemed to remembering something.

“It said ‘My darling Wes, my love for you is without bonds, you are my most precious treasure. Your Pa would be proud of you. May your birthday bring you great joy and peace. Happy birthday son, love Ma.’” Wes smiled at the memory. “She never got a chance to give it to me.”

“I love you, and forgive me for bringing up the matter.” I said. He pulled me closer against him.

“It does hurt to talk about it.” He whispered into my ear, “But I think it hurts more to keep it bottled up inside.”

“Your Ma would be proud of you, if she could see what a

fine young man you've grown into." I said.

"I wished she could have, had I been bigger, stronger...."

"You weren't. You were a boy, it wasn't your job to protect her; it was her job to protect you; she was a great mom, she did her job well." I tilted up my face and kissed his cheek.

"And I shall forever be grateful to her for that."

When we reached back at the Martins homestead it was already nightfall. Wes helped me down from the horse and we entered the house. Gabriella was sleeping and everyone else was in the main house sitting quietly.

"Gosh, I thought you would never get back, Sis. I was starting to get worried. Are you okay?" Rex asked, jumping from his seat as soon as I entered.

"I'm fine, but you must know that Wes would take proper care of me."

"I'm sure he would." Rex sneered and I blushed at the insinuation.

"How is Gabriella?" I asked; changing the subject.

“She is better, the doctor could not stay long but he did give her something that should help with the bleeding, he says she may travel tomorrow if necessary.” Miss Leslie advised and both Wes and I nodded.

“Yes, so that leaves one more night for us in this place.” Rex pointed out, “So Marissa and I will be back to the saloon then, I guess.” He said, strolling towards the door and gripping my hand as he passed.

“You can’t be serious. You can’t expect to stay in the saloon with Ris?” Wes said and I could see he was striving to keep his anger at bay.

“I don’t see why not. If I didn’t have the sense to take Marissa with me last night she could be lying in a bed like Gabriella all defiled.”

“Are you serious?” Wes demanded.

“This house isn’t safe, man. Can’t you see that?” Rex asked.

“You know what; I’m not even going to argue with you. Ris is staying here because I am staying here.” Wes said. I watched as the two men stood face to face, Wes a clear seven inches taller than Rex – who was not a short man.

“Fine. You know, fine. But if something happens to Marissa I’m holding you responsible!” Rex yelled and marched out of the door.

“I assure you my home is quite safe.” Mr. Martin was saying, looking quite embarrassed by the exchange.

“I’m sure it is sir, I believe Rex is just a little high strung. He meant no insult to your hospitality.” Wes advised, Mr. Martin nodded, still looking rather saddened by the whole affair.

The next day as soon as Rex arrived Wes rode into town for word from Papa, when he returned he informed us that Papa had wanted the collected money brought back to him immediately. We all headed back to the Cegan Plantation, a great deal less excited than when we had left. Gabriella was better now, though she could not walk properly on account of the soreness and the bruises and she was still quite depressed. I tried everything to cheer her up but nothing seemed to work. Miss Leslie hugged her tightly for most of the journey home, and when she did not hug her I did. I was rather disappointed at Rex, for he seemed to lose all interest in Gabriella, which made the poor girl even more depressed as she seemed convinced that no more

eligible gentlemen would be interested in her after the incident.

We were still a good ten minutes drive away from the homestead and I could already see Papa, Ma, Anisha, Luke and a couple of the slaves awaiting our arrival, bad news travels quite fast. As soon as we pulled to a stop both Wes and Rex jumped off of the wagon and hurried towards Papa, while we waited patiently in the back of the wagon for assistance to dismount.

“Wes!” Papa’s voice sounded most upset as he turned to my darling Wes and his face was quite red. “Tell me what has happened!” He demanded angrily, I knew for a fact that Wes had already sent him mail on the matter so such a demand spoke only to how very upset Papa was.

“I left Gabriella and Miss Leslie at a decent family on the outskirts of town, Gabriella must have left the house, and was attacked and...and raped.” Wes explained. The resounding slap to his face was so hard that I felt a tear spring to my own eye.

“I hold you responsible for this matter Wes. I trusted you

with the lives of these young ladies and you let me down.” He was practically screaming now as he spoke.

“I’m sorry sir. I...I assumed that your son Rex...had authority for the security of the ladies.” Wes explained. Papa glared at him so angrily that I climbed off of the wagon on my own, for I was so fearful of what he would do to Wes.

“My son Rex? Idiot!” He slapped Wes hard across his right cheek and as his face swung to the side he slapped him against the left so that his face swung back. I had been about to run forward to him but then I felt the restraining arms of Miss Leslie about me, and it surprised me to know that a proper lady like Miss Leslie would have climbed out of the wagon on her own as well.

Wes wiped his lip, and I could see a tinge of blood upon his hand.

“Have you been around me so long and not know I have no son?” Papa asked and slapped Wes hard about the face again, Miss Leslie pulled me to her and I buried my face in her bosom for I could not bear to see Wes treated so.

“Surely you cannot blame the lad, had it not been for him we should all be assaulted.” Miss Leslie said, and I loved her more immediately.

"I would thank you Miss to stay out of my business, it is my right to discipline my slaves as I see fit." Papa said most sternly and Miss Leslie hushed immediately. "And a great deal must be said as well for your complete inadequacy as a chaperone. Why if this is the kind of care and attention I have been paying for over the past ten years for my daughter, I am shocked she did not return home with child."

Miss Leslie's face fell; indeed, if this matter should get about the FARTS school would suffer a great fall out.

"Her father shall demand compensation. Why the girl is of no more use, and she an only child. What manner of legacy can he hope to obtain from her loins now? No decent man shall have her. If it were possible, you would be forced to marry her as compensation." Papa said, glaring at Wes quite angrily.

"I'm sorry, Sir." Wes said.

"Sorry doesn't undo the matter; she will not be a virgin again simply because you're sorry." Papa said, though some of his anger seemed spent now.

"Come. We have to look at the matter of the books." I

watched as Papa started to walk towards the house, Wes turned about swiftly and gave me a polite nod, lifted Gabriella out of the wagon and headed towards the house behind Papa.

As I laid in my bed that night I reflected on all that had occurred over the past few days. It was indeed strange how life could change so suddenly, what had started out as a carefree happy trip had ended in catastrophe for Gabriella. I sighed and buried my head in the pillow; it had been a very long day. The slight tapping at the window prevented me from falling asleep, I climbed out of bed and headed there, pulling aside the curtain and pulling it open.

“Wes.” I whispered, though I felt like screaming.

“One should always knock upon a lady’s window so one can be invited in.” He said. I gripped him by his collar and tugged him through the opening, he chuckled softly.

“Oh my darling, Wes, are you alright. Papa was so rough with you.”

“I’ve had rougher, my love.” He whispered and pulled me

into his arms. His arms crushing the large flannel nightgown I was wearing close to my body.

“Oh my sweet.” I muttered, giving in to the pleasure of his lips against mine. I pressed my body against his, my hands bold in caressing his body.

“I love you.” He said and lifted me into his arms and carried me to the bed, my body stiffened, I wondered if he would take me.

“Only when you are ready, Ris. I swear it.” He whispered into my ear and I relaxed against him, allowing him to hold and touch and caress me as he willed for I totally trusted Wes, I knew he would not take me unless I was ready.

He held me in his arms and I rested my head against his chest happily.

“Ris, tomorrow; speak to Gabriella. It will be easier for her to tell you. Find out what happened that night, why she left the house.”

I nodded.

"Papa seems concerned that he shall have to find a husband for Gabriella. Do you think he would force you to marry her?" I asked, frowning.

"Unlikely. I'm a slave; I hardly think Gabriella's parents will consider me an appropriate compensating husband for their daughter."

I nodded, that was true and for once I was quite glad of the fact that Wes was a slave.

"What do you think Papa will do?" I asked.

"I don't know. I know that if we don't find the man that raped Gabriella, both Rex and I shall quickly become the prime suspects. We would have had opportunity and motive is always assumed in these matters."

"Dear me, but how shall we find such a person, why did not father encourage you to stay and follow that matter instead of returning home with the collected funds?" I demanded.

"My sweet, Ris. All is not as good on the Cegan Plantation as it might first appear. Without that money, your father might be forced to sell off more slaves to make ends meet. As it stands, there are not even enough persons on the

plantation now to reap the next crop.” I gasped and stared at Wes.

“Dear me, does that mean that I shall be soon put out upon the street?” I asked.

“We have continued to make ends meet here because we have had great sales to Caspel Town and Doc in his journeys to Taylor Town has been kind enough to take what ever excess product we have and sell it to the Taylor plantation, if not for those sales we might have gone belly up a long time ago, coupled with my negotiating skills and your father’s knowledge of the land – we’ve been hanging in there. But the plantation is in debt, mainly because of your father’s insistence on funding a war that the south cannot win.” Wes said.

“”Why do you say that?” I asked.

“We call this a war of the north against the south, but there are many in the south that are against the stand that the south has taken – they are like a house within a house. But you’re father refuses to see it. He wants to believe that everyone in the south wants to keep slaves, but some don’t, that’s why we can smuggle slaves out, because there is help inside of the south, help that is necessary to smuggle

slaves to the north so they can get armed and come back and fight.” Wes explained.

I understood what Wes was saying, for indeed Papa supported slavery very strongly, but neither Rex nor I did. A house within a house.

“I shall be glad when the war is over, and we win.” I whispered and he pulled me into his arms and kissed me soundly. A victory meant freedom, freedom for Wes and me to be together, to leave this place and to go where ever we wanted to go and live as man and wife. I sighed happily at the thought.

“I love you.” I muttered and felt his hand slide around me and slip up the edge of my flannel nightgown and cup my derriere.

“Oh.” I whispered, but I pressed my self against him and my soft breast crushed against the hardness of his chest.

“I love you.” He responded, his lips claiming mine as his hand wreaked havoc with my senses as he caressed the naked skin beneath my nightgown.

“Darling.” His hand caressed my legs and I could feel my body grow damp from the feel of him. I had never experienced such a thing and I felt a wave of nervousness rush over me.

“Wes.” I said and I felt his hands slide from beneath my gown; encircle my body and press me against him.

“Get some sleep.” He said and closed his eyes beside me. I kissed him happily, this was what I wanted most, the chance to sleep in a bed next to Wes – dreams do come through.

Chapter 12

When I awoke the next morning Wes was already gone, but lying next to me on the pillow was a hurriedly scribbled note that said.

“Dreams do come true. Love, Wes.” And then beautiful Xs which covered the balance of the paper. I stretched happily and hugged my teddy bear, explaining to it how it must now

hold second place since I had found a much sexier, adorable teddy bear to hug. I grinned at my little chat and started to get myself ready for my day's chores. I remembered what Wes had asked me to do and I made up my mind to speak to Gabriella as soon as I had an opportunity.

The opportunity came late in the afternoon. As soon as I finished my chores I headed up to Gabriella's room. She was still looking quite pale and worn.

"Why Gabriella, it is so nice to see you sitting up. How are you?" I asked. A tear slid down her cheek and I thought I would cry myself.

"You have no idea how horrible I feel, Marissa. The things..." She brushed another tear from her face and I knew she was trying to be brave.

"I know it is very hard for you, but you must tell me what happened. All of it. Father is determined to find out who was behind this matter." I explained.

"Oh please, I would rather everyone not know about it." Gabriella protested.

"Just me, and those who are important to know, other than

that; no one else, I promise you.” I said. She glanced through her window absently, appearing to forget that I was there.

“How did you come to be outside, Gabriella?” I prompted. She looked embarrassed.

“Rex did whisper to me that he should meet me on the outside at midnight...I know it was a very foolish thing to do, but I thought it might be fun to spend a bit of time alone with him. He seems such a rogue, quite unlike the gentlemen we were told so much about.” She said. I nodded knowingly.

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“Well. He did not show up. Perhaps he had been only jesting with me and I took him seriously. I waited a half an hour for him but there was no sign.” She sniffled sadly. “I thought that perhaps I should walk a bit closer to the town, maybe he was late or...or...I can not believe I was so foolish!” She cried and broke down into a flood of tears. I did so hate dragging these matters up, but I feared that if the matter was not gotten to the bottom of it would not be a pretty matter.

I ran over to her and hugged her tightly to me; I could not pretend that I knew what she was feeling for I had never experienced anything even mildly close to what Gabriella had.

“Go on my dear, I do believe you shall feel better if you get the matter off your chest, keeping things to oneself does not help.” She nodded and brushed the tears from her eyes again.

“Well, I only felt someone grab me from the back. At first I believed it was Rex, but the man was much fiercer. He wore a mask over his face and his hat hid his eyes. I struggled as hard as I could but he was much too strong for me. I would have screamed but he held my mouth and carried me away on his horse. It was so painful, and I pleaded and begged him to stop, but he would not, and he bit me.” She blushed bright red at the memory. “I was so afraid, I did not know what to do – and he took me a second time. Oh, it was a most fearful experience. He was a complete monster.” She said.

“Did you know if he was a Negro or a White man?” I asked, remembering the men that camped just outside the town and finding myself wondering if one of them might have done such a thing.

"I don't know. I..." She cried the more.

"Now, Now, Gabriella. I am but asking, it doesn't mean anything." I explained and she nodded sadly and stared back out of the window. I sighed, putting my arms about her comfortingly, I truly hoped that Gabriella would be able to overcome this situation.

That night when Wes knocked upon my window I hurried over to open it so I could tell him all the information I had gained. Before I could speak he pulled me into his arms and kissed me soundly.

"Now you can tell me your news." He said and I giggled happily.

I relayed all that Gabriella had told me as I guided Wes towards my bed, lying next to him was positively the highlight of my day.

He pulled me into his arms as soon as we laid upon the bed and pressed his lips against mine.

"I love you." He whispered and I slid my hand beneath his shirt and caressed him boldly.

“And I you.” I said as I lowered my head to press my lips against the chest that the top of his shirt exposed.

“Wes, is sex always so painful, as Gabriella described?” I asked.

“No.” He brushed his lips against mine and fondled my breast lovingly. “It is far more pleasure than it is pain. But rape and making love are two very different things.”

I nodded, understanding what he was saying to me.

“Does it hurt, at all?” I asked. He laughed and slid his hand beneath my flannel nightgown and caressed my nakedness.

“The first time – yes.” He said. I nodded and I could feel my heart racing anxiously at the thought.

“We don’t have to rush, Ris. A great deal has happened in the last week that would make any young girl afraid to try something new.”

“Indeed.” I said, allowing my hand to drape casually over his body and pressing myself closer to him as his hand continued to caress me, causing me to feel quite damp between my legs.

“Wes.” I croaked, my voice hoarse with desire, but how did he do such wonderful things with just his hands.

“Forgive me. I take more privilege than I should. But I must confess; being so close to you drives me completely crazy.”

“Oh my darling.” I moaned, pressing my lips about his face until he caught me and held me closely and claimed my mouth with his, his tongue driving deep inside of me. I could sense the passion between us building and I could feel Wes’ heart beating faster.

“We should sleep.” He whispered; pulling his lips from mine and taking a deep steady breath. He wrapped both of his arms about me and drew me close.

“How shall I concentrate on such a boring thing as sleep with you beside me?” I asked and he laughed.

“It will be no easier for me, but if we do not sleep, I am quite convinced that I would be tempted to go much further.” He confessed.

“Wes.” I said, my voice growing serious as I nestled myself in his arms; mentally regretting that he would have to leave

my bed before the break of dawn.

“Yes, my sweet.”

“Did Papa say what Gabriella’s family would do?” I asked.

“He said that I shall have to go into town the day after tomorrow and try to find out whatever I can, because Gabriella will leave in a few days time and we must have something to tell her father.”

“Do you think they would do something violent if we know nothing?” I asked.

“I don’t know. This is quite a serious matter, the honor of a young lady is at stake.”

“Honor seems such an easy thing to lose. If I gave myself to you, Wes, would you still respect me as a lady in the morning?” I whispered.

“Definitely not.” He said, shaking his head most seriously, and my eyes widened. “I could not respect you as A lady, I

would respect you as MY lady.”

I slapped his chest hard and giggled.

“You do enjoy playing about with me.” I scowled.

“More than you will know, my love.” He whispered and pulled me back into his arms so that we could both sleep.

The next day was quite busy, I spent part of it with Gabriella encouraging her to eat and then I helped with the cooking and the clean up. It looked suspiciously to me as if there were even less slaves than they had been when we had left for the trip to town. When I asked Ma about it she simply said that expenses had to be trimmed. I was quickly becoming worried about the state of my family’s financial affairs and made up my mind that I should have a word with Papa about it.

I found such time to speak with Papa well after lunch. I knocked upon his study door and not hearing an answer took it upon myself to enter, Wes was there working alone quite diligently upon the books.

“Wes.” I said and he jumped to his feet as soon as I entered.

“What are you doing here?” He questioned.

“Am I not allowed to walk about my father’s property?” I teased as I sauntered over to place a most loving kiss upon his lips, he wanted to frown at me for being so bold during the daylight hours but he could not help himself but smile.

“Your father will be back quite soon.” He advised.

“Then we have a few moments then?” I asked, wrapping myself about him and completely tantalizing the poor boy.

“You shall be the death of me, Ris.” He said, but his arms did come up and encircle my waist.

“Why what fun is living if one can’t take a few risks.” I said.

“Hmmm, Ris by name and Risk by nature.” He whispered and I giggled.

“My, but I always did wonder why you called me so, for you are the only one.”

“I’m the only one that knows you.” He pointed out and I

giggled again.

The sound of the door creaking caused both Wes and I to jump apart and not a moment too soon either for father strolled in looking quite upset, when he saw me there his face grew stormier.

“Marissa!” He glanced from me to Wes quite suspiciously and I so wanted to laugh.

“What are you doing here child?” He demanded.

“Why I was looking for you of course.” I said honestly and his features relaxed some.

“So did you not notice I was not here when you entered?” He questioned, coming over to give me a quick peck on the cheek.

“Of course I noticed, Papa. You are not so small that I should miss you.” I said and saw Wes try to stifle a grin.

“So why are you still here then?” Papa persisted.

“Wes informed me that you should be right back, so it seemed sensible of me to wait. Did you not wish me to wait for you Papa?” I asked. He glanced from Wes to me again rather uncomfortably.

“Of course you should wait. What is it that you needed to

speak to me about?" He queried.

"Why, I noticed that a few more slaves are missing, and the plantation is already quite short of hands as it is, and I wondered if we were experiencing some financial difficulties." I explained. Papa looked so embarrassed and flustered.

"Why, that is not a matter for a young lady to concern herself with. Your job is to merely look pretty so that you might find a fine young man." Papa said. I made a face at him.

"Really, Papa. Why do you not give up on this hope of me becoming a fine young lady? Surely you know by now it will never happen."

"A man can live in hope. Now if that is all you required you may run along now, Wes and I have much business to attend to."

I sighed heavily, he had still not answered my question; I shall have to ask Wes tonight when he comes to my room.

Wes' point of view

I was rather anxious to see Ris, being with her seemed to give me the energy to face every new day, besides which, the Boss had requested that I go into town in the morning and that meant I would be away for at least two days. I was being sent to gather information that might help us to solve the mystery with Gabriella. A carriage was schedule to arrive any day now and take her home. I was under no illusions about how her family would react when they heard that she had been raped while she was under the Cegan care. The Boss had been trying to see if he could scrape together some funds with the hope of compensating them for the lost of the marketability of their daughter; the reality was he barely had two coins to rub together far less pay out as an honor gift. No, what he wanted me to prove was that this had been a pure and straightforward rape by an unknown person and that it had been the fault of Gabriella herself. The assignment did not please me one bit, the girl had been through enough and now to make the matter her fault would add insult to injury. There was going to be no happy end to this matter that I could see, someone was going to be quite unhappy. It had been a mistake to listen to Rex, if I hadn't listened, none of us would be in this position now. It puzzled me that the Boss did not choose to take this mistake out of my hide. I had seen him whip many slaves before, whipped them until their skin looked as if it would peel off, but to me he seemed to reserve the creative punishments. The brutal punishments, the ones that left no

outward signs, but many inward scars. The punishments that lasted for weeks at a time; I pushed the memory out of my head; sometimes I wished he would just whip me and be done with it. I sighed heavily as I reached the bottom of Ris' window. If he ever found out that Ris and I were still in love, even after ten years, he would kill me for sure. But I didn't care, I loved Ris and as long as she wanted me; I would be with her.

I started my climb up to her window, glancing around swiftly to ensure that I wasn't watched. I might be willing to die for the chance to be with Ris, but I definitely wasn't willing to die if I didn't have to.

I rapped upon the window just three times with my finger.

"Wes." The sound of her voice sent immediate chills through my body. How could I even have imagined that I would stop loving Ris. She was a part of me, she was in my blood. I pushed aside the curtain and climbed through the window.

"Ris." My mouth fell open, I could not help myself. She was completely naked, her red hair flowing about her like an angel's – though my thoughts were far from angelic.

“Wes. I’m ready.” She said and I hurried towards her.

“Wait.” I stopped, uncertain of what she would require of me but pretty darn sure that what ever it was I would oblige.

“Anisha told me that there is a quaint slave custom. When two slaves desire to be married, they have a ‘jump the broom’ ceremony.” She explained and I stared at her bewildered.

“Look down Wes.” She said; I glanced down at the floor and noticed a broom lying there just behind her.

“You want us to jump the broom?” I asked, fighting to restrain myself from laughing; only Ris would set such store upon such an idea.

“You don’t like the idea, to become my husband?” She asked. I grinned and hurried forward towards her.

“I guess I have suffered too much of the white man’s education to fully appreciate these things. But, if jumping would make me your husband – I am quite prepared to

jump the moon if necessary.” Her face lit up so brilliantly that I was ashamed that I had even hesitated in the first place.

“I love you.” I whispered and pulled her against me, my body hardening at the feel of her nakedness against me.

“I wish to vow to you Wes, between us and God; that I shall be faithful, and I shall love you always and you shall never require another wife because I shall dedicate myself to making you completely happy.” She said, rising up on her tip toe and pressing her lips against mine. “Now you make a vow before we jump.” She instructed. I groaned inwardly.

“I’m so turned on now I can barely think straight!” I muttered and she tapped me across my face, but not hard.

“You can think of something, you are ever so bright.” She encouraged, I groaned again.

“Are you going to ruin our wedding night?” She demanded.

“Okay, fine. Well don’t hold me, so I can concentrate.” I instructed. She stepped back giggling and I closed my eyes, trying to blank her nakedness from my mind her perky breast with cherry red tits.

“Gosh.”

“Stop that.” She said, slapping me.

“Okay, okay.” I said, but I was grinning, I knew this was important to Ris and I really did want to make a proper try.

“Go on then, or we shall spend the whole night here and you shall have no opportunity to lay with me.” She pointed out, that cleared my head up straight away. I cleared my throat but kept my eyes closed so her hot body wouldn't distract me; but I held her hand.

“Ris, I love you with all my heart and I so wish I could marry you properly, in the way that you would want to be married, but if being married is about being committed and in love, I don't need a broom or anything Ris. I'll always be totally committed and in love with you. I swear it.” I said, opening my eyes to see a tear slipping down her cheek.

“Oh, Ris.” I pulled her into my arms and kissed her firmly.

“I love you.” She whispered; gripped my hand and we jumped over the broom, landing on the bed with a thud. We both started to laugh.

“Shhhh.” Ris whispered, “Before Papa hears us.” I grinned, not even the thought of Ris’ father finding us could dampen the way I was feeling.

“Do you feel married?” She asked me.

“I’ve felt married since I was ten years old.” I told her and she giggled.

“I have your ring.” She said, pulling the chain with the ring attached to it from her neck.

“It’s your ring. I gave it to you.” I reminded her, pulling her close to me and allowing my hands to massage the soft firmness of her breast.

“Wes.” She said.

“Yes my sweet.”

“Might I press upon you for one more thing?”

“Name it.” I responded, I watched her carefully, I could see that whatever it was required quite a bit more of her

boldness than usual.

“I have never seen a man...naked. Would you...” She blushed and I grinned.

“You wish me to undress in front of you?” I asked.

“Well, I did see a baby boy once, at the School. His Mama had brought him there and one of the girls was asked to assist in changing him. So I do have something of an idea.” She explained.

“I’m no baby, Ris.” I said; feeling compelled to point that out before I started to undress. She merely nodded slowly.

“Okay, well, go then.”

I slid off of the bed to the side and started to unbutton my shirt, I could see her watching me intently.

“Shall I dance?” I asked teasingly and her eyes lit up at the prospect.

“Yeah, that’s not happening, I’m not dancing.” I said flatly and she giggled.

“You did suggest it.” She pointed out.

“I shall remember that you can’t take a joke in the future.” I said as I tugged off my boots, almost falling in the process.

“Do you do that every time you undress?” She asked curiously.

“Generally I sit to take off my boots.” I pointed out.

“Yes, indeed, that is what you did last night. It must have been all the jumping the broom that caused you to forget.”

“Yeah. let’s call it the jumping the broom.” I said, staring at her enticing body on the bed. I unbuckled my belt, unzipped my pants and pulled them off, tossing them onto a nearby chair with my shirt.

“Ummmm, gray long johns.” She said as I came down to my underwear.

“Uh huh.” I said as I unclipped the buttons to the front that went down to my stomach and then shrugged my shoulders out of them.

“Mmmmmmm....very muscled. No wonder you make such

light work of lifting me.” She said. I pulled the long johns down, exposing my manhood and I heard her gasp. I stepped out of the underwear and straightened up – her eyes were wide.

“My, I had no idea they grew so big.” She exclaimed and I would have chuckled but thought better of it.

“Curiosity all satisfied?” I asked, I could feel...actually see myself growing hard just watching her lying there on the bed; naked. She nodded quite slowly.

“Why does it stick out so?” She asked.

“It’s called an erection and it indicates that I’m turned on, very turned on and I want to make love – to you.” I explained. She nodded.

“May I touch you?”

“You need not ask me if you can touch me, I’m yours.” I whispered, leaning forward to rest close against her on the bed. She reached out her hand gingerly and touched my member nervously. I would have told her that it did not bite, but then I remembered Gabriella and decided that was not a wise choice of words.

“Make love to me, Wes.” She whispered and I sank down onto the bed pulling her about so that my body was resting upon hers.

“With pleasure, my love.” I whispered. Her hands wrapped about my neck and her nails dug into my skin, and I knew she was nervous.

“Are you sure, Ris.”

“Yes, Wes, I’m very sure.”

I pressed her legs apart with my knees and felt her nails sink deeper into my skin. I could have taken her right there, I was definitely ready, but it was Ris first time and I didn’t want to rush it. I slid my hands between her legs and felt my need grow at the wetness of her. She moaned and pressed her body against mine. I claimed her lips, my tongue delving into her mouth possessively. I had asked Ris if she was sure, but I knew it was I that had to be sure. For once we made love for me there could never be any turning back. Once I claimed Ris as mine, Cegan would have to kill me to stop me from being with her.

“Wes, oh my darling Wes.” She whispered as my lips left hers for a moment’s breath. I pressed her face against my

shoulder, the need in me to feel myself deep inside of her was growing stronger than I could withstand.

“Bite me here my sweet, if it hurts.” I whispered, and then I pressed myself into her. Two things happened simultaneously – I felt the tightness of her and had to press hard to enter and I felt the pressure of her teeth upon my shoulder as she broke the skin with the strength of her bite.

“Oh Wes.” She muttered, and when she held up her face there was a tear in her eye.

“Oh darling Ris, if I could make it not hurt, I would have.” I whispered, pressing my lips against her face and cheek and neck, my body moving in and out of hers.

“Oh Wes, don’t stop.” She whispered, the tear from her eye vanishing and her arms drawing me hard against her. I could feel her body moving in time with mine, driving me faster and heightening my excitement, it was all I could do to try to control myself so that the moment should not end too quickly.

“Oh, oh, oh gosh...” She said, her voice rising slightly, I claimed her lips again as much to feel the pleasure of my tongue in her mouth as to drown out the sound of our loving.

When she lifted her legs and wrapped them about my waist – I lost all semblance of self control. The rhythm and speed of my pace automatically increased, I knew I was pushing hard, but my own body was driving me now, her arms gripped me tight as I pressed my full self deep inside of her, pulled away and pressed in hard again. Her body jerked beneath mine, and when I was about to empty myself I pulled out, collapsing upon her from the effort.

“Oh my, oh my, oh my.” Was all she said as I rolled my weight off of her and pulled her into my arms.

“I love you.” I whispered.

“Oh my.” She said again.

“Are you okay?” I asked, some concern beginning to surface.

“Is making love always like that? For if it is I shall surely forgive a woman for being a whore.” She said, staring earnestly into my face. I laughed.

“Only you would say such a thing Ris.” I pulled her to me and pressed my lips against hers. “But making love is usually quite pleasant, but this was not just pleasant. This

was...heaven on earth." I explained.

"Yes. I did not believe my body could feel such things, so intense, so needy. I fear you have awakened a monster in me." She confessed and I grinned.

"And I am quite prepared to feed it." She giggled happily and rested her head against my chest and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 13

I awoke the next day to an empty bed and I missed Wes immediately. I loved him so; everything we shared was perfect, beautifully, marvellously perfect. I yawned and stretched and picked up the scribbled note beside my head.

'I shall think of nothing else but you until I see you again. Love Wes' it read and it was filled with the most adorable hearts and kisses. I grinned happily and made to throw my legs off of the bed.

"Oh." I grimaced, my, but I was sore. I rested my hand gently upon my private part and rubbed it soothingly. Dear me. I

was just about to make another attempt to dismount the bed when I heard a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I called, sliding my feet gingerly down and groping about for my flannel nightgown before making my way quite carefully to the door.

“Anisha.” The voice called and I smiled as I unlocked the door and let her in.

“When ever did you start locking your door?” Anisha demanded as she hurried in with a large jar of water. “Why I’ve been trying to awaken you for nigh an hour.”

“Do forgive me, Anisha. I...I was a bit tired this morning.” I explained, trying my best to hurry over to the basin in spite of the soreness between my legs.

“I shall take the washing down then while you clean up.” Anisha said pulling the sheets from the bed; but then she stopped quite suddenly.

“Blood. Why, there is blood on your sheets.” She declared. I fought valiantly to hide my blush.

“Oh, yes. I cut myself.” I lied.

“Dear me, do show me so I may tend to it.” Anisha insisted. I splashed water on my face, using the time to work out what I should tell Anisha.

“Don’t trouble yourself; it was not a great cut. I took care of it myself.” I said.

“Are you sure, I would not wish you to get an infection.” She said and I shook my head. I did hate lying to Anisha, she was such a pleasant girl and a friend too, but I was not sure that I should risk sharing with anyone the fact that Wes and I were lovers, for such information reaching the ears of my father could well mean the end of Wes’ life.

“Shall I return for the water?” Anisha was asking, looking quite harassed.

“No, I shall bring it down and wash the basin. You have quite sufficient chores; and you may leave the wash in the bucket, I shall deal with it as soon as I get down.” I promised. She looked relieved, pulled me into her arms and hugged me tightly and then hurried out of my room and down the stairs.

I finished washing myself, dressed and hurried down the stairs. There was a great deal of work to be done on a plantation and now there were only seven slaves left – two women and five men - we all had to pitch in.

By afternoon I was so tired that I collapsed upon the chair on the porch and fell off to sleep, Ma woke me two hours later; her face looking quite disturbed.

“A fine young lady like yourself should not have to work so hard. I really must speak to father about this. I cannot understand why he is selling off all our slaves, who shall do the work?” She demanded. I glanced up at Ma through now rested eyes and smiled. Ma was a perfect lady, she did not concern herself with matters of finance; she felt such things were for men folk. Ma would never know that something was going wrong until the house was falling in about her, and Papa liked it that way.

“I believe Papa is experiencing some financial problems. We shall all need to do more to make ends me, and with the war going on, half of our crop is donated to the soldiers, so that we must live on just half of what we once lived on.” I explained. She stared at me, perhaps a little surprised that I knew so much.

“Your father told you this?” She asked and I was immediately sorry I had mentioned it. I had pressed the information out of Wes, and I was not sure that Papa would be pleased to know I was so well informed about his finances.

“No. Wes did.” I confessed, still staring at her, “But please don’t tell Papa, he would prefer if we were in the dark on such matters.” I explained. She nodded slowly and then laid her hand gently upon my shoulder.

“You are quite close to Wes?” She said and I blushed.

“There are not many things fine ladies may indulge in, and before they are married they are even fewer. Do you understand what I am saying child?” She asked. I scrunched up my face, I wasn’t really sure.

“I daresay not, Ma.” I confessed and she sat herself down beside me and held my hand in hers quite gently.

“Wes is a mighty fine looking boy, I can quite see how a woman would wish to...am...you know what I mean. But an unmarried woman has only one asset to bring to her marriage, and that’s her virginity. Without that –her husband might be mindful to put her away.” Ma explained.

“Why are you telling me this, Ma?” I felt compelled to ask and she blushed bright red.

“Why, I simply noticed that Wes appeared to confide in you what he would not confide in others, and I just wanted to warn you...before you went too far.” She said. I nodded.

“I shall consider myself properly warned.” I informed her, smiling quite innocently. She stood up and patted my shoulder.

“Oh, I did the washing.” She said and strolled back into the house, my mouth dropped open. Oh gosh, did she guess?

I spent quite a bit of my time during my chores worrying as to if Ma had figured out that I had been with Wes, if she had, would she tell Papa? I was sorry that Wes was not there, for I would have wished to speak to him about the matter but he had left quite early to head into town to deal with the matter of Gabriella's defiling.

I spent much time with Gabriella in the evening, she was looking so much like herself again, I was quite pleased, I was even able to encourage her to go for a walk about the plantation. I asked Rex to join us, for I knew Gabriella had a thing for him, but he refused; insisting that he had some chores he had been unable to complete during the day. I felt so crushed when as he walked off Gabriella looked at me and whispered.

“I don’t blame him; I would not wish to be with a girl another man had done such things to.” I hugged her close to me and changed the topic.

Even though I went to bed quite early that night I found that I was quite unable to sleep for I could not seem to make myself comfortable in the bed without Wes beside me. I sighed heavily and made up my mind to count sheep. I must have counted a million of them and then a ray of sun came peeping through my window. I tossed the little teddy bear that I had picked up sometime during the night against the wall angrily. My, but it was no substitute at all for Wes. He was warm, that was cold, he was big, that was so tiny, his body was firm and hard, that was much too soft and fluffy. I grinned at myself, truth be told, there would be nothing on the earth that could ever favourably compare to my darling Wes. I missed him so.

I slipped out of my bed and hurried down the stairs and fetched my own bath water, washed myself, dressed and headed down to the slaves’ quarters. I knocked on Anisha’s door and she jumped up quite startled.

“Goodness, what on earth are you doing up and dressed already?”

“I brought water for your bath.” I said and she giggled uncontrollably.

“Can you show me about the quarters?” I asked after she had bathed and dressed herself.

“It’s not much to see. There are two bunk areas, one for boys and one for girls. Each area can house twenty slaves, but there not nearly so many of us now.” Anisha explained. “I share these quarters with Maise, she looks after the boys’ needs - food and washing mainly, she helps with the cooking at the house, and she works in the field as well when she’s not too busy.” I followed Anisha into the next bunk area.

“This is the boys’ quarters.” She said and I half smiled as four males scrambled to their feet as a sign of respect because I entered. “You know Luke...” She winked at me when she said that and I smiled. I remembered Anisha had said Luke was her man. He wasn’t tall but he was buff and muscular and quite handsome too.

“This is Mark, Tom and John; they all work in the field from morning to night pretty much. It’s a large ground and it used to use twenty slaves to maintain it, now the Master is trying to maintain it with just us seven.” Anisha explained. My, but things were getting quite bad.

“So, where does Wes sleep?” I asked, the question slipping out of my mouth before I could restrain it, Tom and John exchanged a look.

“Why, he sleeps right over there mame.” Tom said.

“When he sleeps.” Mark put in and there was the slightest of grins on the faces of the younger men – Luke and Mark. I blushed and Anisha gripped my arm and led me out of the facilities.

“Well, you’ve seen it now. Tom and John are like uncles to us and Maise is like a mom. Most of us don’t know our real families, so we sort of make a new family out of who we’ve got here.” She explained.

“Oh. I’m mighty sorry to hear you don’t know you’re families. Is that on account of you being bought as a small child?” I asked. Anisha nodded and kept walking so I followed her.

“But, I’m hoping that after the war all of that will come to an end. Luke and I would want to have a family; I’d be pretty hurt if my baby had to be sold off to another plantation.” She explained, I nodded, I really couldn’t imagine having a child for Wes and having someone take him away from me, why; they would have to kill me first.

“I’m sure Papa would never separate a family like that.” I said firmly. She didn’t answer me.

I worked with Anisha most of the day and to Papa’s surprise I helped out in the field as well. I must confess that I was not nearly as efficient as the slaves but they suffered me to help; it being the thought that counts and all of that. By evening I was so tired I thought I would collapse and I was just preparing to drag myself to my room when I saw Wes come riding back in. Why, immediately I felt ten times energised. He slid off of his horse easily, winked at me and headed towards the house. Miss Leslie came running out of the house when she spied him through a window, she had sent Wes on an errand too, she felt she needed to inform the School of what had occurred and ask what they would recommend that she does at this time. I could see she was very nervous about the matter and to see her run towards Wes told me that she was more than anxious. I wasn’t sure if Wes told her much for his stride said that the first person he intended to speak with was Papa and the look on his face told me that he had big news to share.

Wes' point of view

I felt my body respond instinctively when I saw Ris in the yard, I wanted to go to her and give her a proper hello, but I had to fix business with the Boss first; he would get pissed if he felt I had returned and hadn't reported to him first.

I greeted Ris' mother as I entered the house and headed towards the study; which was usually where he spent most of his time. I knocked on the door and waited patiently; this wasn't really a conversation I wanted to have. Ris had come into the house behind me, as had Miss Leslie; there was going to be plenty of bad news to share tonight.

"Come in." The Boss called, I turned the handle and strolled in; Ris and Miss Leslie rushing in behind me before I could close the door. He looked at me with surprise.

"I wasn't expecting you back until tomorrow." He said.

"Things went quicker than I thought." I said, neglecting to mention that I'd ridden like the wind and hardly slept. I half smiled to myself, I had been like a man obsessed, I wanted to get back to be with Ris, all I could think about was making love to her again, it was a small wonder I was able to get through the assignment.

“Good. Why are these women here?” The Boss asked, suddenly turning to stare at Miss Leslie and Ris.

“This affects us too.” Miss Leslie explained. The Boss stared at her real hard and she looked embarrassed.

“I want Wes to brief me first, when he’s done I’ll call you – if I think it is necessary.” He said firmly. She looked as if she were about to say something but changed her mind. I had done a bit of money collecting too while I was in town, I figured that would put the Boss in a better mood. I pulled the money and receipts out of my bag and held them towards him, good news first, I thought.

“Close the door, Wes.” He said and I headed to the door to push it in. Ris was still there and I made a kissing face at her. She grinned; then she reached out and gripped my manhood and squeezed me gently. I felt myself harden in her hand and totally forgot I had been holding the papers and money – they all went tumbling to the ground; she giggled.

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Boy?” The Boss demanded as I scrambled to collect the papers and cash from the floor. I gave Ris a stern look, but even then I couldn’t help but smile. I pushed in the door quickly, to avoid any further distractions, picked up the money and documents and

hurriedly placed them on the Boss' desk. He grinned broadly.

"I wasn't expecting that we would be able to collect funds this trip." He said.

"I know, but a few people who hadn't been able to pay last time were able to pay a bit more this time." I explained. I'd had to twist a few hands, but it was worth it, a little bit of sugar can definitely make the medicine go down.

We discussed the takings for a while, the Boss highlighting some items he would be needing me to travel into town and purchase on my next trip. I watched him stroll over to the safe and put the money and documents away.

"You can take care of the books in the morning." He said and I nodded.

"Well, this mess with Gabriella. Did you find out anything?" He asked, settling back in his chair comfortably.

"Yes sir, I did." I said.

"Well? You want an invitation to tell me? Out with it boy!" He yelled.

“Well, Boss. I think it was Rex that did it.” I said and waited for him to blow up.

“Go bring my whip, Wes.” He said, I stared at him dubiously. Gosh, talk about killing the messenger because of the message.

“I have...” I started to say.

“I said, go.”

I stood up and headed out of the study. Dang, but I thought I had couched that news pretty good, I must be losing my touch.

“Wes; what’s happening?” Ris asked as soon as I walked out of the door.

“Your father wants the whip.” I said. I glanced around quickly and not seeing any one about pressed my lips to hers. “I love you.” I said and hurried off to the shed where such things were kept.

I knocked on the study when I returned and was summoned. I entered and saw Rex standing next to his father.

“Give me that whip, boy.” The Boss said and I passed it to him, Rex glanced at me and then his father cautiously. “Tell me what you told me earlier.”

“I said I believed that it was Rex that raped Gabriella.” The Boss held the long spikey end of the whip in his hand and glared at Rex.

“What do you have to say about that, Rex?” He asked; Rex looked incredulous.

“What do I...well it's absurd! Why would I do something like that? Perhaps Wes is trying to cover his own hide?” Rex yelled.

“What do you say, Wes.” The Boss asked.

“I spoke to the whore Rex was with the night Gabriella was raped.” I said. “She said that Rex was drinking in the bar for a while, then he left and he came back much much later. She said he had blood on him.”

“I got in a fight outside.” Rex countered angrily.

“Who did you fight with? Were there any witnesses?” His father asked.

"I don't know the guy...I wasn't looking for witnesses. Don't tell me you believe the word of a slave over me?" Rex asked.

"You denying you did this thing boy?" The boss questioned.

"Hell, yeah!" Rex screamed and glared at me angrily.

"Let me just say, if you done this and you don't confess right now, I'll shoot you myself when it comes out. If you keep this thing to yourself boy and people find out; our entire family name would be no better than mud!"

I glanced at Rex, he was breathing hard but he wasn't talking.

"So you got one last chance to confess boy; so we can fix this thing." The Boss said. Rex completely crumbled; he covered his face with his hands and groaned.

"I didn't mean to hurt her, I was drunk! Gosh, I would never have hurt Gabriella..." The sound of the whip against Rex's back halted his words and he cringed, one of the strings of the whip clipped his face and left a deep cut.

"Aaaaahhhh!" That was from the second lash. I glanced over at the Boss, his face was so twisted with anger he looked like he would never stop beating Rex. I didn't intervene; personally I thought Rex deserved a beating; and

much more. I watched as Rex curled up onto the floor, his hands shielding his face from the whip. By the time the Boss stopped, Rex was in tears.

“Every day you make me more ashamed to call you my son!” He said. Rex pulled himself up, hanging onto the edge of the desk for support and looked about the room with embarrassment.

“So what are you going to do about this matter?” The Boss demanded and Rex hunched his shoulder hopelessly. “Fool! You have to ask Gabriella to marry you. We don’t need someone else investigating this matter and coming up with the same conclusion Wes came up with. We need to put an end to this story right here and right now. Marry Gabriella and she can bring no criminal case against you. It will protect her, her family name and our family name.” The Boss said firmly and Rex nodded weakly.

“Use your mother’s wedding ring and ask Gabriella to marry you tonight, by the time Gabriella’s family arrives tomorrow evening for her; she will be Mrs. Rex Cegan and no longer their responsibility.” I watched the Boss fidget about on the desk. “Another mouth to feed. You’ll have to help about here until you can find a place of your own for you and your wife.” He grumbled.

“Wes, go get Gabriella; we’ll be ready for her in an hour. Rex go get your Ma; I shall have to explain this business to her before Gabriella arrives.”

I nodded and headed out the door, Rex close behind me.

“I thought Pa would kill me.” He said as I headed towards the yard.

“He should have.” I responded and left him there.

We all went into Papa’s study when Gabriella was summoned; Miss Leslie and I hugging Gabriella comfotingly as we entered. As soon as I entered I saw Ma was already there and standing dutifully beside Papa’s large chair, her arm draped about the back as if she was about to have a portrait painted. Rex was there to, and he was properly cleaned up and wearing one of his best suits and looking quite nervous, a fresh scar on the side of his face that made me wonder where it had come from. Wes had gone and leaned against the wall behind Papa’s chair, trying to blend in and look as if he wasn’t there, but he was far too strikingly handsome to be ignored. I caught his eye briefly and then looked away; I so longed to be with him again.

“Gabriella, do come in and close the door behind you.” Papa instructed and we three shuffled into the room and I closed the door behind us.

“This has not been the stay over I had anticipated, and I must say that I am quite disappointed with the level of security my boys and Miss Leslie offered to you on your trip to town.” He paused. “Of course as head of the Cegan clan I hold myself as ultimately responsible for this matter and feel compelled to compensate you in some...way.” He glanced up at Rex briefly and then at Gabriella. “War times are upon us and resources for compensation are quite limited. But what I have, I offer you, the hand of my only son and heir in marriage.” Papa said. I stared over at Rex in shock and then stared at Gabriella, her face looked totally confused.

“Well boy?” Papa prodded and Rex hurried over to where we were standing and bent down on one knee, presented Gabriella with a beautiful ring, which looked quite familiar, and said,

“Gabriella, will you marry me?”

The entire room was completely silent for an entire minute. I

stared over at Wes, he gave me a 'long story' look, and I looked at Miss Leslie she was beaming brightly. Miss Leslie was old school, for her marriage was the answer to any scandal.

"Well, what do you say, Gabriella?" Papa prompted; his impatience to have the whole matter over with showing plainly in his voice. Papa was not the romantic type. Gabriella straightened her back and shrugged off our arms from her shoulders, her eyes intent and serious as she stared down at Rex. I could see she was thinking long and hard, to her, this was not a simple yes or no matter.

"Tell me Rex, was it you? Was it you that attacked me?" She asked, her eyes not even blinking and I was amazed that Gabriella would show such strength. The embarrassed look on my brother's face answered the question and he need not have said anything but he did.

"Yes, and I'm sorry, Gabriella. I swear I am." He said earnestly. Gabriella reached down and slapped him so hard about his face that his lip burst. I watched as blood trickled down the side of my brother's mouth, my own eyes wide with shock. How could Rex have done such a beastly thing?

“No. I will not marry him.” Gabriella said firmly and now it was Papa’s turn to gasp in shock. “But I will accept your offer of compensation for what your son did to me.” As Gabriella continued a look of confusion spread over my father’s face.

“I have no money, your only option is to lock the boy up, ruin our family name and ruin your own as well. No gentleman shall wish to marry you if this gets out.” Papa pointed out flatly. I would have expected Gabriella to be tearful at the matter for I knew it was her greatest fear but she remained quite unflinching.

“There is another solution to this matter.” She said and every eye turned to stare at her. “Instead of Rex, I will marry Wes.” Papa laughed; slamming his hand on the table as though it were a huge joke and he could in no way contain himself.

“Are you mad, girl? Wes is a slave!”

“Which means he is under your command. Rex is a monster and a layabout and he is no gentleman; but Wes is kind, sensitive and a gentleman in every sense of the word. He is well educated and capable of supporting a wife and child, his skin is fair enough, he can pass as a white man anywhere, no one need know he was a slave.” My eyes grew wider and more incredulous as Gabriella continued to

speaking. "You can give him his freedom and I shall marry him." Gabriella insisted.

"Marissa, are you..." Miss Leslie's voice vanished as the entire room turned to darkness and I collapsed in a faint on the floor.

Chapter 15

I awoke in my room to the feel of Wes' warm body beside me.

"Wes." I said, even before I opened my eyes and he pulled me into his arms.

"You must have done too much today, and then all the surprise. Anisha watched you for a few hours, she said you were sleeping naturally, so I thought I would come up and check on you myself." He explained. I nodded dumbly, my lips seeking out his, wanting to reassure myself that he was there, he was beside me, and he was mine.

“I can’t believe Rex would have done such a thing.” I whispered into his chest and he pulled me close to him.

“He was drunk, though that is no excuse.” Wes said and I nodded. I pulled my flannel nightgown over my head and placed it beside me. I slid my body over Wes’ and started to undress him.

“Are you better?” He asked, his voice sounding quite concerned. I nodded my head and proceeded with the task of stripping him of his clothes.

“I love you.” I whispered as I pressed my lips against the sculpted muscles in his stomach.

“And I love you.” Wes replied; bringing his arms down about me and preparing to pull me higher on his body.

“No.” I said firmly, pressing his hands away and pushing them over his head. “Not yet, I just want to touch you.” I whispered; pressing my lips against his body and making my way to his chest. I could hear him groan softly and I knew it was taking all of his control not to gather me into his arms and make love to me. I allowed my hand to caress the firm muscled contours of his leg and gently embrace his manhood before running over his muscled stomach and well defined chest.

“Gosh, Ris. You’re driving me crazy.” He muttered, his hands gripping the head of the bed to restrain himself from holding me. I didn’t stop, we hadn’t spoken about what was really bothering me. Yes I was surprised about the news that Rex had been the rapist, yes it had been surprising to realize that the plan to deal with the matter was for Rex to marry Gabriella, but what had truly hurt and broken my tender heart was the declaration by Gabriella that she intended to marry Wes and not Rex.

I pressed my lips against his chest, darting my tongue out to drive him completely wild.

“Ris.” His voice was so hoarse with need and desire I could barely make out my own name on his lips. This was my right, Wes was my man, the thought of another woman having the right to touch Wes the way I was touching him, to kiss him how I was kissing him, to make him want her and beg to be with her the way he was wanting me and the way his eyes were begging me to let him make love to me, the thought of another woman having the right to do all those things was more than I could bare.

I slid my hand up, running it lovingly across his body to his face; I felt a tear slide from my eye and hang on the edge of my lashes. If Wes married Gabriella, it would be she whose naked body would be kneeling on all fours over Wes’. It

would be she that he would be filling with his beautiful manhood. The tear that had been hanging on my lash dropped and spattered against Wes' stomach and was quickly followed by another.

"Ris?" Wes' voice was still hoarse but laced with great concern. Another tear spattered and I brushed my hand across my face to stop them. If this would be my last night with Wes, I would not wish it ruined by such a foolish thing as tears.

"Gosh, Ris, are you crying?" Wes exclaimed, gripping me firmly with both of his arms and hauling me up so that my face was in line with his. "Tell me what I have done wrong so I can undo it my love." He said earnestly and I collapsed on him with even more tears.

"Oh Wes, the thought of you with another woman is more than I can bear." I confessed; my tears flowing freely.

"I swear it, Ris. I've been with no woman but you. I have been completely faithful to our vow." Wes insisted, his face a mask of puzzlement.

"I speak of Gabriella. You are to marry her." I said; my words intertwined with sobs. He stared down at me and laughed and I punched him in the chest.

“How dare you find my tears amusing?” I demanded.

“Your tears are far from amusing, my love. If I could make it that you never have to cry another one I surely would. I’m simply amused that you would imagine that I would wish to take two wives. Isn’t that illegal?”

I stared up at him, my eyes still glassy from my crying but my tears somewhat subsiding with his words.

“Two wives?” I whispered.

“Did we not vow, and jump the broom and make beautiful love to seal the deal?” Wes asked and I nodded dumbly.

“Then how can I marry another?” He demanded.

“I have no idea.” I whispered, my voice becoming stronger.

“I love you. You are the only woman I care to make love to. No one else.” He said. I allowed my body to relax against his, a sense of peace beginning to flow over me.

“But what if Papa forces you?” I asked.

“You can take a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink. The kind of marriage Gabriella wants requires me to sign a certificate – which I won’t, it requires me to say vows – which I won’t say and it requires the marriage to be consummated by making love to her – which I will never do.”

“Papa shall be quite angry if you defy him.” I said; my hand playing idly now with his chest as I considered the consequences of Wes’ planned actions.

“He’ll get over it.” Wes said and I could not help but grin. But he was quite bold for a slave.

“I hope so.” I whispered; pressing my lips against Wes’ and sighing. I slipped my legs on each side of his body and felt him pull me down towards him and press inside of me.

“Time to feed the monster.” He whispered and I giggled.

Wes’ point of view

I had left a note on Ris' pillow saying 'Together forever, no matter what. Loving husband always.' I hoped it would help to convey to Ris just how strongly I felt about her and let her know that there was nothing anyone in the world could do to make me want to be married to any one but her.

As soon as I had washed and dressed and headed up to the house the Boss had said he wanted to speak to me. I knew immediately it was about what Gabriella had requested, I hoped he wasn't going to try to push it.

"What do you think about Gabriella's proposal?" He asked, sinking down in his chair and leaving me to stand. Yeah, that was basic 'your the boy and I'm the man' control tactics, I had long learnt not to bother about such things. I leaned against the wall and considered what he was asking.

"You said yourself, I'm a slave, hardly makes sense even considering." I pointed out. He nodded but turned his mouth down at the edges. I knew he was thinking about his family reputation, men like Cegan set a great deal of store on how other people perceived them. If he didn't give Gabriella what she wanted she could destroy him and everything he stood for.

"I can't believe that idiot Rex told her that he was the one.

For once in his lousy life he could have lied and I'd have been proud of him, and the jerk confesses. Now she has that to hold over my head!" Cegan jumped from his chair and started to pace the floor. I didn't say any thing; I preferred to talk when I felt there was a need.

"I would have thought you'd be happy at the prospect. The chance to be a free man, Gabriella's a good looking girl, well brought up, you could do much worst." He was saying and staring at me intently.

"I guess I could." Was all I said and he looked frustrated.

"So you interested in marrying her?" He asked. I shook my head.

"Answer me boy!" He yelled.

"No sir, I have no interest in marrying Gabriella." I said firmly. However, if you want to offer me Ris I would be more than obliged to accept her hand in marriage. I thought to myself but refrained from expressing the thought. The Boss had long made it clear to me that he didn't consider me to be good enough for his daughter.

"Why is that, Wes?" He asked and he was making his way over to me. I straightened up and watched him cautiously

as he approached. The problem with this situation with Gabriella was that it could raise a whole lot of questions that I didn't rightly want raised by the Boss at this time.

"Just not interested, Boss." I said.

"Hmmm." He pressed his finger against his lip and started to walk away from me again.

"Marissa was pretty upset about the news." Cegan said.

"It would appear so." I said. I had to confess, the direction of his conversation was starting to make me quite uncomfortable.

"Why do you think that was?" He asked.

"I don't rightly know, I would imagine it would be Ris you would have to ask about that." I said. "Though hearing one's brother is a rapist could be quite shocking – but I'm only speculating sir."

"You know what doesn't make sense to me, boy?" Cegan asked, going to sit on the edge of his desk now.

"I have no idea." I responded.

"Why a slave should have so little interest in the chance to

be a free man?" He said; staring at me intently.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly be a free man, would I? I'd be leaving one type of bondage for a different kind of bondage." I said. He smiled but it didn't quite reach his eyes, something was eating him.

"I just want to be sure that you're saying no to this arrangement for the right reasons." He said. I didn't ask the obvious question like; what would be the wrong reason.

"You know what the wrong reason would be Wes?" He asked. I sighed inwardly. This conversation was not going to go away.

"I imagine you're going to tell me, Boss." I said, fighting to keep some level of respect in my voice. My sarcasm tended to piss him off and I really wasn't too keen on receiving the back of his hand against my face.

"Yes, I will. The wrong reason would be Marissa." He said flatly. I nodded my acknowledgement of his words. "But that's not the reason is it boy?" He asked. I treated the comment like a rhetorical question and remained silent. He raised his hand and glared at me.

"I expect you to answer when I ask you a question, boy."

“Sorry, Boss. I thought it was rhetorical. I rather thought I had answered the question already. I think I’m making the decision for the right reason – the reason being I’m not interested in Gabriella as a wife.” I explained.

“You remember when you were ten years old Wes?” Cegan asked. I made a puzzled face, hell I remembered, who the heck could forget something like that.

“Lot’s of things happened when I was ten years old.” I pointed out.

“You kissed my daughter.” Cegan said; I nodded my acknowledgement of the fact. “Do you remember what I told you then?” He asked and I shook my head; I didn’t plan to help this conversation along. “I told you that Marissa was not for you. And do you remember what you said?” He plugged on. I shook my head again but he glared at me so viciously that I felt compelled to answer.

“That was a long time ago, sir.”

“You said that you loved my daughter.” He explained. “And I beat you Wes. I beat you all day and all night and I told you

over and over again never say you love my daughter.” I glanced away, pretending to be preoccupied with a portrait on the wall, the boss, his wife, Rex and Ris at just five years old.

“You remember that beating, Wes?” He asked. I remembered it only too well. Every morning I woke up he would tie me down and ask me one question ‘Do you love my daughter’ and when I said yes he would beat me until I passed out from the lashes. When I woke up, he would ask me the question again and the cycle went on for five days. Then one day he beat me so bad he broke two of my ribs and the only reason he stopped was because I had told him I didn’t love his daughter.

I was in bed after that for four weeks under Dr. Glyne’s care. At first I was really embarrassed that I had sold out on my feelings for Marissa but as the years had passed I had looked back at the experience and told myself if had been necessary to wake me up to the fact that Marissa and I were from two different worlds and there would never be any hope for love between us. Then Marissa had come back and shown me that our love was bigger than both our worlds and worth fighting for. I wasn’t a ten year old kid anymore; it would take more than a beating to make me give up on my feelings for Ris again.

“I have a vague memory.” Was all that I said.

“Don’t make me have to refreshen that memory, boy.” He responded. I stared ahead at the portrait on the wall. It was clear Cegan was beginning to suspect something was going on between Ris and me. I wasn’t sure if it was because of Ris’ reaction to the news that Gabriella wanted to marry me or my reaction to being asked if I was interested in marrying Gabriel, whatever it was; the situation was drawing tighter and I could feel it.

“You do whatever you think you need to do, sir.” I said, mentally adding that I would be doing what I felt I needed to do as well. We stared at each other for a full five seconds, neither one of us blinking.

“You just watch yourself, boy.” Cegan said; turning away and heading back to his desk.

“Now, about this matter with Gabriella...” He began again.

“I’m not marrying her.” I said flatly.

“Fine. But she seems to have a great deal of respect for you. I’ll suggest that you spend some time with her and use your not inconsiderable charms to convince her to marry Rex.” I stared at him opened mouth. He was asking me to

spend time with Gabriella to try to get her to marry Rex. I stared at him, how the heck was I supposed to do that, if I started spending time with Gabriella; Ris would be so angry at me she'd start pissing blood!

"I don't think that's a good idea." I put in quickly.

"You have a better one that won't result in my family name being destroyed, Rex being locked up or you being married off to Gabriella?" He demanded staring at me; willing me to come up with a new plan.

"No." I admitted. He nodded his head dismissively at me. "Well, get to it then, Gabriella's parents are coming here tonight. You'd better get to trying to change Gabriella's mind."

Chapter 16

Marissa's point of view

I was doing my chores when I saw Wes and Gabriella leave the plantation on the wagon. I had to admit that something

akin to a cold hand seemed to squeeze my heart and would not let it go. I glanced over at Anisha, who was helping me with the washing.

“Wes loves you.” She said simply and went back to the task at hand. I trusted Wes, I knew he would never be unfaithful to me and he had promised most faithfully that he would not marry Gabriella, but if there was one thing I had learnt from that stupid school for FARTs was that there were lots of ways a woman could entice a man. Miss Leslie always said that men were nothing but putty in a woman’s hand, if she would but take the time to learn how to mold them.

“What if Gabriella seduces him?” I asked.

“You mean like what you tried to do?” Anisha asked, grinning at me quite devilishly.

“My, you make me seem quite a floozy.” I said, my face turning a bright red.

“Wes is not so easily seduced. Trust me.” Anisha said, still smiling. Just then Luke came and Anisha completely forgot about me as she and Luke sported about. I smiled; it would be so good to be able to have such an open relationship with Wes. To hold his hand and walk; to sport about with him in public and to kiss him senseless whenever the urge overtook me. Talking of kissing, I observed that Anisha and Luke were exchanging quite an intimate kiss, it looked as if

they would be happy for time alone, and perhaps a stroll was in order.

Wes' point of view

"It's a mighty fine country. Why I could live here...with you; all my life." Gabriella said. We weren't very far from the plantation when we stopped; we were close to the small lake just seven minutes' ride out – but it was quite scenic. I glanced over at her as she surveyed the land, looking more happy and relaxed than I had seen her looking in days. I didn't want to prolong this outing; I just wanted Gabriella to know that my marrying her was out of the question.

"Gabriella...may I call you that, Miss?" I asked politely; she turned to face me, nodding her head as she did.

"But of course, if you are to be my husband you certainly can't call me Miss or Miss Gabriella or any of those things." She pointed out.

"Well, that's just it, Gabriella." I said quietly, "I can't be your husband." I explained. She stared at me her eyes all bright

and shining and then she broke into tears. Darn it! There's nothing I can't bear more than a woman crying.

"That's nothing to cry about, Gabriella." I said hurriedly. I would have pulled her into my arms but I figured the less physical contact with Gabriella the better. She buried her hand in her face so pitiful I felt my heart go out to her.

"I understand. I'm worth nothing now. No man would want me, I deserve to marry Rex, and have him keep beating on me and abusing me. I'm no good; I'm no good to any man." She wailed; gripping her skirts and using them to help stem the flow of tears.

"Don't say that..." I started. She laughed, not a proper laugh but a laugh of self condemnation.

"It's true, you don't even want to touch me." She sobbed. I felt like a heel, I was so concerned about not wanting to seem too close to Gabriella that I had allowed it to cloud my judgment. The girl had been through so much, and all she wanted was comfort; and I was refusing her that.

"That's not true, Gabriella." I denied and to prove my point I pulled her into my arms; allowing her to bury her face in my chest and weep uncontrollably. We sat like that for a while,

Gabriella emptying her sorrow on me. When she appeared to be easing up somewhat I said. "You're a beautiful girl, any guy would be honored to call you his. I just...I just can't marry you, that's all."

"Why Wes?" She asked, staring up at me now with a tear streaked face. "I could be a good wife. I would respect and love you, I swear I would." She said earnestly.

"I know you would be a good wife, Gabriella. Just not my wife." I explained.

"Just give us a chance. I know it's sudden, but at least give us twenty four hours, Wes. Don't just say no, I know this can work." She pleaded.

"No, it can't." I said firmly, still holding her in my arms.

"Why not, Wes?" She demanded.

"I'm a slave." I said, opting for the easy answer.

"Isn't that for me to be concerned about? I'm willing to look past it Wes. Surely you are not a slave in your heart?" She countered. I sighed heavily; I was really hoping that Gabriella would have been more easily dissuaded from this

road she had chosen.

“Or am I not even good enough for a slave now?” She asked; tears starting to flow down her face afresh.

“It’s not that. You’re a complete catch. I’m just not the one for you.” I explained. She totally caught me by surprise when she leaned into me and pressed her lips against mine and stuck her hands down my pants and grabbed my manhood.

“Whooaaa...” I released my arms from about her as quick as I could and pulled away so fast from her prying hand that I lost my balance and slipped off the wagon seat. She giggled.

“That wasn’t funny. You shouldn’t do that.” I said; getting to my feet and dusting off my butt and positioning my hat on my head again.

“You’re way bigger than Rex.” She said; climbing down from the wagon to join me on the ground.

“That’s hardly the kind of conversation a lady would want to be having.” I pointed out, but my face was already going quite red. She giggled again.

“If you want; you can make love to me.” She said; approaching me with just the slightest sway in her walk.

“It’s kind of you to offer, Miss. But no thanks. In fact, I think we ought to be getting back.” I said; sidestepping her and hoisting myself back onto the wagon. I had rather hoped that she would find her own way back onto the wagon but she held her hand up to me and I automatically gripped it and pulled her up, big mistake. As soon as she reached on top of the wagon in front of me she lifted her skirts and petticoats up high and sank down on my lap, one leg on each side of my body and her arms snaked about my neck and her fingers tangled into my hair and she said.

“I’m not wearing any pantaloons you know.”

She need not have told me so; I had received quite an eyeful when she had lifted her petticoats to sit down.

“I...” I began and she placed her lips against mine again; pressing her body so close I could feel almost every contour of her body. I settled my hand on both sides of her slender waist and prepared to lift and hoist her into the air and onto the vacant seat beside me when I heard Ris’ voice say...

“Are you having fun, Wes?”

CHAPTER 17

Marissa's point of view

“No...this is so not what it looks like.” Wes said hurriedly, lifting Gabriella off of his lap and plopping her so hurriedly onto the seat beside him that she almost toppled off.

“Really? So what is it Wes?” I demanded. I watched Wes dismount from the wagon and come to stand in front of me.

“A misunderstanding, that's all.” Wes said.

“Uh huh.” I muttered turning on my heel and heading towards the house again.

“Ris.” He shouted after me first and then hurried forward and gripped my elbow firmly.

“You angry with me? I swear I wasn't doing anything. I didn't even kiss her.” He said. I was fit to be tied, Gabriella with her slutty self spread across my man, why if I didn't leave this very minute I would be tempted to gouge her eyes out.

“That’s not what it looked like from where I stood.” I pointed out, doing my level best to remove my elbow from his grip but he held me quite firmly.

“I just told you it wasn’t what it looked like.” Wes repeated. I push my small upturned nose higher into the air.

“I’d appreciate my arm back, if you don’t mind.” I said stiffly and Wes breathed a most exasperated breath.

“Can we talk later?” He asked. It never failed to irritate me how Wes worked so hard to keep our relationship a secret, why I couldn’t give two hoots who found out about us.

“I quite appreciate that, you being so busy now and all.” I responded. Miss Leslie would have said that a lady had no business being sarcastic, but I really felt I was quite entitled to a display of quite unladylike qualities in all the circumstances. Really, to come and find another woman trying to ride your man; of all the nerve.

“Come on, I’ll ride you back to the plantation.” Wes said placing his hand in the small of my back and steering me towards the wagon.

“I have no interest in travelling on any wagon with you and her.” I pouted.

“I told you it was not what it looked like.”

"You have lipstick on your collar, Wes. And I don't wear that color." I pointed out acidly. It wasn't that I did not know that Wes had not been making love to that 'ho' Gabriella, it was just seeing them there together that was quite upsetting. I fear that although I had no cause the green eyed monster was riding my very nerves.

"Hello!" Gabriella screamed from the top of the wagon, "I'm here, whose going to drive me back?"

"You can't think I would make love to Gabriella, Ris. I love you; I would never do something like that." He said, his voice sounded low and urgent. I knew he would prefer that Gabriella not know that he and I were involved but I was pretty upset and not much caring about keeping secrets.

"I think Gabriella wants you." I said angrily.

"I don't care what Gabriella wants, I care what you want." He said; holding my arm and detaining me.

"Don't touch me!" I said, pulling away from him.

"Come on, we'll talk about this later." He said, urging me back towards the wagon.

"You didn't bring me out here, you brought Gabriella. I'll get back the very way I got here." I said firmly.

"Ris..." His voice trailed off weakly and he ran his hand

through his too long hair and I noticed it was shaking.

“Bye.” I said firmly and strutted off. I wasn’t sure why I was so angry at Wes; I had seen much of what had gone on for about the last ten minutes, choosing to turn up when Gabriella had decided to straddle him, I could see it had not really been his fault, but it upset me that Wes allowed things to get as far as they did. I couldn’t figure out why he just couldn’t tell Papa that he was not marrying Gabriella and let that be the end of it. He had not raped the girl, he was not even a blood member of our family that he should be overly concerned about our reputation, and personally, I couldn’t care less if people thought worst of us because I had a brother that was a scoundrel.

“I’m not leaving you to walk back alone.” He said firmly.

“I’m not going with you.” I responded.

“Yes you are, and we shall have that talk.” He said and before I could protest he had swept me into his arms and was strolling towards the wagon holding me bridal style.

“You put me down this instance!” I screamed, wriggling quite fiercely in an effort to dislodge myself. “How dare you manhandle me so?!”

“You are quite welcomed to manhandle me, Wes.” Gabriella put in and I glared at her angrily.

“Stay out of our business, you whore!” I screamed at her.

“I think name calling is not a good idea.” Wes said and I reached up and slapped his face hard.

“Whore? This is my business, why Wes is going to be my husband.” Gabriella declared.

“When hell freezes over!” I yelled back.

“Perhaps we should all calm down.” Wes suggested and I slapped his face again.

“Well hell shall freeze over tomorrow – for that is when I shall marry Wes.” Gabriella insisted.

“Wes loves me. He would never marry you!” I fumed, my whole face becoming red with anger. Gabriella stared at me; her eyes wide with shock.

“Wes loves you?” She glanced quickly from Wes to me. Wes had just put my feet down on the ground, climbed into the driver’s seat and was lifting me up.

“I said I wasn’t going with you.” I pointed out.

“I know what you said.” He replied calmly and I slapped his face again.

“Why Wes can’t love you.” Gabriella said, apparently now

finding her voice.

“Well he does, tell her Wes!” I instructed firmly. Wes groaned and clicked his tongue so the horses started forward. I slapped his face again.

“There see, he doesn’t love you or he would admit it.” Gabriella declared triumphantly.

“He does love me, he’s just being a jerk, he probably thinks that you would tell Papa.” I countered.

“Well then, it is settled. Since your father would not approve of you and Wes, Wes shall marry me!”

“No he won’t!” I said glaring up at Wes angrily. “Tell her that you shall not marry her, Wes.”

“Gabriella. I shall not marry you.” Wes said flatly. I slapped his face again.

“This is not a fun matter Wes; I shall not have you mocking me!”

Gabriella giggled.

“But this is a fun matter, why Wes has no interest in you at all.”

“Let me out of this wagon immediately.” I screamed making

to stand up but Wes' arm encircled my waist and held me in place.

"Just calm down, Ris." He said.

"Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again!" I felt so embarrassed, I had so trusted Wes to confess his love for me and now Gabriella was laughing at me.

When we arrived at the plantation I did not even wait upon Wes to help me out of the wagon. I climbed over Gabriella and jumped down, tumbling forward onto the ground. I heard Gabriella laugh but I was too hurt to care, I picked myself up and raced out to the back of the house. I did not wish for anyone to see me, for I could not help myself from sobbing.

Wes' point of view

I helped Gabriella down from the wagon; she was still smiling. She tried to press herself against me again but I pushed her off firmly, I did not need anymore drama with Ris.

"I told you I'm not interested in you in that way, Gabriella, and I told you I wouldn't marry you." I said firmly. She stared at me, realisation apparently dawning for the first time.

"You are in love with her." She said.

I didn't answer, Ris had been right; I didn't need to be giving Gabriella ammunition to take to the boss. She was a nice enough girl; but I figured if she thought she could use information to her advantage she would probably try. The civil war seemed as if it was on its last legs, no point broadcasting our relationship and getting myself killed by the boss when I could wait maybe just a few more weeks, months at the most and I would be a free man, free to express my love for Ris and free to marry her for the second time. A smile tugged the corner of my mouth at the thought, no, I definitely didn't need Gabriella messing up that.

"Well, answer me, darn you. Are you in love with Marissa or aren't you?" She demanded.

"I don't answer to you, Gabriella." I said simply and she slapped my face.

"I have business to attend to." I said and she raised her hand to slap my face again and I gripped it roughly and she winced.

"Unhand me!" She yelled.

"Don't do that again." I said firmly. I really hated being slapped, I suffered the boss because he was necessary, and I accepted Ris because she was...well...Ris. But hell if I was going to let random jerks slap my face.

“But you’re a slave.” She announced angrily.

“Yeah. If you want to beat me like a slave...you have to tie me up first.” I said and walked away from her. I could hear her ranting and raving behind me but I wasn’t really thinking about her anymore, I had to track down Ris and try to fix this problem.

I found Ris in the barn, she had climbed up to the loft and I could hear her weeping, it hurt my heart to know that I had caused her this grief.

“Ris.” I called and I could hear her struggle to stifle her tears so I would not know that she was there. I climbed the ladder to the loft and glanced around.

“Ris.” I repeated.

“Go away.” She said and I could tell that she spoke from behind a stack of hay. I circled the stack so I could see her properly.

“I love you.” I said.

“Too little too late.” She responded wiping her eyes with her hands. I bent down and gathered her into my arms.

“You know we can’t tell anyone about us, not yet Ris.” I

explained. She slapped my face for the hundredth time and I ground my teeth.

“I was fully dressed, so was Gabriella...well, almost, we weren't even gone for more than half an hour and ten minutes of that was the drive. There was no way I could have made love to her Ris.” I explained. She didn't answer; she turned her face away from me. “She came on to me, I wasn't really expecting it. I'm sorry about that. But I didn't encourage her...I swear it Ris. I love you.” I pleaded wrapping my arms around her body and pulling her close to me. I loved Ris and I knew I was totally addicted to her and was definitely not prepared to lose her.

“Don't touch me, Wes. Don't ever touch me again.”

“You don't mean that Ris. I know you love me.” I said; pressing my lips against her cheek and allowing my hand to cup her breast. She slapped my face again, the thousandth time and pushed me hard away from her.

“I'm not your secret whore, if you're ashamed to confess your love for me, then you should be ashamed to make love to me. You will never touch me again.” She said; getting to her feet and walking towards the ladder.

I hurried after her and gripped her hand in mine and pressed my lips to her palm.

“I'm not ashamed of our love, Ris...” I started but she

slapped my face again.

“Slap me as often as you like, if that is the only touch I am entitled to from you I will be satisfied with it.” I said, the pain in my chest intensifying, I was saying a silent prayer that Ris was not really going to end our relationship over this incident.

“I hate you.” She screamed, pummeling my chest with her fists, although her lashes did not hurt not even a tenth as much as her words did.

“I didn’t have sex with Gabriella. You are the only woman I want.” I insisted.

“You shall never have me again.” Ris said; moving closer towards the edge of the loft.

I gripped her by the arm and spun her about to me. She glared at me angrily. I pulled my gun from my holster and pressed it into her hand and pressed the mouth of the gun against my heart with my finger and hers holding the trigger in place.

“If you are done with me, Ris. shoot me now, it would be

much quicker and less painful than living without you.” I said.

“We’re finished.” She screamed; tugging the gun from my hand and tossing it onto the floor. “You wanted to be free of me from the moment I came here. You’re free of me now.” She said.

“Ris, I’m begging...” My words were cut off by the sound of Cegan’s voice downstairs.

“Wes!” He yelled. I groaned and pressed my hands against my face. He was the last person I needed to have to deal with now.

“Oh, you’re master is here – it seems his feelings are the only ones you care about.” Ris said and held onto the ladder and started down.

“What are you doing in here?” Cegan demanded, glancing about suspiciously. “Where’s Wes?”

“He’s upstairs, doing all the dutiful work you would want him to do like a good little slave.” Ris said and floated out of the door before her father could respond.

“Wes!” Cegan screamed louder and I made my way down

from the loft with a heavy heart.

“What were you doing up there, with Ris?” He yelled.

“Nothing boss.” I muttered and started towards the exit. “I was doing nothing.”

The answer seemed to have sat well with him because he changed the subject.

“You get through to that Gabriella girl? Cause her parents arrived earlier than expected and I told them what happened to her and their expecting a wedding as soon as I can bring in a preacher.” Cegan said. I nodded, I didn’t much care about the matter anymore, I knew I wasn’t marrying Gabriella.

“So?” He prompted. I had a splitting headache and didn’t care to talk about Gabriella.

“I don’t think I got through to her.” I admitted. Cegan looked frustrated.

“Damn it boy, I was depending on you.” He said. “A marriage to Rex might not be a bad thing, Gabriella’s an only child, the Santinis have some money and who knows, maybe we can make this situation work for us.”

“I don’t think their much better off than you, Sir. I hear their in debt to their necks to the Taylors too.” I put in, handling business about town you tended to pick up information. Cegan made a distasteful face.

“That means I’ll have to be looking after her now. Darn it – and if she’s pregnant.” He gripped my shoulder and headed towards the exit. “Go and clean up; I’ll need you and Rex present at lunch when we discuss the marriage and who Gabriella will be marrying.”

“I’m not marrying Gabriella, Cegan.” I said. That was the first time I’d called him that to his face. It had more slipped out than that I had planned it; I was just so frustrated and upset. He glanced at me hard but didn’t comment, acted like he hadn’t noticed.

“I want to see you up at the house in two hours for lunch.” He said firmly and then walked away.

Lunch was a real strain, looking over at Wes sitting there and trying to pretend that I didn’t care about him anymore.

Every time he got the chance he would try to catch my eye and I would look away. It bothered me that Wes was there at lunch because Papa never invited him to sit at the table with us for lunch. Which could only mean one thing; Papa had decided to treat Wes as a free man so that he could offer him to Gabriella as a husband. The very thought of it caused a horrible burning sensation in my chest. I had told Wes that I did not want him any more, but words were so much easier to utter than feelings were to change. I had loved Wes all my life, and I was ashamed to admit that even if he had been unfaithful; I wasn't sure that I would ever have the courage to live my life without him. It helped that I knew that he hadn't been unfaithful; it would make eating humble pie and crawling back to him a little more acceptable.

As soon as lunch was over we headed into the family room and everyone sat down quite comfortably as if it were just an ordinary afternoon, but we all knew some pretty nasty business had to be dealt with.

"Well, Cegan, we don't have all year here, and who knows if my daughter could be pregnant." He glared over at Miss Leslie as he said that who blushed brightly. "I wish to have this matter dealt with immediately. A price must be paid for what has happened to my child."

"Of course, of course." Papa said, looking most miserable.

“Miss Leslie has been properly reprimanded for her lapse. The School has severed all ties with her.” He glanced over at Miss Leslie as he spoke and I watched as she brushed a brief tear from her eye. “Her reputation is ruined. No other school will take her.” I felt a sense of pity for Miss Leslie, this unforgiving man’s world we lived in would not offer Miss Leslie many opportunities, what on earth would become of her?

“And so it should be. I paid good money to make my daughter marketable and due to the neglect of this woman I now find myself saddled with a girl who far from being sought after shall soon bring shame to my family name if this matter is not fixed and fixed quickly.” Santini said bluntly.

“Quite.” Papa agreed while Ma knitted quietly as if she could hear none of the conversation. “My son has offered himself to your daughter, to make an honorable woman of her. There has been some confusion over her marrying Wes...” Papa’s voice trailed off miserably.

“She should marry whom she chooses, but marry she will.” Santini insisted.

“I...” Papa began.

“She can’t marry me.” Wes said and every eye in the room turned to focus on him.

“Why ever not, boy? You look strong and acceptable.” Santini said, glancing from Wes to Papa.

“Gabriella and I can’t marry because I love ...” Wes began and my eyes grew wider as he spoke, why, if he announced he was in love with me in front of the entire room Papa would kill him for sure.

“Wes!” I screamed. I knew I had been quite upset about Wes’ secrecy, but I would rather a secretive Wes than a dead one.

“Love being a batchelor!” Gabriella said, pretending as if that was what Wes had meant to say and uttering it at the same time as I spoke so that both our voices drowned out Wes’ confession. Every one’s face looked quite puzzled. “Which is fine with me for I would rather marry Rex.” Gabriella finished.

I stared at Gabriella wide eyed and then hurried over and hugged her tightly.

“Thank you.” I said, a tear of joy slipping down my cheek.

“Wes took care of me when I needed him, it was the least I could do.” Gabriella said; pulling me towards her. “And nothing happened.”

I nodded, glancing across at Wes who looked as if he had no idea what had just occurred. I hurried over to him as everyone began congratulating the bride and groom.

“I’m not ashamed of us, Ris. If you want me to tell your father, I will.” He said as soon as I reached him. “I just wanted things to be different first.”

“I love you.” I said and he made to reach out for me but I side stepped him.

“I can keep our secret a little longer.” I said and then moved away to mingle in the group.

Wes’ point of view

I picked a few flowers before I headed up to Ris’ window

that night and gave it my secret tap. I smiled at the thought, secret tap, all this secrecy almost caused Ris and me to break up. If this war didn't finish soon I'd have to take matters into my own hands, take Ris away somewhere – maybe north and start a life together like an ordinary man and wife. Things couldn't go on like this for too long. I slid through the window and strolled over to Ris, she was sitting on the bed looking thoughtful. I presented her with the flowers.

“Am I forgiven?” I asked. She stood up and wrapped her arms around me and the whole world came back into alignment.

“I'm sorry I gave you a difficult time, Wes. But just seeing you and Gabriella and not having the right to say anything.” She explained.

“You have the right to say anything you want, Ris.” I said earnestly. “It won't be like this all the time. Three months. If this war isn't over in three months I'll leave here, take you with me and we can settle down and raise a family like normal folks.” I promised. Her eyes lit up so bright it made me smile, gosh, what on earth had I done to deserve Ris loving me so. I just hoped like heck that I kept on doing it.

“I shall count the days.” She said happily, already starting to unbutton my shirt.

“We don’t have to make love, Ris.” I held her hands firmly. “I don’t want you to think that it’s just about sex. I love you, and I’d wait if you want me to.” I said.

“I don’t want you to. We’re already married Wes. Why, it’s what married people do.” She whispered her hands continuing to undress me. “I love you.”

I lifted her into my arms and rested her gently on the bed.

“I love you too.” I said, making light work of her clothes. “Promise me something.”

“Anything my love.” She whispered huskily as my hands cupped her breast and my body hardened against hers.

“Promise me that no matter what, you shall never tell me we are finished again.” I said. She giggled.

“I’m serious, Ris. You have no idea how devastating that is.”

My hands caressed her body, completely enjoying the softness of her.

“Tell me how you would feel Wes if you were to come and find my legs sprawled over the lap of a strange man.” She said, her hands sliding down to grope me and cause me to grow harder. I groaned, partly because I was so completely turned on and partly because I had a horrible picture of Ris beautiful creamy legs spread across the body of a strange man.

“Don’t even say such a thing.” I muttered pressing my lips against her neck and drinking in the sweetness of her.

“Then you know how I felt.” She said, her hands tangling into my hair and removing the string that kept the long strands in place.

“Forgive me.” I whispered, my lips brushing against the tip of her nose and causing her to giggle.

“That tickles.” She said wrapping her arms about my waist and then wrapping her legs. I inhaled deeply, gosh, I wanted so much to be one with her.

“Do you think that Rex will abuse Gabriella?” She asked

suddenly, I stared down at her as if she were crazy.

“You expect me to think when your legs are around my waist? Every drop of blood from my brain is in my...” She pressed her lips against mine before I could finish the sentence.

“Gentlemen aren’t supposed to mention their ‘what you might call its’ to ladies.” She teased. I grinned.

“Indeed. So I should say that I shall put my ‘what you might call it’ in your ‘what you might call it’?” I responded and she laughed.

“You’re incorrigible.” She muttered and pressed her lips against mine, allowing the sweetness of her tongue to slide into my mouth. I sucked on it hungrily and then plundered her mouth with my own tongue, possessively claiming her lips.

“Oh...Wes.” She whispered and pressed her body against mine, anxious for the feel of me inside of her.

“Don’t worry about Gabriella. I spoke to Rex and made it clear that if he did something like that to Gabriella again – I’d kill him myself.” Her eyes widened and she stared at me.

“Would you Wes? Take a man’s life?” She asked.

“Yes, Ris. I would and I’d lose no sleep over it.” I said bluntly.

“Good for you Wes, why he would deserve such if he was to treat poor Gabriella like that again.” Ris said.

I slid my hand beneath her hips, lifting her slightly and pressing my member into her tightness.

“Ris.” I whispered as I buried myself deep inside of her.

“Yes my love...” She choked out her voice deep with emotion.

“Never push me away again.” I said the feel of her consuming my body and starting to erase rational thoughts.

“I won’t...I promise my love.” She said and then our conversation deteriorated to simple words of ecstasy.

Chapter 18

When I awoke I looked about me for the customary words of love that Wes always left behind him and I was not disappointed. I picked the piece of paper up and pressed it to my lips happily.- ‘all my love always’ – it read simply and I rested it against my heart. And all my love too, darling Wes. I said, though he was no where about to hear me, but I believed in his spirit he would know what I said.

“Marissa.” It was Anisha, tapping gently at my door; I dressed hurriedly and hurried over to open for her.

“No time for resting, we have a wedding to prepare for in just two hours.” She said, barging into my room and pouring water into the basin. “Do clean up quickly and dress and come downstairs.” She instructed and hustled out of the door again before I could get in a word edgewise. I sighed. I guess this would be quite a special day with Gabriella and Rex getting married.

The wedding was quite simple; just the bare essentials, but it didn't matter, if it had been Wes and I getting married I

would have found it to be absolutely perfect. There were the signs of limited money, no cake and not much decorations but Gabriella's dress was absolutely stunning. I believed that her mother must have spent her very last dime to afford such a thing – or perhaps it had been her mother's own wedding dress, whatever it was it looked most costly. It was such a strange ceremony, everyone looked somewhat glum, not the type of expression one would expect to see at a wedding and when the minister said that Rex might kiss the bride poor Gabriella looked as if she would pass out from fear. I felt so sad for her, why if I had not loved Wes so I might have been tempted to give him up for her. But that was so not going to happen. I glanced around the yard for the hundredth time, there was still no sign of Wes, I wasn't sure if it was his idea or Papa's that he should not appear at the wedding.

There was a brief reception after the wedding, consisting of lunch and a bit of music, all done rather low keyed and again I could not help but feel sorry for Gabriella that something that every girl dreams about, getting married, could have been so completely spoilt by Rex's callousness.

Two hours later the entire 'celebration', if one could call it that, was finished. The minister muttered something about having an appointment back in the town, Gabriella's parents said that they would head back with him and in no time at all there just remained Gabriella and I standing

alone in the living room.

“Well...” I said, desperately seeking something positive to say, “You’re a fine married lady now.”

“Oh Marissa, I’m ever so fearful!” She said and rushed over to me and grabbed me so fiercely about my waist and started to weep. I had not imagined how the whole matter had been from Gabriella’s point of view. But now as she stood there weeping on my shoulder my heart went out to her. She was such a strange person, one moment you hated her, then you loved her, then you hated her and then you loved her again. I did wish she would make her mind up if she would be good or evil.

“I don’t want to have sex – ever again.” She said, still weeping.

“It certainly did not appear that way when you straddled yourself over my man.” I felt obligated to point out. She did not even hesitate in her crying to deny my charge.

“I just wanted to know that it could be different, Marissa. Now I shall never know.” She wept. I stroked her hair gently with my hands. Both Gabriella and I had left the FARTS school as innocents and both of us had been exposed to the world of sex – but that was as far as the similarities went. Gabriella had been introduced to sex as lust, desire,

selfish need that didn't care about who or what it hurt, animalistic need that cared only about satisfying itself; while I had been introduced not really to sex, I had been introduced to love making. What I shared with Wes broke the barrier of sex, it was true there was all the need, desire and animalistic attraction but there was so much more than that. We loved each other, making love was just the way we expressed our feelings of love. Why, if I could not make love to Wes any more for any reason, I would still love him as much as I do right now; I would simply find another way to express it. Wes was gentle, thoughtful, making love was a joint effort for both of us, I was as much aware of Wes' needs and his likes as he was aware of mine. Ours was not a one sided affair, we were both committed to risking it all for each other. I sighed as I patted Gabriella's head, yes, both Gabriella and I had been exposed to the world of sex, but it was as if there were two separate worlds.

"It can be different, Gabriella." I assured her, feeling strangely like the more knowledgeable person in the matter of relationships.

"It hurt so much, Marissa." She whispered, still sobbing.

"It shan't always hurt. It's only the first time, I promise." I assured her and she glanced down at me, her eyes still brimming with tears.

“Are you sure?” She asked. I hesitated for a moment only, Gabriella already knew that Wes and I were involved, now she would know just how much.

“Yes. I’m very sure.” I said, giving her a knowing eye.

“Oh.” She said, brushing a tear from her eye. “Would you tell me about it?”

I tugged her towards a chair and we sat down.

“It’s beautiful...like magic.” I said, I could find no other words to describe what being with Wes made me feel.

“Oh...that was not how it was for me.” Gabriella said doubtfully.

“Rex was drunk. I am sure he shall be much gentler now. And it shall be much more...interesting.” I said, brushing a tear from her eye and plastering a smile upon my face.

“You think so?” She asked hopefully.

“I am positive. And Wes has told Rex that if he tries any of that rough stuff with you he shall deal with him most firmly.” I said in my toughest voice and was pleased to hear Gabriella giggle.

“He did?” She asked, her eyes starting to sparkle now. “And whatever did Rex say?”

Wes had not told me that part but I felt a bit of embellishing of the truth was well in order, why it was for a worthy cause, to make Gabriella smile on her wedding day.

“Why he said ‘oh, I shall never hurt Gabriella, because I’m so afraid of you’.” I said, doing my best to mock Rex’ gruff voice. Gabriella laughed outright, as did I and Rex walked back into the room at the very moment.

“What’s so funny?” He demanded. Both Gabriella and I shook our heads vehemently.

“Surely you are not encouraging my wife to laugh at me so early in our marriage?” Rex said, but his voice was not stern at all. I believe he was glad that I had been able to help Gabriella to relax.

“Why, would I do such a thing?” I asked innocently and he laughed extending his hand towards Gabriella.

“Come, Gabriella, I will show you my room.” Rex said and Gabriella exchanged such a nervous look with me.

“Rex.” I said, “I don’t wish to interfere with your wedding day plans, but I thought that perhaps you might take your wife for a romantic ride on the wagon...you know spend some

quality time together before tonight.”

Gabriella looked at Rex so hopeful, though she made no comment, society was so full of rules and Gabriella had always been one to try to conform to all the rules, now she was being the dutiful wife and keeping her mouth shut instead of telling Rex that she wasn't ready to be alone with him in their bedroom.

“Pa won't let me drive the wagon.” Rex said, obviously not missing Gabriella's nervous glance.

“Perhaps Wes can take us, we've all been working hard over the last few weeks, we deserve a day off, and it is your wedding day.” I pointed out. I rather fancied having an opportunity to spend time with Wes as well.

“Will you ask Wes? Pa would listen to Wes if he asked for the wagon.” Rex said, just the slightest trace of jealousy in his voice towards Wes.

“Of course I will. You might want to change your beautiful dress, Gabriella. Doesn't she look beautiful, Rex?” I prompted.

“ Indeed, I can hardly take my eyes off of her.” Rex said, Gabriella blushed, a real blush and looked quite pleased.

“Come on, I’ll go upstairs with Gabriella and help her change, then she can go and get a snack ready to take with us on our ride while I ask Wes to take us out.” I said, Rex nodded and headed towards the stairs.

“Perhaps Gabriella can also use the opportunity to pack her things, so she can have them moved to my room as well.” Rex said firmly and I knew he was letting me know that before the night was over he fully intended that Gabriella would be a proper wife to him.

Both Gabriella and I blushed at the implication as we hurried out of the room and up the stairs.

The wagon ride would have been in complete silence if Wes and I had not been discussing the landscape and how much the surroundings had changed in the ten years I had been away. Rex had sat in the back of the wagon with Gabriella and they were both just staring into the distance absently.

“We’re here. The most beautiful landscape ever.” Wes said climbing out of the driver’s seat and lifting me down to stand beside him.

“It’s beautiful, now I’m sorry I did not bring my bathing suit for I would certainly have swum in the lake.” I said.

“You don’t need a suit to swim.” Wes bent down and whispered in my ear and I blushed.

“You are so outrageous.” I whispered back, so Rex and Gabriella would not hear us.

“Come on, let’s leave those two alone for a while, we can go for a walk.” Wes suggested and I nodded immediately.

“We’re going to take a stroll, give you two some alone time.” I shouted, I didn’t bother to add that it would give Wes and I some alone time too. The look of panic that surfaced on Gabriella’s face made me feel guilty immediately.

“We’ll be back in less than twenty minutes.” Wes added and some of the color returned to Gabriella’s face.

“Oh Wes, I feel so frightened for Gabriella. She’s so scared.” I said. Wes was picking up stones from beside the lake as we walked and inspecting them.

“She’ll be okay. Rex isn’t a complete jerk.”

“I know.” I muttered, digging into his hand to see what he had collected. “What on earth are you doing, Wes?”

“I like to skip stones, but you have to pick the stone very carefully.” He explained. I picked a stone from his hand and tossed it into the water and watched it sink most gracelessly.

“Oh!” I scrunched up my face and stared at the water. “That wasn’t a proper stone.”

He laughed.

“This is how it is done.” He slung the stone across the water and I watched it jump across the lake one, two, three, four, five times, my eyes widened.

“Do that again!” I screamed, why, I had never seen any such thing. He grinned and skipped another stone and then another.

“Oh, teach me that, Wes.” I said, giving him my very best puppy dog face.

“Ladies don’t skip stones.” He pointed out and I glared at him.

“And when have that stopped me?” I demanded.

“Well...I believe never.” He said with a smile and I smiled back.

“Well then, it shan’t stop me now. Go on, show me. Unless you’re afraid that I shall beat you at it?” I challenged.

“You beat me?” He looked incredulous. Wes could be pretty arrogant when he was ready.

“What, you don’t think a girl could beat you?” I asked; pressing my hands akimbo and looking up at him challengingly.

“Frankly?” He stared at me with those earnest, arrogant green eyes and smiled broadly, “Nope.”

“You are so on. Come on, show me and then I shall beat you at your own game.”

He laughed outrightly. Why, the nerve of the man, I shall soon show him. I grabbed some stones in my hand and faced him again.

“Okay, out with it, you who are about to be a loser. How do I throw these?”

“First of all...” He pried open my fingers and allowed my stones to fall to the ground, “You can’t just snatch up any old stone. You need a stone that’s not too big, not too small and a little flat.” He dropped two of the stones he was carrying into my hand.

“Okay, fine.” I said, gripping one of the stones and tossing it into the water before he could speak. It sank like a rock.

“Well, now you’ve tried it that way, you can listen and find out how it’s done.” Wes said. I blushed with embarrassment. He slid one hand about my waist and pressed his body against my back, his other hand holding mine.

“You need to hold me to show me how to throw a stone?” I asked, but I couldn’t help smiling. He winked at me and grinned.

“Probably not, but I definitely like this way best.” I laughed and he pressed his lips against my neck.

“I love you.” I whispered.

“I love you too.” He responded; then fixed my hand so that part of the stone was projecting from my fingers. “Okay, bring it towards your waist and then fling.” He allowed his

hand to move in conjunction with mine and I watched in amazement as the stone skipped twice across the water.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. I did it, I did it.” I screamed, jumping up and down with excitement. I bent down and started to hunt stones like the ones Wes had given me.

“Bend my knees, flex my wrist and swing like this...” I repeated as I went through the antics that Wes had shown me, it skipped only once and then sunk.

“Oh.” I said, turning to Wes with a look of disappointment on my face.

“You’re doing great. Just keep trying.” He encouraged. I pressed my lips against his cheek, I loved that Wes was so encouraging.

“Knees, wrist, swing...” I said and watched the stone skip twice, I turned about to face Wes, my eyes shining brightly.

“Did you see that? Why, it was practically perfect.” I declared. He laughed.

“It was very good.” He admitted and pulled me into his arms. “So now you can skip stones, can I steal a kiss?” He asked; already pressing his lips against mine. I pushed him

away gently.

“No time for kissing Wes. Why, I have to beat your record of five skips.” I said picking six well shaped stones from the ground, I ignored Wes’ groan.

“You do know you’re obsessive don’t you?” Wes pointed out, sitting on the ground beside me.

“Why if I weren’t obsessive I would never have waited for you for ten years.” I explained.

“That’s true.” He confessed staring out at the water as my stone skipped three times.

“I’m getting better.” I said and he eyed me with a worried look.

“Did you see that?” I screamed after only fifteen minutes. “It skipped four times. Your record is going to be so destroyed, mister.” I did a victory jig in advance.

“Yeah.” He jumped to his feet, picking up two stones as he did.

“I challenge you to a rock skipping duel.” I said, casting my bonnet upon the ground as though it were a glove.

“What do I get when I win, my love?” He asked slyly.

“What do you wish, gentle man?” I asked, changing my voice to sound like a soft sweet innocent lady.

“I wish....” He bent and whispered into my ear such erotic descriptions that my entire face turned a flaming red.

“Wes!” I yelled and he chuckled.

“You’re way too easy to tease.” He laughed. “If I win I shall require only a long deep passionate kiss before we go back to join your brother and his wife.”

“Well,” I was still trying to settle my mind from Wes’ earlier words, why the boy had my mind completely focused on the bedroom now. “For throwing me off my game, I shall request that you color one lock of Papa’s hair red when he’s asleep in his study.” I said and watched with satisfaction as Wes’ eyes widen.

“Color your father’s hair?” He yelled, glaring down at me.

“Why, if you are so sure you shall win, it doesn’t matter what I tell you to do.” I pointed out and he blushed most becomingly.

“See, I can make you blush too.” I said.

“Fine. I accept your challenge, my lady. You go first.”

“No, no, you go first. I wish to see what I need to beat.” I said most seriously.

“Fine.” He tossed the stone in his hand into the air a few times and then swung back his hand to throw.

“Just looking at you makes me feel so horny.” I said in the hoarsest bedroom voice I could find and he glanced around at me, the stone in his hand sliding out the same time.

“Shoot.” He yelled, but it was too late, the stone had already hit the water and bounced twice and died.

“What? Only two bounces?” I asked, feigning disappointment.

“You distracted me with that...voice.” He said.

“Well, all’s fair in love and war. And right now, we’re at war.” I pointed out and he glared at me.

“That’s cheating.”

“Whatever.” I said glibly.

“Okay, okay, fine. You win. You might not even be able to beat my two skips.” He said.

“With my eyes closed, Darling.” I said.

I selected a rock carefully and hefted it, tossed it away and selected another one.

“Sometime today, baby.” Wes said.

“Shhhh, I’m concentrating here.” I pointed out.

“Wouldn’t want to break you’re concentration.” Wes said sarcastically.

“Okay, honey, here I go. And no matter what you say I shan’t allow you to distract me. Women are not so easily distracted by sex as men you know.” I informed him as I

bent my knees and prepared myself to throw. "And in all fairness, I did not touch you."

"Indeed. I swear I shall not touch you." He promised looking quite handsome as he stood there casually watching me ready myself for the throw.

"But you look quite calm for someone who is about to give my father a dye job." I said, feeling rather suspicious.

"You haven't thrown the stone as yet, who is to say I might not still win." He asked, looking down at his nails in a casually distracted manner. I blanked him out of my mind.

"Oooooohhh." I blew a strong wind from my mouth and bent my knees. "Knees, wrist, swing..." I said and flung the stone out towards the water and stared after it. It looked like it had the potential to be one of my best throws yet. It all seemed like slow motion as I waited for the stone to descend into the water so I could start the count, but before that could happen another stone came out of nowhere and struck it, both stones fell into the water lifeless. My mouth dropped open and I stared over at Wes in shock.

"You cheated!" I accused.

"All's fair..." He had no time to complete the sentence for I lounged at him, but my; he can be fast when he has a mind too for he darted away and I had to chase after him. Each time I thought I could catch him he sidestepped me until I collapsed on the ground quite spent.

"You are much to fast." I complained.

"I shall let you catch me then." He said, coming to kneel on the ground beside me.

"I've already caught you." I said.

"Indeed, my sweet." He whispered.

"Perhaps it is time for your prize then, since you did win." I said, allowing my hand to loop about his neck.

"Indeed." He said and pulled me into his arms and kissed me most soundly. A kiss that said quite clearly that this woman is very much mine. When we pulled apart we were both breathing quite hard.

"My darling, darling, Wes." I said and he hugged me close.

"I fear we have been gone for close to two hours instead of the few minutes we promised Gabriella." Wes said, standing to his feet and pulling me up with him.

"My, but I do feel guilty. I do hope she is okay."

We hurried back to the wagon, to where we had left Rex and Gabriella, but I need not have worried for when we returned Rex and Gabriella were in the middle of such an intimate embrace that both Wes and I blushed.

"Should we tell them we are back?" I whispered.

"No, I think we can go and lose ourselves for another two hours and they shall not care." Wes whispered back. I smiled up at him and slid my hand into his big one.

"Well, at least she does not appear to be afraid of making love to Rex now." I said as we walked off into the woodsy area holding hands.

"You can say that again," Wes said with an embarrassed chuckle, "You can definitely say that again."

Chapter 19

Things were going fairly okay, Ris and I were growing closer, Rex and Gabriella seemed to be getting along and in spite of the cash flows at the plantation life was plugging on. It was time for the harvest, it was going to be tough but if we all pulled our weight there was no reason to believe that we shouldn't at least be able to get three quarters of the field harvested. Cegan would push us to do all, but that wasn't possible with the few hands he had available. I glanced over at Ris as she laid their sleeping. Soon I would be able to marry her, the way she would really want to be married. Soon, this war would be over and we could settle down and make a family of our own. I allowed my hand to brush the hair away that had fallen in front of Ris' face while she slept. I pressed my lips against hers and she stirred slightly. She was quite a sound sleeper, I kissed her again, lightly, I didn't really want to rouse her.

"Fire!!! Fire!!!!" The voice was that of Mark's, I clambered over Ris and jumped to the floor pulling on my clothes as swiftly as I could. I shook Ris.

"Darling?' She opened sleepy eyes towards me.

"There's a fire, Ris. Get dressed. Hurry!"

"Where?" She muttered, still half asleep. I didn't want to leave her dazed like this, I didn't know how close the fire was to the plantation. I shook her firmly again and pulled on my boots and strapped on my gun.

"Wes." She muttered slowly. There was a loud knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Ris shouted now getting to her feet and pulling on her night dress. I pressed my lips against her cheek swiftly and headed out of the window. The last words were from her mother demanding to know why the bedroom door was locked.

I scurried down the tree outside Ris bedroom and hurried down to the field, where I could now see the full blaze.

"Mark!" I screamed, "Grab the buckets from our quarters. " Luke grab the buckets from the well!" I glanced around to see where the boss was, he was standing opened mouth and staring at his harvest going up in smoke.

"Mark!" I yelled and then saw Mark come scampering out of our quarters with three buckets in hand. "Form a line from the well. Soak the front of the field first and move back, see if we can at least contain the fire."

"My harvest!" Cegan was saying, shaking his head miserably. I knew I would have hell to pay for this later but I needed every hand at work.

“Join the line boss, we got to control this fire. Pull from the well.” I instructed and he walked off to follow my instruction.

We toiled on the fire for most of the night, by early morning it was just a smoldering flame, but it had burned out more than half the field.

“Mark, you keep an eye over the embers, don’t want them sparking up again.” I muttered and headed towards the house. “Harvest will need to start now, see what we can salvage.”

“We heard some men rummaging about the back of the field, figured it was soldiers looking for food so we kept ourselves quiet.” Tom muttered. I nodded, we had occasions when soldiers came and took much of our harvest for their food, but they had never burnt any before.

“Maybe rebels.” I suggested. I was just by the entrance to the plantation when Cegan gripped my shirt and pulled me towards him, I knew he was pissed so I didn’t struggle.

“Where were you? They were all out here before you came. That’s why I keep you in the back there, to keep an eye on what goes on down there. You think I give you a gun for

decoration? I give it to you to protect this plantation!" Cegan yelled. I nodded my head, it was pointless talking, he was in a foul mood.

"Answer me boy!" He screamed.

"I went for a walk. Couldn't sleep." I said. He glared at me angrily. "You got insomnia? Walking around in the middle of the night?"

I would have shrugged, but I knew how that irritated him.

"Where were you? Someone lit that fire, and I want to know who!"

"I'll try to get to the bottom of it today, Sir." I promised.

"Getting to the bottom of it won't bring back my crop. Doing your job, now that would have made a difference!"

"I'm sorry sir." I muttered but he was already heading into the house, stopping only to stare at Ris who was now on her way out. He stopped for a long time and stared at her and then looked back at me, then stared at Ris again and then he strolled into the house with his fist clenched. I glanced at Ris and our eyes met.

"Bloody hell." I muttered; Ris had put on her night dress on the wrong side.

Chapter 20

Anisha's point of view

I tossed and turned in my bed. The day had been a hectic one, what with Wes investigating the fire and Massa Cegan fuming over the lost of his crop, we all knew well enough to stay out of his way; otherwise it would be a beating for no reason at all. We had all noticed Marissa's nightdress that it was on the wrong side, true, she could have a logical reason for having it off – maybe it got stained, or damp or torn, and then the fire broke out and she had to just grab it and put it on quickly to get outside. Yeah, there could be a reason why Marissa would have to dress hurriedly to come downstairs. The truth is, all those reasons are a little lame, considering how proper white ladies would never think of going to bed in the nude. Why, I'd heard that white ladies didn't even let their husbands see them naked, but then again, there was very little 'proper' about Marissa. I smiled at the thought, I loved Marissa a great deal, she was the complete opposite to everything I was. I had tried to play it safe my whole life, doing everything Massa told me, never talking back, I did everything to try to avoid getting into trouble. I was scared of lashes and obedience meant I didn't have to get any. But Marissa was different, true, she wasn't a slave but she didn't seem to be afraid of anything.

She made up her mind that Wes was for her and she did everything in her power to get him, and she did get him. I could never be that bold. The thought of Stephenson floated into my head, I remembered when the war had started and Stephenson had convinced five more slaves to run away with him to help in the war efforts. He had wanted me to go too, he had said he loved me. But I wasn't like Marissa, I wasn't willing to risk everything for love, I had told him 'no', and I had never seen a man look so hurt. I knew Wes was in contact with Stephenson still, but I never asked about him, and I imagined that he didn't ask about me, I had made my choice, and love had lost.

I turned over on my bed and glanced over at Maise who was sleeping quite peacefully, she had spent her entire life as a slave, she had children, but they had been sold off to another plantation. I felt my chest constrict at the thought, I had refused to make love to Luke – I couldn't bare getting pregnant and having my babies taken away from me. Again I thought of Marissa, she took life by the horns and lived it to the fullest, I was always afraid of what could go wrong. I wasn't sure which life style was the best, something told me that Marissa and Wes couldn't go on the way they had been going for much longer. The thought had not properly crossed my mind when I heard the sound of footsteps outside of my door, I jumped to my feet and scampered outside to see who it was, it was Massa Cegan.

"M...masss...ssaa." I stuttered; if he wanted Wes there was going to be big trouble, because Wes was never in his bed at this time of night.

"Where's Wes?" He demanded. Oh gosh, if I told him 'I didn't know' he would go looking for him, but I didn't want to get myself in trouble lying either. I could hear Maise shifting on her bed and I knew our voices must have awakened her.

"Answer me girl or let me take a belt to you!" Massa Cegan yelled and I felt my legs tremble terribly.

"He...he went to the toilet sir. Passed here just a few moments ago." I lied, oh my gosh, I couldn't believe I was taking such a risk for Wes and Marissa.

"Really?" He grunted skeptically and strolled off towards the boys section. I hurried over to Maise and shook her roughly.

"Run over to the house quickly, toss a pebble against Miss Marissa's window and tell her Massa is looking for Wes." I instructed hurriedly. She nodded and scrambled to her feet.

"Tell her he's supposed to have just gone to the toilet." I said as I scurried out of my room and headed over to the boys' quarters. When I arrived Massa was banging a stick against the floor to get everyone up. Clearly he had already

checked Wes' bed and found it was empty.

"Where's Wes?" He roared. I mouthed 'toilet', 'few minutes ago' behind Massa's back, I was pleased that John picked up my message so quickly.

"You just missed him, sa, he should be back any moment he said."

"Is that so?" Massa asked, his voice sounding less doubtful than it had earlier.

"Indeed. I'm a mighty light sleeper, said his stomach was a bit upset or something." Tom offered.

"Oh. I'll wait." Massa Cegan said and went to sit on Wes' bunk.

"Will you be needing me, Massa?" I asked, trying to use the opportunity to get back to my own quarters, and see if Maise had carried out my instructions.

"No. You sit right there. I don't want any of you going anywhere." He muttered and I sat down on the edge of Luke's bed nervously. Had Maise found Wes? Massa Cegan seemed awfully suspicious, would he believe us? Would he beat us all for lying to him? I fought the temptation

to twist my hand nervously in my lap, no need giving him reason to be more suspicious. I was quite relieved when ten minutes later Wes strolled in looking as cool as ice and approaching from the toilet direction.

“What were you doing!” Massa Cegan yelled as soon as he reached the door.

“You want details? Toilet’s usually a pretty private business.” Wes said and I almost smiled.

“What’s the status on the fire?” Massa Cegan asked, changing the subject suddenly.

“Don’t have any answers yet, Sir. Spent most of the day trying to contain the damage. Me and the boys harvested what was salvageable of the damaged crop, hoping to go into town tomorrow and try and get it sold.” Wes explained. Massa Cegan nodded.

“As soon as you come back we have to start harvesting the rest of the crop, can’t wait until someone burns that too.”

“Yes sir. I think we might need some more hands, Tom and John are getting a little old for the kind of work needed for the field.” Wes pointed out.

“You think I manufacture slaves?” Massa Cegan yelled, “I ain’t got no one else but them, they’ll have to work. If they can’t work – they’re no use to me.”

“Maybe I could arrange some...” Wes began.

“I don’t want to hear it, they work or they get put out to pasture!” Massa Cegan interrupted and Wes shrugged.

“And I want to know who set that fire before you leave tomorrow.” Massa Cegan insisted, then turned on his heels and marched off.

Wes’ point of view

I spent most of the day searching for evidence about the fire, and what I found was pretty unsettling. By the end of the evening I was pretty convinced I knew who had started the fire, the problem was, I didn’t know I would want to share the names with the boss. I waited until I caught Tom on his own; he was the eldest in the group, looked simple enough but a real ring leader.

“You got something you want to tell me, Tom?” I asked,

leaning back on a tree while Tom scraped up debris from the burnt area.

“Can’t say that I have.” Tom replied. “Except that you’re going to get yourself killed if you don’t stop running around behind Massa’s daughter.”

I half smiled, Tom had probably been the closest thing I had to a father in the dysfunctional world of slavery that I lived in.

“Thanks for the warning. Now I’ll give you one. Next time you get a hankering for lighting fires you should try and cover your tracks a little better.” I said and watched as Tom’s eye brows shot up in the air. “And I know it wasn’t you alone. You got at least two of the others to help you.” I stared up in the air questioningly, Luke was too scared of Cegan to risk something like this. “Probably Mark and John.” His eyebrows when higher up his forehead.

“You can’t tell, Massa. He’d kill us for sure. He only wants an excuse, we’re starting to outlive our usefulness.” Tom pleaded.

“Why would you do something like this?” I asked. Pushing myself off the tree and coming to stand next to Tom, helping him to clear the area.

“The field’s too big, we couldn’t harvest that field on our own, it would kill us.” Tom explained, his voice low and nervous.

“You should have talked to me first.” I said.

“What good would that do, Massa Cegan don’t listen to no one when he done made up his mind.” Tom complained. I nodded, that was true, but still, right now I was between a rock and a hard place.

“It was a dumb idea, Tom.” I said flatly. “What am I going to tell Cegan when he asks who done this?”

“Tell him soldiers raided the field and burnt it down.” Tom offered.

“Ain’t enough prints for soldiers, and it was too quiet.” I said. “And the prints aren’t

soldier style.”

“I don’t know what you’re going to tell him, but you can’t tell him it’s us.” Tom said, his voice growing more forceful. “We have a secret, and you have a secret.” He looked at me knowingly. “If any one of those secrets were to get out, the

other one might get out too.”

I laughed.

“You threatening me Tom?” I asked, I cocked my head to a side. I hadn’t planned on telling Cegan about the fire, but it bugged me that Tom would try to blackmail me.

“Just telling you to be careful about what you tell Massa.” He said. I grinned and straightened up, dusting the ash from my hands.

“Knew you were a crafty one, Tom, never thought you’d try to use that craftiness on me.” I said and strolled off before he could answer. What pissed me off was that I’d already smudged the prints and destroyed any evidence that would have allowed anyone to trace the fire back to them, I had risked Cegan’s anger and what I got in return was a threat.

I walked up to the plantation, I hadn’t seen Ris for the entire day and I knew she was worried because I’d had to leave so hurriedly last night, and I probably wouldn’t get to see her before I came back from town. Gosh, I missed her already and I hadn’t left as yet. Cegan met me at the door and ordered me to his study; he was really riled up about the fire.

“Report.” He said simply. I took a deep breath.

“Nothing to report boss.” I said. Sliding my hands into my pocket and selecting my most casual pose. He didn’t answer he strolled outside and came back with the horse whip – so not good.

“You were saying, Wes?” He asked, his voice just as threatening as Tom’s had been.

“I don’t rightly remember.” I muttered and glanced across at him as he slapped the whip in his hand.

“I’m getting tired of your wise remarks. I want straight answers and I want them now. Do you know who lit that fire?”

“No sir.” I said and he lashed out at me with the whip, I dodged it. He grunted angrily.

“I got to tie you to beat you boy?” He demanded.

“I guess so, sir.” I responded. He lashed out at me with the whip again and I evaded it once more.

“Who you protecting? Was it John?” He asked. John was always seen as the rough one, they never knew it was Tom that got up to most of the stuff.

“Not as far as I know sir.” I replied.

“Fine.” He lashed at me again with the whip and I side stepped.

“Someone’s gonna pay for this fire. If you won’t give me a name, I’ll just chose one. I’ll beat Anisha as punishment for the fire. Don’t think I don’t know one of those slaves started it.”

“Anisha never does anything to hurt anyone.” I said. He laughed.

“Peter pays for Paul and Paul pays for all.” He muttered.

“I’ll take the beating then.” I said. He lifted his whip and struck at me again, I didn’t move, I allowed the whip to strike me squarely on my shoulder and winced. He sneered.

“Beating you ain’t going to bring my crops back. Get into town and sell what you can. And get back here as soon as

possible.”

The whip hurt pretty bad, but I had learnt to bear pain long ago.

“It’ll take some time, getting sales, damaged crop and all and Dr. Glyne said I had to get a check up when I came to town again, I guess I’ll have to get that done too, boss.” Cegan grimaced, he didn’t much like Dr. Glyne.

“Fine. Your shoulder okay?” He asked, just a tinge of concern in his voice.

“It’s fine. Guess I had better be going.” I said.

“Yes.” He said, then as I opened the door to leave. “No need telling Dr. Glyne about this incident.” He muttered.

“No need.” I replied and left his office.

I had a lot to do, sell the crops, try to collect some money, make the trips that Stephenson and the boys were depending on and see Dr. Glyne. But above all those things, I had to see Marissa, it would be almost a week before I could see her again, I didn’t want to leave without giving her a proper good bye.

When I caught up with her she was in the stables feeding the horses.

Marissa's point of view

I was surprised that Papa had not drilled me on the fact that my nightdress was on the wrong way, and yet I was glad. Perhaps he hadn't noticed. But then when Maise came for Wes so urgently I was quite nervous again, Wes had told me not to worry and I believed him, I would always believe Wes, but I had not seen him again since then.

"Aaaaaaaagggghhhhh..." My scream was only partially cut off by Wes' hand across my mouth. He released my mouth just as quickly as he had grabbed it.

"You horrible boy, why you startled the daylights out of me." I complained, still breathing rather hard. He laughed and I punched his shoulder and he winced.

"You've never winced so from my play." I said, concerned. Perhaps I was becoming too rough with Wes.

"I had a little run in with your father." He said and I looked surprised. "But it was nothing too great. No need to worry yourself."

“He struck you?” I asked. Wes nodded and I insisted that he show me. There was a long red line from shoulder to arm – much like the one across Rex’s face.

“How brutal.” I said. He chuckled; slipping his hand into my hair and combing his fingers through it lovingly.

“I must leave you today, and I shall be gone for a week.” He said distractedly and I pouted.

“Must you?”

“If I didn’t have to, I wouldn’t.” His hand caressed my neck absently. “I must salvage what can be salvaged of the damaged crop.”

“Do you think Papa would let me go with you?” I asked hopefully, my eyes shining brightly. He laughed outright.

“Your Papa is not a fool. That’s like putting the wolf to guard the chickens.”

“Are you a wolf, Wes?” I asked teasingly.

“Only if you’re a chicken.” He replied with a grin and then

swooped down and pressed his lips lovingly against mine.

“I like being a chicken.” I said.

“I like being a wolf.” He replied and we both laughed.

“Do hurry back.” I instructed firmly, “And please don’t get yourself killed.”

He laughed.

“Of course I won’t, you wouldn’t know what to do with yourself without me.”

“I should pine away to nothing.” I confessed and he pulled me against him and claimed my lips for his own.

“Did I tell you I loved you today?” He asked.

“Technically no, because the last time you said it was before midnight.” I informed him.

“How completely neglectful of me. I love you.” He whispered. “And just so I shan’t fall behind while I’m away – I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, okay, was that seven? I think I lost count.” I giggled.

“You are far too crazy my darling Wes. There could be no one more perfect for me.” I confessed and he laughed.

“Too true.” And then he kissed me again.

I laid my head against his chest and listened happily to the strong rhythm of his heart and privately prayed it would go on beating forever.

“I have to leave.” He said, after we had been holding each other like that for a few moments.

“I shall miss you terribly.” I said and felt a tear stink the back of my eyes. Dear me, I should not wish to send off Wes with tears, I buried my face deeper in his shirt that he would not see.

“And I will miss you. Don’t go a courting while I’m gone or I shall have to shoot the guy when I get back.” He warned and that made me laugh again.

“I shall be completely faithful, I promise.” I crossed my fingers in front of his face, crossed fingers meant that a promise could be broken.

“You little weasel.” He joked and I grinned. I could never be unfaithful to Wes. It would be like being unfaithful to my breath or to my heart – Wes was so much a part of me. Without Wes, I would be incomplete.

“Can’t have you taking me for granted.” I teased. He

laughed and then his eyes grew so solemn.

“I would never take you for granted Ris. I know how much you’re giving up to be with me.”

“Nonsense. I’m not giving up anything. There is nothing without you.” I tiptoed and pressed my lips against his. “I love you so much Wes. I love that you make me feel loved, and safe and secure and cherished and like a real woman.”

“I can hardly wait until this war is over, I shall enjoy being in a home with you and our fifteen children.” My eyes widened.

“Three children.” I said firmly, he laughed.

“Ten children.” He compromised, nibbling on my ear most seductively.

“Five.” I replied, my voice quite hoarse.

“Eight.” He whispered, his hand pulling me closer against his body so I could feel how hard he was becoming.

“Seven.” I muttered as my lips pressed against his neck and trailed to his chest. He lifted me away and grinned.

“Seven it is then.”

“You tricked me.” I accused, but I was laughing, I couldn’t

imagine anything more wonderful than lots of little Wes' running all around my skirts.

"Wes junior one, two, three..." I teased.

"And Ris junior. Beautiful red hair girls that drive their father crazy."

I wrapped my arms around Wes' waist and wished that I never had to let go.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." He promised.

"Be careful." I said and tilted my face up to his. He pressed his lips against mine, his tongue exploring my mouth in a kiss that was both passionate and possessive.

"I love you." I said.

"I love you." He whispered and then he was gone.

Chapter 21

The days seemed to drift by meaninglessly without Wes there, and I daresay I imagined that all of life would be like that without Wes. We worked hard though, trying to cut

more of the crop and still keeping up with the house work. Papa pushed the slave right hard in the field and by day three poor old Tom passed out right in front of our eyes and had to be laid inside for a full day. I heard Papa grumbling that he would have to get rid of Tom, for he was quickly becoming little help and only a mouth to feed. It was most distressing and I hoped Tom would recover quickly and be able to show Papa he could be still useful.

I laid in my bed, earnestly praying that Wes would return at least by the morrow, surely he had accomplished all his tasks by now. I sighed, gripping my pillow closely and rubbing my face against it. I did miss Wes so much.

The tap on the window startled me and I hurried up and opened it, it was Wes and I practically dragged him through the window.

“You’re back early.” I whispered, already beginning to unbutton his shirt.

“I missed you.” He whispered.

“Did you manage all your tasks?” I asked, my words meant to incorporate the matter of Stephenson and the boys.

“Yes.” He said, appearing to understand what I was asking.

“And the doctor?” I asked. He frowned and then smiled.

“Yes. It was fair. He made a great fuss about the cut.” Wes explained, looking rather perplexed.

“He’s a doctor, I guess that’s what doctors do.” I surmised.

“I guess.” Wes muttered but looked so distraught that I pressed him to tell me his concerns.

“The only time a doctor gets that worked up about a slave is if there are plans to sell him, then you want the best condition for the slave.” Wes said, looking at me through squinted eyes.

“You think Papa means to sell you?” I asked. Wes shrugged.

“I don’t know. He seems pretty upset and even tonight, when I went to him to pay in the money I collected and report on everything, he looked kind of angry or something.” Wes said.

“But Papa couldn’t possibly run this plantation without you.” I declared and he smiled and pulled me into his arms.

“Perhaps it is my imagination.” Wes said, pressing his lips

against mine.

“Let us hope so.” I whispered as we pulled away the balance of our clothes and lay beside each other on my bed.

“If he sells me, Ris, don’t be afraid, I swear I shall be back for you.” Wes whispered hugging me tightly.

“I know you would, and I shall wait faithfully.” I said as Wes’ hands caressed my body with boldness and familiarity that comes from knowing someone belongs to you and you alone. When he pressed himself inside of me I groaned and gripped him firmly, enjoying the feel of him.

His hands caressed my hips, sliding to cup my butt and press me tighter against him.

“I shall never be able to get enough of you.” He whispered hoarsely.

“I would never wish you to get enough. I would always wish to give you more and more.” I said just as his lips claimed mine in a long and passionate kiss.

“Wes..” I gasped as he pulled his lips away from mine, our bodies working in tandem to build up both pleasure and

need inside of us.

"I love you." He whispered and I flicked my tongue in his ear and he groaned.

"I love you too." I replied, not able to imagine a more beautiful experience than Wes and my body joined as one. When he rolled me onto the bed and climbed on top of me, I knew it was because his passion had reached its peak and release was necessary. I loved Wes, even in the heat of the passion of our lovemaking, Wes was always gentle with me, and even though he held one of my legs and pressed himself forcefully inside of me, I knew he was conscious to retain enough control so he would not hurt me. Once I had cried out, for he had pressed himself so hard and deep into me that a stab of pain had shot through my body, Wes had stopped immediately and gathered me to him, apologizing profusely, and though I had assured him I was no porcelain doll and could not be broken, he was still quite careful. Tonight though he was rougher than previously, but I believed it was because of our long separation and the desire that had built up during that time. I didn't mind, for I loved making love to Wes whether he was gentle or a bit rough, and I had learnt what positions caused pain when Wes was a little more amorous.

Now, as his body entered and exited I gripped him firmly, thoroughly enjoying the sensation and never wishing it to

end. Then when I felt his movements increased I knew he was swiftly approaching a point of no control, my arms gripped him even tighter as my own body moved along with his, losing control as well.

“Oh Wes, Wes...oh...oh...” I gasped as he pressed himself into me again hard and firm and I felt him empty inside of me. He started to pull away and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

“Ris...” He ran his hands through his hair and they were trembling. Every time Wes and I had made love in the past he had pulled himself out and then came, this was the first time that Wes had emptied himself inside of me.

“I’m sorry baby.” He whispered; his body still trapped inside of mine as a result of my legs about his waist.

“For what?” I asked, my hands stroking the side of his face gently.

“I shouldn’t have done that, I...” He raked his hand through his hair again. “I could get you pregnant.” He said.

I looked at Wes, my fingers flickering across his lips, enjoying the feel of him softer but still inside of me and the feel of his juices slowly leaking unto the sheet beneath me.

“Could I?” I asked, still staring at him. I loved Wes, and there was no one I would rather be pregnant for than him.

“It’s going to be okay.” He said. Pulling me into his arms and covering my face with kisses.

“Of course it is going to be alright, I completely trust you, Wes.” I said, and no words had ever been truer, but a part of me felt the slightest twist of nervousness, a nervousness born, I feared, from Wes’ concerned reaction at what he had done.

Chapter 22

Wes’ point of view

“Make love to me again.” Ris whispered. I pressed my lips against hers and pulled her towards me, enjoying the feel of

her in my arms.

She slipped her legs about my waist.

“Wes.”

“Ummm.” I muttered; I could already feel my body beginning to respond to her body once more.

“I want you to make love to me completely, as if...as if you would wish me to be pregnant.” She said. I looked at her and I know the puzzlement was written all over my face. “If I am pregnant, I don’t want to feel as if our child was a mistake, someone that you and I regretted bringing into the world. I want to know in my heart that we planned for our child; that we wanted them and there was no mistake at all.” She said.

“Ris. Sweetheart, you might not even be pregnant.” I pointed out.

“I don’t care. I want our child to know he’s wanted, I don’t want him to be a mistake, Wes.” She insisted.

“He or she will never feel like a mistake.” I promised.

“No he won’t. Make love to me again, Wes.” She persisted.

I pressed my forehead against hers as my arm slid about her body and pressed her close to me.

“We have plenty of time to make babies, my love.” I whispered.

“We may already be making one, you said yourself I might be pregnant.” She continued.

“Might be.” I emphasised.

“Fine.” She pouted at me. I groaned, Ris could be stubborn about some of the strangest things.

“Lets not argue about this.” I said; this was so not the conversation I was planning to have on my first night back.

“Sorry.” She muttered, wrapping her arms around my body and burying her face in my shoulder, but not before I had seen a tear collect on the edge of her eyelash.

“Ris.” I whispered. She didn’t answer at first, refusing to remove her face from my shoulder.

“I guess you should be getting back to your quarters.” She said, her arms still around me and holding me close.

“You think I would leave you? You think I wouldn’t accept this child?” I asked; I bit hard on my lip not quite sure why I felt so upset at Ris’ reaction.

“No. I love you. I trust you.” She said while the snuffle in her voice became more pronounced.

“What is it then? You must know that it would be madness for me to get you pregnant deliberately, Ris.” I said. She nodded her head against my shoulder, still refusing to look at me. I sighed heavily. Women were way too hard to understand.

“Nothing. Nothing, I am just being foolish of course.” She whispered, lifting her head from my shoulder and giving me her bravest face. I felt my insides twist; Ris was trying to be brave for me. Why hadn’t I seen it before, even though Ris loved me and trusted me she still somehow felt that she would be dealing with the worry alone. I guess I could understand, it would be Ris that would be carrying our baby, it would be Ris who would be present with the reality every second of the day and it would be Ris who would have to be careful that a word or action did not cause people to suspect that she was with child. I imagine she felt that because the pregnancy was a mistake which I regretted, that fact somehow absolved me from any possible

responsibility. Nothing could be further from the truth, I loved Ris and any pregnancy was more my responsibility than hers as far as I was concerned. The problem was how could I get Ris to see that?

“I love you.” I whispered, and I knew that I had mentally made up my mind to do whatever was necessary to make sure that Ris would not have a moment’s discomfort or wonder as to if I held myself responsible for any pregnancy.

“I love you.” She whispered, allowing her arms to wrap around my body and squeeze me firmly. I pressed my lips against hers and felt her press her body against mine. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. I pressed against her legs with my knee to spread them slightly.

“Don’t Wes. I know you don’t want to.” She said, looking up at me with a mixture of emotions that showed her uncertainty.

“Silly girl. I always want to make love to you.” I confessed and she half smiled at me. “I always want you, Ris and if we’re pregnant, I want our child.” I said. She nodded at me, her eyes brightening.

“I can’t figure out why you would want to be pregnant for me, Ris. With all the problems around us. I’m confused...” I said, pressing my lips against hers. “But I’m honored, my love, I’m completely honored. And if you’re sure that you want me to make love to you, and maybe create a child between us...I’m happy to.”

“I am, Wes. I am.” She said huskily and I covered her mouth with mine and pressed myself deep inside of her.

“I love you.” I whispered, releasing her lips and savoring the jaggedness of her breath that told me she was seriously turned on. “Shall we make our son first?”

“Twins...I hear for twins you have to press harder.” She said her voice barely coherent.

“Then lets go for triplets then.” I said with a grin and as I press my member to the hilt deep inside of her I felt her nails dig into my flesh and she groaned loudly.

When our bodies were spent I rolled off of her onto the bed, pulling her into my arms. I would have loved to have gone to

sleep right there, I was completely exhausted. We had climaxed together and I had not pulled away, I had stayed pressed inside of her, enjoying the feel of her tightness around me as I emptied myself. Now the barest signs of dawn were beginning to show, I had stayed much longer with Ris than I had intended. I scribbled a note of love to Ris, pressed my lips against her cheek as she slept peacefully. I had heard older women say in my moving around that pregnancy in a woman who had never had a child before tended to show later than in a woman who had children before. Yes, based on what they had said, a young girl could take as much as four to five months before she started to show. If they were right, that gave me a little time before I had to make my move. I half smiled, me a father, I bit my lip to control the excitement that seemed to want to rise inside of me. She might not even be pregnant, I told myself and was surprised to find that there was an element of disappointment that accompanied that revelation.

I pulled on my underwear and zipped up my pants hurriedly. I needed to get back to my quarters as soon as possible. I smiled again, in town I had heard that the rumor was rife that the war would be at an end soon. Many were saying that as Virginia went, so would go the war, and the south wasn't doing so well in Virginia. I slid my body through the window, this whole thing could work itself out in as little as two weeks, although another voice kept reminding me that

one could never be too sure when it came to war.

I swung onto the tree outside of Ris' room and dropped to the ground easily. I hadn't taken my first step before I saw Cegan stepping out from behind the other side of the tree.

"I could plug you right now, and even if you were a white man, not one person would find me guilty." Cegan said firmly. He was right; climbing out a man's daughter's bedroom window could get anyone killed.

Chapter 23

I didn't answer; it was pretty pointless riling him.

"What you got to say for yourself, boy!" He screamed at me, cocking his gun towards my face. We were standing too close, I could have wrestled him, I could have gotten his gun away, but there wasn't much of a point to that. If I fought with him, I'd have to run and Ris was up in her room, I wasn't going anywhere without her. I leaned back on the house and folded my arms across my chest. There was nothing I could say that he would like, but it was pointless lying now.

“I love Ris, and I mean to make her my wife.” I said firmly and he glared at me with a face full of hate. It was no more than I expected.

“Ris is not for you, boy. I thought I beat that out of you when you were a pup?” He screamed.

“I guess it didn’t work.” I said.

“Um.” He stepped off a bit and yelled at me to raise my hands in the air, I obliged.

“What...” It was Ris, I guess all the yelling must have awakened her.

“Get back to bed!” Both Cegan and I yelled at the same time.

“Wes! Oh Papa! Don’t hurt him!” I could hear her scramble back across the room and I figured she was dressing.

“If my daughter comes down here with her nightdress on backward...I’m going to kill you right where you stand, boy.” Cegan said and there was a sudden quiet upstairs in Ris room. I half imagined that she had put her dress on wrong and was changing it about after what her father said.

“Luke!” Cegan screamed. “Get out here, boys!” And I

watched as Luke and Mark appeared followed by Tom whose head was held so low I could barely see his face. I didn't need to deliberate for too long to figure out who would have told Cegan where I was. I didn't hold it against him, Cegan could be pretty brutal and persuasive when he wanted to get information out of you and he had been getting suspicious.

"Tie him up." Cegan shouted, Luke looked hesitant but Cegan struck him with the gun barrel across his face, he winced and hurried towards me with rope in his hand.

"It's alright. You don't have a choice." I said; more in response to the look of shame on Luke's face.

"Papa please..." It was Ris again, she was scampering out of the window now – in a properly downed nightdress. "I love him. I want to marry him. Papa please." Ris was always different, I couldn't help myself from thinking that as she slipped down the tree and jumped to the ground when she was just a few feet up.

"This is what I spent all that good money on? To make you a lady and that's what I get? A stupid whore!" Cegan screamed and Ris practically stumbled back at the attack.

“Don’t you talk to her like that.” I said, though my voice was calm I had to grit my teeth to keep it so.

“You dare talk to me boy?” He demanded.

“I won’t have you disrespecting Ris like that.” I said frankly and he looked at me with an expression I couldn’t quite fathom. I figure it had to be more hate, but I didn’t care, he could do what he liked with me, but damn if I would let him hurt Ris.

“Oh Wes, don’t make him angry.” Ris said, tears flowing from her eyes. Honestly, he was way past angry already.

“I’ll be okay.” I said as she wrapped her arms around my waist and held on tightly.

“I won’t let him hurt you Wes. I love you.” She whispered. Cegan gripped Ris by her arm roughly and dragged her off of me.

“Luke and Mark, tie him to the tree for the night. At noon we’ll beat him.” Cegan said staring into my eyes as he said

it. I didn't give him the satisfaction of showing a reaction. "You think you're so tough eh? By tomorrow night, you'll be begging me to stop beating you." I refused to make any comment.

"Papa, please!!!" Ris yelled gripping her father's arm, he tossed her off and she fell to the ground weeping.

"I warned you, Cegan!" I said, not even trying to hide my annoyance.

"You're tied up, I'm holding the gun, and you're threatening me?" He asked surprised.

"I'll kill you if you hurt her." I said flatly and I meant it with every fiber of my body.

"Wes!" Ris cried, hustling to her feet.

"Take her inside and tie her to a chair or something!" Cegan instructed, tossing his head in Mark's direction.

"Don't touch me!" Ris screamed as Mark made to hold her.

"Don't give any trouble, Ris. I don't want you getting hurt." I

said firmly.

“But...” Ris was saying as she struggled with Mark.

“No buts Ris, I’ll be fine. He’s just tying me to a tree.” I said quietly.

“Wes.”

“Get her inside!” Cegan yelled.

“Go on, Ris.” I said. She looked hesitant for a moment and then raced off to the house screaming for her mother.

“Luke, Tom, tie him to the tree – upside down.” Cegan muttered. I resisted the temptation to groan and allowed Tom and Luke to lead me to the large oak tree in the back yard. I watched Luke shimmy up the tree with a rope and then waited as Cegan kept his gun pointed at me and Tom tied my feet.

“Hoist him up!” Cegan yelled, an almost half smile on his face. “You think because this plantation needs your skills that you can disrespect my family and get away with it?” He sneered.

“I wasn’t disrespecting Ris. I love her. I’d marry her right now if you give me permission.” I said, immediately realizing how difficult it is to speak upside down.

He strolled over to me and punched me in the throat, I gasped for air.

“No. No. No. You don’t have permission to marry Marissa.” He growled while I fought to regain myself. “Don’t mess with me, boy, when I was torturing men, you weren’t even born yet.” He said and strolled off to the plantation and left me swinging there.

Marissa’s point of view

I scampered up the stairs as if the house was on fire, the only person that could talk sense into Papa when he got like this was Ma.

“Ma...Ma!!!” I bellowed at the top of my lungs as I raced through the house, praying feverishly that Papa wouldn’t

shoot Wes.

“Maaa!” I yelled pulling at their bedroom door.

“Goodness child!” Ma muttered; pulling on her house coat and staring at me quite disapprovingly.

“Papa’s going to kill Wes! Ma! Ma! You’ve got to stop him!” I screamed. She looked quite bewildered as she made her way over to me.

“Kill Wes? How ridiculous, why he couldn’t run this place without Wes!” Ma pointed out; I blushed bright red as I gripped her arm and pulled her towards the door.

“He caught Wes...am..leaving my room.” I said.

“Marissa!” Ma yelled.

“I love him!” I responded instantly and she gave a heavy sigh.

“Let’s see what I can do then.” She muttered. “Perhaps Papa will have him marry you. He reads, he writes, he can pass for white and even if we lose the war it would be one way of ensuring that he stays with us and help your Papa with the plantation.” Ma said. I grinned excitedly up at her and gave her a big hug.

“Thank you for understanding Ma. I wish Papa were more like you sometimes.” I said.

“Fathers are different, Child. They never wish to imagine their daughters being anything else but virgins.” Ma pointed out as I practically dragged her down the stairs.

“Do hurry Ma. I would die if something happened to Wes.” I said.

“You won’t die, you might feel as if you would, but you won’t.” Ma said very firmly. I dared not argue with her, but I knew she was wrong, I would most definitely die.

“Pa.” Ma said as we walked outside of the house, I gasped when I saw Wes hanging upside down, his feet and hands bond.

“Oh please take him down!” I pleaded. Pa didn’t even look at me, he glared angrily at Ma.

“Stay out of this.” He said his lips stretched tight and frowning.

“Dear me, but why have you treated Wes so...”

“He’s defiled our daughter and he deserves what he gets.”

Papa grunted out, cutting across Ma's words.

"I would never dream of crossing you of course, it is hardly my place, having no head for such matters. But the boy is quite significant to the Plantation, isn't he? Why if we kill him, whoever shall we get to take his place, and for no pay at that?" Ma asked quietly, Papa glared at her.

"I'll not kill him!" He bellowed and then gave me an equally nasty glare. "If I had intended to kill him he'd be dead already. I shall simply teach him to stay away from my daughter."

"But I love him." I cried.

"Could we not allow them to marry?" Ma asked.

Chapter 24

Papa slapped her across her face.

"Stay out of this, and I shan't say it again." He threatened as Ma laid her hand gently against her cheek, her eyes beginning to tear up.

“How could you!” I screamed at him, I had never seen Papa hit Ma before. More tears welled up in my eyes and trickled down my face, Ma pulled me to her and hugged me tightly.

“Come, let us go inside. We have housework to attend to.” She said quietly as she tugged me along with her. I could hear Mark’s footsteps behind us and I knew Papa had sent him to keep me in the house.

I hardly did any housework, pacing the floor anxiously, wondering what would happen to Wes. When Papa entered the house I stared at him nervously but he strolled past me and went for his lunch.

Lunch was conducted in complete silence, not even Rex and Gabriella daring to say anything and Ma still looking quite pale.

“Come, let us wash up the wares.” Ma said as soon as Papa had finished his meal, he spared her the briefest of apologetic glances but she wasn’t looking in his direction.

“Please cut Wes down!” I said not able to resist pleading

one more time.

“I will ask Wes to swear that he will have no more to do with you. If he agrees, I will cut him down, if he doesn’t...I’ll beat him until he does.” He said calmly and then strolled out of the house. I turned to stare at Rex and Gabriella with tears flowing freely.

“Help me.” I begged.

“Marissa...” Rex looked sad, “You know Pa won’t listen to me.”

I glanced over at the door, Mark stood there like a wall, barring my exit.

“Aaaagggggghhhh!” The shout was so agonising I raced over to the door but Mark gripped me by my hand and refused to let me go.

The large piece of wood that Cegan swung at my back felt like it would break my bones each time it connected. I had bit down on my lip for the first five lashes but the six had

caught me about the knee and I yelled. I bit harder on my lip, I didn't want to scream, or shout or show any sign of pain. I didn't want Ris to know that it hurt, I didn't want her to hurt for me.

"I want you're word, Wes. I'd take you're word that you'll have nothing more to do with my daughter." Cegan said and the taste of blood in my mouth told me I'd been biting on my lip too hard.

"I can't...I love Ris..." Any other words I was going to say were cut off by the pressure of the wood against my legs. The impact was so firm that it set me swinging back and forth on the rope and the string I tied the ponytail with slid out to the ground.

"Say you'll have no more to do with Ris." He insisted. I bit down on my lip, it was pointless answering him, I didn't have the answer in my heart that he was looking for.

"Say it boy!" He screamed and swung the stick more wildly this time, it landed across my back, that wasn't as painful. I kept silent.

"Nothing to say?" His voice was deceptively calm now. "Within an hour you'll be begging me to let you speak." He

threatened.

He proceeded to beat me mercilessly with the stick. His lashes came so fast and furious that I had no opportunity to stiffen my body in preparation for the onslaught. Had I not been a man I would have cried, even as I had cried so many years ago when Cegan had beaten me for loving his daughter. But things were different now, my mind was already made up, he would have to kill me, I would never change my mind about loving Ris.

When the blows slowed I opened my eyes slowly, my body ached in places that I didn't even know existed and my head pounded with the worst sort of headache I had ever experienced. Not only because of the intense pain my body was enduring but because I was hanging upside down.

"Well?" Cegan demanded. He looked winded, swinging a wood that size with the kind of viciousness with which he had been swinging it had taken its strain on him. I couldn't help but find myself wishing that he would get a heart attack and die right in front of me. Ris wouldn't much like that either.

"Answer me boy!" He screamed, breathing heavily. I could hear the sound of soft murmurings around so I knew we weren't alone, but I didn't have the energy to turn my head to see who else was about.

“I love...” The last words were cut off when Cegan swung the stick at me full force, catching me in my stomach, if I had been standing I would have doubled over, but hanging upside down I could do nothing. He struck again, and again and again, when the stick caught me across my ribs I yelled out. I was ashamed when I heard Ris’ returning my scream from inside the house.

“Idiot!” I heard Cegan shout and then I heard Ris’ voice much closer to me than I expected.

“My darling Wes!” I would have sworn that I felt her arms around me, but I was drifting in and out of consciousness and reality was beginning to blur.

“...her out of here.” I heard Cegan shout and then I felt an angel press her lips against mine.

“Ris...” I had to be dreaming.

“You’re killing him!” Ris yelled.

“He’s killing himself.” Cegan retorted and I drifted into oblivion again until the feel of damp coldness splashed

against my face and alerted my consciousness.

“Stop that, leave him alone!” Ris was screaming.

“Get out of my way child! I want him to be conscious for every lash!” Cegan shouted. I felt Ris bind something around my leg, I glanced up to see her tying something about her wrist. My brain was way too dull to figure it out.

“You want to tie yourself to him?” Cegan demanded. “Go right ahead, you’ll get the same lashes he gets. You deserve it!”

“Don’t...” All I could think was that he would hit Ris. Oh my, Lord, don’t let him hit Ris. I could feel anger stir in me, I should never have allowed him to bind me, how could I protect Ris now? I fought to lift my body up, a vain hope of reaching the rope that bound my ankles. Every muscle, every bone, every flipping tissue in my body cried out, I tried to ignore the pain, but my body was refusing to obey my requests. I simply didn’t have the ability to pull my body up by pure brute force at this time. I was simply too weak, too beaten. I saw Cegan lift the stick to lash out at Ris and I did the only thing that was available to me, I twisted my body.

“Aaaaagggghhhhh!” He had been aiming for her backside,

when I twisted my body on the rope, because Ris was tied to me, her body shifted so that the stick landed on my upper shoulder instead of on Ris.

“Wes!” Ris scream, agony resonating within her voice.

“I’m...fine.” Actually I could barely speak and I wasn’t sure if I would have enough energy if Cegan decided to throw another blow at Ris. I wanted to make her untie herself from me, but I just didn’t have the strength that I knew it would take to argue with her.

“You plan to take all her lashes, Wes?” Cegan asked. I didn’t answer, I couldn’t even if I had wanted to.

“Leave us alone. We just want to be together!” Ris said her words broken up with sobs.

I cringed as Cegan lifted the stick into the air again, Lord give me just enough strength to protect Ris, I prayed wearily.

“I will never forgive you if you hit our daughter.” Mrs. Cegan’s voice boomed with more authority than I had ever heard in it. Cegan glared at her angrily.

“I told you to stay out of this.” He warned.

“I’ll accept quite a lot from you. Hitting me, cheating on me, disrespecting me in front our children...” Cegan’s face turned red with embarrassment. “But beating our daughter like a common slave. NO. I won’t abide it. You shall have to kill me first.”

The tension in the air felt like something that you could cut with a knife, women didn’t speak to their husbands like that and definitely not in public. I wasn’t sure what Cegan would do, but I hoped he wouldn’t take it out on Ris. I was no help, the pain in my head was getting worst and I was finding it difficult to stay focused.

“Cut him down!” Cegan shrieked, then he stared at Ris right in the eye and said in a voice that was remarkably calm. “Wes is not for you.” He turned on his heels, gripped Mrs. Cegan firmly by the arm and marched her towards the house.

“Father!” I could make out Rex’s voice filled with concern for his mother.

“Stay out of this boy, you deal with your wife and I’ll deal with mine.”

“Mama!” Ris yelled.

“I’ll be fine. Look after Wes.” Mrs. Cegan shouted as they disappeared into the house.

“Cut him down and carry him to his bunk.” Rex instructed.

“Ris...” I wasn’t even sure what I was going to say, but then every thing just went completely black.

Chapter 25

Marissa’s point of view

I lay in my bed that night tossing and turning. Papa seemed to have settled down for the balance of the day, I could only assume Ma had talked some sense into him. He was quite upset though. In my heart I knew he felt that Wes and I were over, but in my heart I knew he was wrong. What Wes and I had was bigger than anything he could do to us, I had made up my bed with Wes and I was quite prepared to lay in it.

I half smiled as I recollected that after Mark and Luke had taken Wes to his bunk I had wanted to spend the evening nursing him back to health, but Ma had sent Gabriel to summon me, insisting that my presence with Wes might only send Papa into another rage. Why couldn't he just let us be? I brushed a tear from my eye, my, but I was shifting moods swiftly, but I couldn't help but recognize the road ahead was not going to be easy for Wes and me. Oh that the stupid war would end!

It was all so strange, why, if the war ended everything would fall neatly into place. We could be married, in a church, move far away and raise our family. I instinctively laid my hand upon my stomach and sighed wistfully. Why couldn't Papa see, it was obvious to everyone else. All of the slaves knew that Wes and I belonged together, Gabriella knew it, she had been so kind to me today, Ms. Leslie knew it and she was a complete prude, heck, even Rex, who had so disliked Wes knew it and seemed to accept. I sighed, and Ma, darling Mama, she knew and she understood, but why couldn't Papa. Why couldn't Papa understand, surely he could see how determined we were today, surely that would cause him to relent? Oh that the stupid war would end and Wes could be a free man! I twirled Wes' ring lovingly in my fingers, anxious for the day when I could wear it boldly on my hand instead of about my neck.

The gentle tapping on the window startled me and I sat up in bed. It was shut tonight for Papa saw to it himself before

he headed off to bed. It bothered me none, for I knew that Wes was wearied and would sleep soundly all night.

“tap..tap...tap...” I hurried over to the window and peered out. Wes was clutching onto the tree and tapping gently against the pane.

“Goodnesss!” I muttered and pushed the window up so he could climb through. “Are you crazy? You should be recuperating.” I scowled him, but I was quite pleased to see him.

“How can I recuperate unless I see you?” He asked earnestly and I smiled.

“My poor darling. Are you in much pain?” He looked as if he was debating how frank he should be. “The whole truth.” I said firmly and he smiled.

“Excruciating...” He muttered but he was grinning.

“Come on, lay down.” I hustled him over to my bed, glad for the opportunity to look after him. I stripped off his boots and clothes and covered him with the sheets.

“Your back is all black and blue.” I fussed.

"I'm lucky he didn't choose to use the whip. I'd still be bleeding. At least these bruises will heal faster, and they won't leave a scar." Wes muttered.

"My father is a monster." I cried tears springing to my eyes.

"Don't be too hard on him, if I found a man in my daughter's room I'd want to skin him alive too." He said and I pulled a brief smile.

"Still." I muttered, unwilling to be so forgiving. "Did you see how he struck Ma?"

"Hmmm." Was all Wes said as I climbed into the bed beside him and snuggled under the sheets.

"I could have punched him." I declared. Wes laughed.

"They're probably having great make up sex even as we speak." Wes commented.

"Gross!" I slapped him on his shoulder and he winced, I felt guilty immediately.

"I'm so sorry. I'm too rough. How awful of me." I felt like a complete heel, Wes was going through all of this because of me, and I hadn't received one blow.

"I'm fine." He muttered, but even as he shifted on the bed to face me he made a face and I knew he was too tender. I pressed my lips against his and then feathered gentle kisses across his neck and cheeks.

"This is just what I need to help with the healing process." He moaned and I giggled sliding my hands along his body and caressing him gently.

"Ris." He looked a little embarrassed and I stared at him to continue. "I can't...well...make love to you." He was actually blushing. "Not that I wouldn't want to, I'm just..." His voice trailed off.

"I know that silly, why I don't even know where you got the energy to climb that tree." I muttered and hugged him close to me, he winced and I pulled away hurriedly. "Sorry."

"Knowing you were up here was enough of an energy booster for me." Wes said and I kissed him.

“Let me put something on those bruises. You try to get some sleep.” I whispered.

“I can’t sleep without you next to me.” He muttered.

“That’s why you came up here, I’ve spoilt you.” I teased.

“Yes, please. Forever.” He said and pressed his lips against mine softly.

“I’ll be back shortly.”

I didn’t wait for him to answer, I hurried down stairs and into the pantry where Ma kept most of the medicines; pulling out a soothing balm ointment and hurrying back upstairs with it. Before entering my room I glanced around anxiously, not willing for another confrontation with Papa. I hesitated as I glanced down at Wes sleeping comfortably, so much for not being able to sleep without me. I stripped off the sheets and as gently as I could I applied the ointment.

I didn’t sleep that night, I kept watch over Wes and he slept soundly. I half expected him to jump up at early dawn and make his way out of my room but he slept on. When the sun came creeping through my bedroom window I looked over at him, and he was watching me.

“You didn’t leave?” It was more of a question statement, there was something I wasn’t understanding and I needed to know what Wes was up to. He slid out of the bed, looking stronger now, I watched him as he dressed; my eyes admiring his sexy physique and handsome face. He bent down to pull on his boots and his hair tumbled about his face messily. He grinned at me and looked around for the ponytail string and wrapped it around his hair and then continued to pull on his other boot.

“You look much better.” I said. I was still waiting on a response for my first comment.

“Thanks. Get dressed.” He instructed and actually shooed me out of the bed. “Your father will be coming in here any moment now, looking for me.”

“And you want him to find you?” I asked picking up my nightdress.

“No. Put on a dress. No need you running about the yard in your night clothes again, it’s not really proper.”

“Am I missing something?” I asked but I was already laying aside my night dress and pulling on my day clothes.

“We’ve been caught, Ris. It can’t go back the way it used to be. This whole thing got to play out to its bitter end between me and Cegan.” Wes said firmly.

“I don’t much like the sound of that. Couldn’t we be discreet for a few days and perhaps when Papa is no longer studying such matters we can meet again.” I suggested but Wes was already shaking his head.

“No. Cegan won’t forget this. He’ll be watching me like a hawk. If I don’t confront this...he’ll put an end to our relationship.” Wes said the certainty in his voice making me cringe.

“He can’t!” I insisted rushing over to Wes and throwing my arms around him, when he wriggled slightly I recalled that he was still tender.

“No, he can’t. But we have to face him and tell him so, no matter what.” Wes said.

“What if he kills you?” I hated to even think of it, but I wanted Wes to appreciate what was at stake.

“I know men. If Cegan was going to kill me he would have killed me yesterday.” Wes’ face scrunched up slightly. “He wants me alive and I’m going to use that to make him see

that there is nothing he can do to stop us from being together.”

“I hope you’re right.” I said as a fierce knock sounded on my bedroom door.

“Wes!” Papa’s voice bellowed from the other side of the door and I gave a start.

“What shall we do?” I whispered.

“I’ll open it.” Wes said and strolled towards the door, he was limping very slightly.

“Are you sure.” I whispered discretely but he had already thrown the door open and was staring Papa face to face.

Chapter 26

“Yes, Sir.” Wes said quietly and Papa glared at him quite spitefully.

“You didn’t get enough beating yesterday, boy?” He

demanded.

“I have my mind made up sir, I love Marissa and nothing you do to me will make me change my mind.” Wes said. Papa glanced around behind him and then spread his hands wide and stared at me. His loud voice had drawn Rex, Gabriella and Ma to my door.

“So this is what you want?” He asked. “For every one to see you for what you are, a slut.”

I gasped but I had no time to shout Wes’ name before Wes’ hand had swung into the air and connected with Papa’s right cheek. Papa drop to the floor like a bag of stones. That could not be good.

“Goodness.” Mom squealed and dropped to the floor beside Papa, tapping him gently against the face. “Get some water, Gabriella.” She yelled and I watched Gabriella sail off hitching her night dress about her.

“Wes.” Rex’s voice sounded wary, I glanced up and realized Rex was holding a gun in his hand and it was pointed at Wes.

“I can’t let him talk about Ris like that. She’s my wife.” Wes

said.

“I can’t let you beat Pa like that. You a slave.” Rex muttered.

“Oh Rex, you can’t mean to kill Wes.” I said the words barely squeezing out of my throat. Rex looked confused.

“They’ll be no killing. Put Wes in lock up. When you’re father comes to he’ll decide what’s to happen.” Ma said firmly.

“You going to put me in lock up, Rex?” Wes asked slowly. The tone of his voice said he had plans other than allowing Rex to put him in lock up. I glanced at Rex, in spite of the fact that he was holding the gun in his hand he looked nervous.

“I don’t want any trouble, Wes.” He muttered and his eyes were taking in the guns holstered around Wes’ waist. I’d never seen Wes shoot anyone before, but I’d heard he was very fast.

“Wes.” My voice was barely audible. Would he take on Rex? Could he out draw him even though Rex already had his gun in hand? And could a battle between them end in anything but sorrow for me?

“Stay out of this.” Wes said firmly and I bit down hard on my lip.

I watched Ma stand to her feet and step between the two boys.

“I didn’t let my husband hurt my daughter, and I’m not going to let you kill my son.” She said and I could hear Rex breathe an audible sigh of relief.

“I wouldn’t have killed him, Mame.” Wes said sheepishly. “I would have just shot the gun from his hand.”

“You trust me, Wes?” Ma asked. Wes seemed hesitant but then nodded.

“Go with Rex, let him put you in lock up. I promise on my life I won’t let anything happen to Ris or you. Let me talk to my husband first. Men can be quite stubborn. But women know how to make them more...flexible.”

“It’s a fl...!” Wes started, then stopped and bit his tongue and I knew he had been about to swear. “It’s a hot box!”

“Wes?” She looked both concerned and startled. Rex grimaced and waved at her to keep moving.

“But...” She still looked hesitant.

“Don’t get in the middle of this baby – this can’t end well.” Rex muttered.

Chapter 27

Wes’ point of view

It felt like I was in that tiny box for days, I knew it was just hours. It was barely bigger than a coffin and the only reason it could stand was because it was resting against the back of the barn. Cegan used it to torture us when we stepped out of line. He called it the lock up or the hot box, you only needed about six hours in there before you started to feel like you were going insane. It was pitch black in the box, not a hole for the sun to creep through, precious little air and you could barely lift your hands in the thing. When I had stepped in I had positioned my gun at the lock, if Ris’ mom didn’t come true I wanted to be in a position to shoot my way out of this crazy box. I wasn’t even sure I should have let Rex put me in here in the first place, when Cegan came

to he would not be a happy man. What if he decided to burn up the box with me in it, fat lot of good a gun would do me then.

I sighed; my arms were stiff from holding the gun in an upright position and my legs were getting tired from standing, not to mention I was getting thirsty. I had to make my move soon, if I waited much longer when I got out I wouldn't be in much condition to defend myself or Ris if the need arose.

I tapped the gun against the door impatiently. How long had I been in here, I had promised Ris to give her Mother a chance, but how long could that chance last? I tapped the door impatiently again, what bothered me was I wasn't hearing anyone, true, the back of the stables was a distance from the house but still. I fought down the desire to act and made up in my mind I would be patient a little while longer.

What seemed like more hours passed and I could hear the sound of horses and men's voices, I couldn't make out what they were saying but they sounded pretty angry. Darn it, if something happened to Ris while I was in this hell hole I could never forgive myself.

I could hear Cegan's voice, it sounded pretty upset, but not

scared. What the heck was going on out there? There was a loud shout of elation followed by the sound of a bullet. Then I heard Ris' voice loud and unnatural.

"You monster!" She screamed and that was followed by Cegan saying.

"Take her inside the house, Rex and lock her in her room. We have guests."

It didn't seem as if Ris was in any mortal danger. I pressed my ears firmly against the wall of the box in an effort to pick up more of the conversation.

"Perhaps you boys would like to stay for dinner. You at least deserve a hero's meal." Cegan said. What the heck was going on? There was camaraderie laughter, I heard a man make a comment but it was muffled. Darn, they were moving further away from where I was; pretty soon I could hear nothing.

I allowed my body to lean up against the box, I wish I knew what was going on in there. Why hadn't Ris come to me? Where had those men come from? Why did Cegan seem to be happy and still unhappy to see them? Some of their voices had sounded familiar, but I couldn't seem to put a name to their faces.

“Shoot!” I screamed at the box angrily. “Shoot, shoot, shoot!” I was quickly losing patience. I made up my mind, the next gun shot I heard I was getting out of this contraption. My turning up might make the situation a whole lot worse, but I would have to take the chance, because me not turning up might mean death to the Cegan family if these guys were a threat.

Everything was quiet, I shuffled from one foot to the next. The last noise I had heard sounded like the group of men riding off and that was a good sign. I wished they would let me out of this hot box, it was torture not knowing what was going on, and I was starting to feel dizzy too. It was time, it was now or never, clearly Ris’ mother had been unable to convince her husband to let me out. Left to him I could be in this box for days, dying of thirst, there was no way I would allow that.

I cocked the gun slightly and started to squeeze the trigger but the door flew open before I could fire a shot.

“Marissa’s gone!” Cegan was standing in front of me and breathing hard, he was clearly in a panic.

I stepped out and was amazed at how wobbly my whole body felt.

“Gone where?” I managed to get out holstering my weapon and glancing about, willing my legs to hold me up.

“I don’t know. You got to find her...and bring her back.” Cegan muttered. For the first time I noticed Mrs. Cegan behind him crying.

“Did the men take her?” I asked, something like boil already starting to rise up in my stomach.

“No...maybe...I don’t know. We didn’t see her leave with them. Those men were my friends, they would never hurt Marissa.” Cegan muttered although his face looked confused.

“Who were they?” I asked, I was resting my arm against the barn now for support. “Get me some water.” I said in the direction of Mrs. Cegan, my lips were parched, I needed to hydrate my body if I was going to be out on a chase.

“Army men.” Cegan muttered, then looked me up and down cautiously. “You okay, you up to this? I need my daughter found.”

“I’ll find Ris. There ain’t no question about that.” I muttered as Gabriella came running towards me with a jug of water in her hand. I must really be exhausted, I didn’t even see

when Mrs. Cegan left to instruct Gabriella.

“You look horrible.” Gabriella muttered.

“Rex can go with you.” Cegan suggested. Normally, I wouldn’t be too keen on going anywhere with Rex, but the way my body felt, I knew I needed someone with me, I couldn’t let pride get in the way of me saving Ris.

“Fine. I heard a shot.” I said. I wanted to take off and track Ris but something told me that unless I understood what happened I might be on the wrong track.

“They shot Tom.” Cegan said his face looking embarrassed.

“What the heck...” I muttered.

“They said the war was over, that they were told to go home, the North had won.” Gabriella put in as I poured the water over my head to revive me and swallowed three gulps.

“Tom started shouting and celebrating and they shot him...out of spite.” Luke said sadly. I hadn’t even noticed

that he had turned up. I glanced around again, seemed every one was here now.

“We’re free?” I muttered, a feeling of disbelief rushing over me. News I had waited for my whole life and now it comes at a time when Ris’ life might be in danger.

“Yes.’ A smile played along Mark’s face but then it turned to a frown. “They said they would see to it that there will be no celebrating in the South.”

I nodded and glanced at Luke.

“Saddle me a horse.” I instructed as I took another gulp of water.

“Me too.” Rex muttered. Mrs. Cegan was standing in the background weeping miserably.

“Are any of the horses missing?” I asked.

“Princess.” Rex said.

“Seems to me if Ris was kidnapped they wouldn’t have

bothered getting her a horse, they'd have put her on one of theirs. I'm guessing she left on her own steam." I muttered, a slight sense of relief starting to surface.

"Why would she run away? She would never leave you."
Mrs. Cegan put in and Cegan grimaced.

"Anisha." I turned about, if there was one person Marissa would confide in it would be Anishea. "Do you know anything about where Marissa might be?"

Cegan glared at Anisha accusingly.

"If you know where my daughter has gone and didn't tell me...!" He said threateningly.

"I don't know where she's gone. She was mighty upset when they shot Tom in cold blood and when they said that they would wipe out every negro they found she said not if she could help it." Anisha explained.

"Apart from the slaves on my plantation, Marissa knows no other Negroes that she could think she would need to save."
Cegan barked.

I turned away from the group and hurried over to where Mark was bringing the horse. I knew exactly the Negroes that Marissa felt she needed to save. Negroes who might have gotten the word and might have let their guard down and started their celebrations, Negroes like Stephenson and his posse, Negroes that I would have warned if I hadn't been on lock down.

"Lets go, I think I know where Ris is." I didn't wait for Ross to respond, I jumped into the saddle of my horse and started racing off. I didn't know how long I had been in lock down, nor how long ago Ris had left, I just hoped that we could reach her before she got into any trouble. The country was no place for a woman alone.

Chapter 28

Marissa's point of view

I had to do this, I had to do this for Wes, I had to save Stephenson and his gang. That bunch of ex army hoodlums would blow through this entire area and men like Stephenson, who had bravely helped in the war efforts behind the scenes would be mercilessly gunned down before proper systems could be put in place. It was dangerous now, they had to lay low for a few weeks, after

all the anger of losing had passed and then they could celebrate being free men.

I was amazed, and pleased at how well I remembered the route to Stephenson's hideout, I took off before those horrible men could leave, I had something on them, I knew where I was going they were just wandering aimlessly and creating havoc, surely I could make it to the hideout without encountering them.

I was no fool, I stayed away from the centre of the town, travel on the outskirts, hoping against hope to go unnoticed, Wes would be angry with me if he knew what I had done, but if he had been free, he would have warned them himself.

The thought of Wes in lock down brought a tear to my eye, but Papa had sworn that he would not kill Wes, and now that the war was over, he had no legal right to keep him locked up. Yet he wouldn't unlock Wes until those men had left, he would want no confrontation between Wes and them, and if those men kept shooting off their guns like that, there would definitely be confrontation.

I was tired, it was night out now, I'd been riding for hours, but I wasn't going to sleep, I had to find Stephenson and warn him. When the familiar trees of the hide out came into view I gave an audible sigh and spurred my horse forward.

“Hold it right there.” It was Mac’s hard dry voice that brought me to a halt.

“I have to speak to Stephenson.” I said hurriedly, the sense that the ten soldiers that had been at my father’s house might not be far behind.

“After I have a little fun with ya...” I wasn’t sure what Mac was going to say, but I felt myself slide off my horse and strike the ground firmly.

“Oh.” I whimpered as I tried to drag my tired body up.

“What the heck...” Mac was swearing as he rushed up to me and swept me into his arms I tried to struggle but was too weary. “Call Stephenson. Wes’ woman is here, and I think we’ve got problems!” Carrying me in his arms and hurrying towards the cave hideout.

Stephenson plucked me from his arms like a flower and put me to sit on a nearby stool, I leant against a tree and struggled to catch my breath.

“Something happen to Wes?” Stephenson asked straight off, “He’d never let you come here alone if he was

breathing.”

“He doesn’t know I’m here. He’s in lock up. I had to let you know, the war is over and the north has won. You are all free men.” I said breathless. Huge smiles spread over the faces of the two men there.

“We know; our source brought news late last night.” Stephenson said happily. “Some of the guys have already gone into town to celebrate, we were going to join them tonight.”

“You can’t.” I instructed breathlessly and Stephenson frowned.

“Why?”

“Some of the army guys are back and they are quite upset at the surrender. I think they are looking to take it out on any Negroes they meet.” I said.

“You sure?” Mac asked.

“They killed Tom for no reason, if Papa hadn’t stopped them they would have killed all our slaves...well ex slaves.” I

corrected hastily as Stephenson glared at me.

“We got to go into town and warn the boys.” Mac muttered angrily.

“It might be too late, I rode all night, but they couldn’t have been far behind me. They must be in town by now for sure. I think they visited Papa first because of his support for the army.” I explained.

“We can’t leave our friends to die. You risked your life to save us, we’d be less than men if we didn’t do the same for our friends.” Mac said and Stephenson grunted his agreement.

“How many were they?”

“About ten or fifteen and they were all armed. Please don’t go into town, you’ll only get yourselves killed too.” I pleaded.

There was the sound of footsteps as a third black man came running into the hiding.

“People are coming, they look like army and they don’t look friendly.” He said breathlessly.

“The boys must have given them our location.” Mac muttered.

“I can only imagine how they must have been tortured.”

Stephenson responded.

“What do we do now boss?” Mac asked as the look out glanced about nervously.

Stephenson gripped my arm firmly and pushed me towards a small crevice in the rock.

“Get in there and don’t come out for nothing. If those men see a white woman with us they’ll think she’s fair game.” Stephenson said. I swallowed hard, the memory of Gabriella’s rape flooding back to my mind. I nodded and hurried into the small cut in within the rock.

“What will you do?” I asked.

“We have three guns here, we’ll fight.” He said.

I bit my lip, I had been too late, a tear trickled down my cheek.

“Don’t cry, at least you gave us a fighting chance, a chance to die like men.” Stephenson said and then he disappeared.

“Don’t you dare come out, Marissa.” Mac said firmly, his

face a mask of concern that warmed my heart. "When Wes gets here, he'll be wanting to find you alive."

"Stephenson's a strategist, if we can get out of this, he can do it." The look out man said and then he too disappeared behind Stephenson and Mac.

I crouched inside the area in the small cleft of a rock, anxious that no part of me should stick out and give me away. A tall blonde haired soldier strolled into the area he was dragging a Negro with him, the young boys face was swollen and just a trickle of blood was running out of the corner of his eye.

"I thought you told me this was the Negro hideout?" The blonde soldier demanded angrily. I pressed my body against the back of the rock nervously.

"They were here, someone must have warned um that you were coming." The Negro gasped through puffed lips, he received a sound blow to the head for his efforts, I watched him fall to the ground unconscious.

"Search this place, they have to be here somewhere, there is no way they could have known we were coming." The blonde soldier muttered kicking at the footprints in the dust on the ground. "They can't be far."

“Yes sir.” A short dark haired man said and then turned to the other men and issued the order. ‘Oh God please don’t let them find me.’

The blonde haired leader tossed about some furniture and brushed away bushes as he searched the area. He had just stepped in front of me and appeared to be bending to look into the crevice I was hiding in when there was the sound of a gunshot.

“They’re in the trees sir!” A stocky angry faced man yelled and they all rushed out of the hiding place back into the wooded area.

That had been too close, I held my breath, wondering if I should make a break for it, had they seen my horse, was the gunshots I was hearing the sound of Wes’ friends being killed? How long could I stay here before they found me?

Chapter 29

Marissa’s point of view

"We got one!" I heard one of the soldiers yell.

"You got one and they got like five of us!" The leader barked and that announcement was followed by more gunfire. I held my breath as three soldiers came running into the small hideout area, I wish I could get out of there.

The sound of more gunshots brought two more soldiers running into the hideout to take cover. I crunched myself closer to the back of the rock praying they wouldn't chose near me to take cover.

"Jack!" One guy shouted but the warning was too late, a bullet rang through the air and struck Jack in his head he fell to the ground gasping.

"In that tree!" The other soldier yelled and I peeped up as an orchestra of bullets riddled the leaves at the top of the tree. Whoever was up there, I hoped they were safe...

"Jack." The other soldier ran over to his dying friend and lowered himself to the ground, he reached out a hand to his friends face and I watch as the man drew his last breath. I struggled to hold back a scream, pinning my eyes shut so I wouldn't have to watch so much death and destruction. When I opened my eyes again I was staring into the eyes of

a soldier.

“Captain!” He yelled as he reached in and grabbed me most unceremoniously by my sleeve and dragged me out. “I have something here you’re going to want to see.” He said. Another bullet rang down from the tree and he dropped in front of me. I didn’t hesitate, I took off, I wasn’t sure where I could go but I knew I had to get out of there.

“Get that shooter!” The Captain yelled as he bolted after me. I could hear shots behind me but I kept running, running and running. The shots were all from one direction, Stephenson and his group must be out of bullets. My heart was beating so fast, and fear gripped every fiber of my body, when I felt the heavy body of the Captain launch and land on me and bring me to the ground I started to scream.

He twisted me around beneath him and his hands caressed me in a familiar way and I thought I would puke.

“Please, sir. Don’t hurt me.” I begged.

“It won’t hurt...at least not too much.” He chuckled and the hair on my neck stood up on ends.

“If you let the girl alone we’ll surrender ourselves.” It was

Stephenson's voice some distance away.

The Captain jumped to his feet and pulled me up with him.

"Well come then, and we'll see what deal we can make." He said.

"Please don't hurt them?" I said, feeling completely powerless and useless. The soldiers must have gathered that Stephenson and the others were out of bullets for I could see them gathering now boldly about their leader.

"You don't fret yourself none, hon..." His words were cut off by the youthful man beside him.

"I think we've got company boss, and they're coming in pretty fast."

"How many?" The Captain asked and the man squinted his eyes and stared out into the distance, I could see nothing.

"Looks like two." He said.

"Negro or whites." The Captain asked.

“Whites sir.”

“Let them come, they might want a piece of this filly too.”
Captain said.

“We ain’t coming out unless you let her go!” Stephenson
screamed angrily.

“That there is Cegan’s daughter, could be boys from his
plantation coming for her.” The private pointed out. The
Captain grimaced.

“Shoot them then.” He instructed.

“They’re still a distance sir, I don’t know if I could make a
shot like that.” He said hesitantly.

“You’re a marksman. Shoot them.” The Captain barked.

“Yes, sir.” The soldier said and lifted his weapon and took
aim.

“You boys got twenty seconds to come out of those trees
before we start on this...” Whatever he was going to say
was lost as a bullet whipped right by us and struck the
marksman square in his chest. The man’s mouth dropped
opened, his eyes widened and then his body fell backward
to the ground, dead.

“What the heck was that?” The Captain yelled in shock.

“Wes!” Stephenson and Mac chorused from their cover.

“What should we do, Cap?” A nervous looking fellow asked.

“Kill him!” The captain said.

“No!” I screamed, knocking at the gun in the Captain’s hand, but his free arm encircled my waist and held me pinned against him.

“Shoot.”

“He’s riding on the side of his horse, we can’t get a clean...”
The soldier fell to the ground dead, a bullet through his head.

“What..” The Captain began but stopped short when the guy next to him dropped to the ground dead too.

“We can’t shoot like him Cap, he’ll kill us all from a distance.” A private yelled.

“Hold your fire!” The Captain screamed. “Let him come in, we’ll deal with him up close.”

I bit on my lip, part of me wanted to beg them not to hurt Wes and part of me knowing that if I let them know how important Wes was to me they might try to use me against him. I stood there quiet and anxious, waiting for Wes’ arrival.

I noticed that only Wes rode in and he slid off of his horse while he was still a few yards out.

“Howdy.” He said, just loud enough for his voice to carry to us.

“You killed three of my men.” The Captain said.

“They were pointing their guns at me, I don’t like people to do that.” Wes said and I noticed the Captain shifted his gun slightly.

"Where's your friend." Captain asked.

"He's around." Wes said. He didn't step forward and I knew that the journey and beatings and the lock up had taken their toll on him. He looked tired but he was fighting not to show it.

"What you want here?" Captain demanded.

"See that little girl you got holding there?" Wes asked and the Captain nodded. "She's my wife."

"Um..Cegan never told me she was married." Captain said.

"Maybe he didn't think it was any of your business." Wes suggested. The Captain grinned.

"Normally, I'd let you go, but you killed my men." He said.

"Seems you killed a couple of my friends in town too. So lets just call it even and you take off and live to ruin another day." Wes said.

"You a Negro lover?" Captain asked.

"Yes, I am." Wes said flatly.

“Kill him.” Captain said. I screamed and that seemed to be as long as the entire episode lasted. It was like a complete blur, one moment five men were holding partially lowered guns in their hands and Wes was standing in front of us with guns holstered, the next moment Wes’ was holding two smoking guns in his hand and four men were lying on the ground dead. The Captain with his arm about my waist still held me tightly pressed to him.

“Goodness.” I could think of nothing else to say.

“You got two seconds to let go of my woman.” Wes said quietly.

“You try to kill me and I’ll shoot her.” Captain said and I inhaled a deep breath.

“One...” Wes said.

“Put down your g..” The Captain didn’t get a chance to finish that sentence because Wes said two and shot at the same time. The first bullet hit his gun hand and sent the weapon flying off to the side, the second bullet went right between his eyes. He held me for like ten seconds before his body crumpled to the ground.

“Wes!” I screamed my body trembling, in five steps Wes was holding me close to him.

“You shouldn’t have come here, Ris.” He said firmly. I buried my face in his chest to hide my tears. I could hear Stephenson and Mac scampering out of their hiding place and racing towards us. Rex had come in from the back as well, I guess that they must have planned for Rex to handle any guys lurking in the background, that didn’t turn out to be necessary.

“Where did you learn to shoot like that?” I asked, my face still buried in Wes’ chest and my voice muffled.

“Just around.” Wes said casually. “Come on, we should be getting back.” He glanced over at Stephenson and Mac. “You guys should take off, I don’t think you want to be tied into the death of these boys.”

“You’re right. Thanks, Wes. Once we saw Marissa, we knew you couldn’t be far behind.” Stephenson said. “She’s a proper woman Wes. You’re mighty lucky.”

“I know.” Wes said and without moving his arm from around my waist he shook Stephenson’s and then Mac’s hand. I watched Rex shake each of the men’s hand in turn as well and then headed off with them as he went to get his horse.

“I love you.” I whispered.

“I love you, too my darling.” Wes responded. “Come on, lets get out of here. It’s a long ride back.”

Chapter 30

When we rode back into the homestead both Papa and Ma rushed up to greet me.

“Don’t you ever leave here like that again child.” Papa said.

“Are you okay? Did anyone hurt you?” Ma was asking and Ms. Leslie was clucking about like a mother hen. I hugged them all, even Papa. He was a mean old FART when he was ready, but at least he had kept Ms. Leslie when she had no where to go and he had released Wes as he had promised.

“But you are such a brave girl.” Gabriella was saying.
“Riding out on your own, why ever did you do such a thing?”

“I needed to warn an old friend.” I said, not really interested in letting them know the involvement with Stephenson and the smuggling of Negros to the north.

“I can think of no one I would be willing to risk my life for.” Gabriella said and Rex glared at her and she blushed.

“Thank you.” Papa said, staring at Wes.

“You should thank your son as well, he helped.” Wes said. There was an awkward silence and then Papa spoke.

“Yes. Thanks, thanks Rex. I appreciate your risking your life for your sister.” Rex practically beamed, it wasn’t often Papa had anything positive to say about Rex. “Did you have to kill anyone?” Papa was looking at Wes again.

“Yeah.” Wes said.

“I’ll fix it up with the sheriff. Self defense.” Papa said.

“Fine. I already spoke to him on our way back. Seems those boys were causing no end of trouble in town and left drunk, but were planning to return. Seemed to think the world owed them something. When I told him I had a run in with them and I had to rescue your daughter...he seemed relieved.” Wes explained and Papa nodded.

“Good.”

“I intend to marry Ris. Now I’m a free man, you can’t stop

me.” Wes said, changing the subject so suddenly that Papa’s eyebrows furrowed. He didn’t answer, he turned on his heel and strolled purposefully into the house.

I loved my family, but I was looking forward to leaving this home, I was looking forward to sharing a home with Wes. He had told Papa that he intended to marry me and I was already upstairs packing a few of my tacklings together to leave with him. We talked about going to the North to live, I didn’t care as long as I was with Wes I was going to be perfectly happy.

Things were going to be different, it had already started. Anisha and Luke were making plans to have a family and Mark was making plans to move on and find work somewhere else, I knew the future seemed scary to Papa, but somehow he would survive. Right now he was downstairs in his study talking to Wes, I wasn’t sure about what but I knew there was nothing he could tell Wes to convince him to not marry me. Wes loved me and I loved him.

The sound of horses in the yard caught my attention and my heart missed a beat. Surely this couldn’t be more soldiers,

and if there were, they could not be renegades also, could they?

I hurried out of my bedroom and down the steps. Clearly I had not been the only one to hear the noise for the entire family gathered in the main house as if someone had sounded a bell.

“What’s going on?” Wes asked coming out of the study followed by Papa.

“I don’t...” Rex’s voice broke off as the door pushed open and Dr. Glyne stepped in.

I watched as Papa’s brow furrowed, I knew he didn’t much like Dr. Glyne.

“There are no sick in this house.” Papa said but Dr. Glyne seemed not put out by his rudeness.

“We shall soon see, shan’t we.” He said and Papa actually winced. “Wes...” Dr. Glyne seemed hesitant. “Come forward, boy.”

Wes looked puzzled but stepped forward towards the man that had been there for him most of his life.

“Wes.” Dr. Glyne said.

“Yes, Sir. Is this about the men I shot...?” Wes began.

“No. That was self defense and we’ve already fixed that.”

“We....?” Wes asked.

“Me and your father.” Dr Glyne said and Wes’ face went white as a sheet.

“My...f...father?” He stammered. I glanced over at Papa who was wearing a remarkably worried look on his face.

“Yes Wes. Jonathan Taylor is your father.” Dr Glyne said and then he stepped out of the doorway to allow a tall, Caucasian, broad shouldered man with a handsome face and beautiful green eyes, just like Wes’ to stroll into our home. He had that air of complete authority, the kind of person people wouldn’t say no to.

“Hello, son.” Mr. Taylor said and I stared from father to son, my mouth dropping open. It was like looking into a mirror, except Jonathan Taylor was forty years older than Wes. Taylor practically owned Taylor town, he was one of the richest men in the south, probably in the world! Why would his son be a slave? Well, an ex-slave? Although had I thought about it before, I should have known Wes was far from an ordinary slave. His speech, his education – better

even than Papa's, that must have cost money, and the ring he gave me, had I not wondered how he could have afforded to own such a thing?

"Son?" Wes said the word with so much scorn that my heart went out to Mr. Taylor. "Don't you dare call me that; I have no father!" An entourage of four heavily armed men strolled in behind Mr. Taylor and fanned out around the room.

"Once you get to know me I'm sure you'll change your mind." Mr. Taylor said confidently.

"I'm not interested in getting to know you. When I wanted to know you, when I needed to know you..." Wes' voice broke and I slipped my arm about his waist. "Mom and I needed you, and you weren't there. Now you think you can waltz in here and undo the last twenty years?"

"I can try." Taylor said simply.

"Heck NO! You know what they did to my mother? How they beat her...how they hurt her? Where were you, they just walked away, free, free, left my mother dead and walked away free!" Wes yelled and his body was shaking with the passion of his emotions. Jonathan Taylor glanced away momentarily as if to gather himself.

"It's complicated." Taylor said, when there was no response from Wes he continued. "I'm a Taylor, all our marriages are arranged. I married a rich woman when I was just a boy of seventeen – ten years my senior and with plenty of power, and she was a witch. I never loved her a day in my life, but my father told me to marry her, she was a good match. When I met your mom, she was just a young girl but I loved her immediately." Taylor was making his way over to where we were standing as he spoke. "I owned a plantation, she was one of my new slaves. I doted on her, I even considered leaving my wife and living with her...Tania. I'll always regret not having the guts to do that. Tania became pregnant, with you. I was the proudest father alive. At first it wasn't much of a problem, no one knew about Tania and I. Everyone assumed the child belonged to one of the other slaves until you were born. You were the splitting image of me." Taylor said with a smile on his face, his eyes inspecting Wes' face. "I gave you everything that money could buy but Claris, my wife was angry. She hated you. She hated that every one that came to the plantation would think you were my son. She hated that she didn't have any children. She hated that I loved your mother. She hated everything. Each day she made life more and more difficult for Tania and you. She would beat her for nothing and Tania often had to hide you from her for fear she would do something dreadful to you. The situation got bad enough that I decided to have a home built for you and Tania away from my wife and ensure that you continued to have an

education second to none and that you were both well provided for. I did everything to look after you.” Taylor said sadly.

“You’re a bloody adulterer!” Wes yelled. “You didn’t have the right to love my mother!”

Taylor’s lips stretched into a grim line, I could see he wasn’t accustomed to being spoken to like that.

“You watch how you talk to me, son.” Taylor said quietly.

“Don’t call me that. I’m not your son.” Wes hissed.

“Yes you are. You’re a part of me, and a part of Tania.” Taylor said gently.

I could feel the muscles in Wes’ body tense but he said nothing.

“I’m sorry I let you down, Wes. My foreman betrayed me, told my wife where you and your Ma was held up and she took him and...” Taylor’s voice went hoarse and inaudible. “She took him and another one of my men and...and...and...she killed Tania.” He wasn’t the kind of man that you associated with tears but he looked ready to cry.

“I wanted to stop them.” Wes said sadly, a tear slid down

the side of his cheek quietly. "But I ran. I just ran."

"No one expected any different." Taylor said coming to pull Wes into his arms and chucking me aside at the same time.

"When my wife came home with blood splattered all over her clothes and told me she killed my whore and my son, I could have rung her neck with my bare hands. I've never hit a woman in my life, but I wanted to kill her." He pulled away slightly from Wes, just enough to look into his eyes, they were almost the same height, the older man possibly an inch or two taller, I guess Wes still had some more growing to do.

"I summoned my most trusted men and rode out to the cabin." He inhaled deeply. "When I saw you were still alive I...I..." He inhaled again. "I made up my mind to keep you safe from her so I had my guy take you to Cegan's, I paid Cegan to look after you, give you slave status so you wouldn't attract too much attention. Claris spent a small fortune and years looking for you, but she never could find you, she eventually assumed that you must have died in the wild, a boy on his own. I couldn't come and visit you, she was watching me, hoping I would lead her to you so she could pay someone to kill you. But I got my good friend Dr. Glyne here to keep tabs on you, make sure you were properly looked after and everything." Taylor paused. "I

don't expect you to love me...right now...I just want to get a chance to know my son."

"Why now?" Wes asked, stepping back from Taylor completely. "Is it because I'm grown and I can look after myself? Is it because the war is over and I'd be a free man anyway and I can go on and live my life? Why now? You let them kill my mother and stroll away free as birds, and now you're ready to step up to being my father?"

Taylor held down his head, then picked up the gun from his holster and spun it idly; I could see that he too was a man that knew how to handle a weapon.

"They're free alright. The kind of freedom you get in death. I plugged those two critters that took my Tania away and there ain't a court in the land that would dare try Jonathan Taylor. They had to die, I was just sorry I could only kill them once." Taylor spun the gun carelessly and deposited it back in his holster. "But I couldn't bring myself to shooting my wife. Not because of the power she had, but it just felt wrong killing a woman. And since she claimed Tania was her slave, no court would find her guilty of murder. Every day I lived with the knowledge that she was free and my Tania was dead. But I needn't have worried, God took care of that demon for me. Claris got sick about seven years after and over the years her health got progressively worst. She died a couple of days ago, making me a free man. Free to claim my son and give him all the things the Taylor

money can give him. Give him all the things he never could get because of her.”

“Wes is rich?!” Rex gasped incredulously.

“Goodness.” Gabriella said and fell to the ground in a faint, I felt rather faint myself, though I was more concerned as to how this news would affect Wes and I.

“You knew this all along, Pa, and never told me?” Ma asked in shock.

“Mr. Taylor made me swear not to tell a living soul and that’s what I did.” Papa grunted.

“Indeed, secrecy was of the utmost importance to keep my son alive.” Taylor said firmly, he hadn’t taken his eyes off of Wes. “Now it’s time for my son to leave here.”

“And go where?” I couldn’t help it, why the words just seem to come out of their own volition.

“Now the war’s over I want to show my boy the world. Well, get all the legal signing down for adoption first of course. Paris is nice, and I hear the girls there are quite...willing.” Taylor said with a smile and I gulped.

“I’ve already chosen the girl for me.” Wes said firmly. Taylor’s face went from calm to a storm in three seconds.

“What the heck...” He started to scream even as Wes gripped my arm and drew me forward to Mr. Taylor.

“This is my girl.” He said and Taylor exploded.

“You hooked my son up with your daughter?!” Taylor screamed. “I give you responsibility for my son and you betray me? She’s not good enough for him! He’s a Taylor...What the heck do you think it is trying to marry him off to that girl!”

Chapter 31

Marissa’s point of view

I gasped. I couldn’t believe that the tide had changed so completely. I was no longer too good for Wes, Wes was too

good for me. I turned on my heel to escape the embarrassment by running up the stairs but Wes' grip on my wrist tightened, preventing me from moving. A tear trickled down my face.

"I did every thing in my power to discourage it, Sir." Papa said and his voice was trembling, his fear of Taylor was so strong I could almost smell it.

"You didn't do enough." Taylor barked and gripped Wes' arm. "It's time you got some proper fatherly guidance." He said staring into Wes' stubbornly set face. "That pig tail must go – pig tails are for girls."

"I like my hair long." Wes retorted.

"Well, when you're under my roof, you wear you're hair the way I want it.' Taylor said.

"I don't plan to be under your roof or any where near you, I plan to be with Ris!" Wes answered back and the next few minutes moved faster than my brain could possibly fathom. Taylor made the first move and gripped Wes about his neck and tugged him roughly against him, the action caused me to stagger back a few feet. Wes winced, I knew that the lashes he had received were still affecting him.

Suddenly Wes went low, gripped Taylor's leg with his hand and tugged hard, both men collapsed onto the floor with a great deal of noise. When Wes' whipped his gun from his holster and pressed it against Taylor's face I gasped.

"Huh. I heard you were good with a gun and fighting." Taylor said a look of pride on his face as he lifted his hands into the air, one hand held a knife, the other held Wes' ponytail.

"I ought to shoot you right now for that." Wes grunted but he had a look of admiration on his face.

"I wouldn't stop you. If you want to see your father dead, go ahead and shoot me." Taylor said confidently. Wes pulled himself off the older man and got to his feet, still wincing.

"You hurt boy?" A look of concern fell over Taylor's and he glared at Papa accusingly. "If you've been beating my boy you'll have hell to pay, Cegan." Almost without pausing he turned to Dr. Glyne. "You give Wes a thorough check up and let me know your findings."

"I'm fine. I was in...a fight." Wes said and the look of pure horror that had taken over Papa's face abated slightly.

“We’ll see.” Taylor grunted. “Enough chat boy. It’s time to go.”

“I told you am not going anywhere. You have a hearing problem old man?” Wes asked and Taylor glared at him.

“You’ll soon learn that I always get my way.” Taylor said smugly.

“And you’ll soon learn that that’s not true.” Wes responded.

“Fine. You win.” Taylor said, stepping forward as if to give Wes a good bye hug. “At least I got the chance to meet my son.” In two seconds Taylor had whipped Wes’ gun from his holster and brought it down firmly against his head.

As Wes fell to the ground unconscious I rushed forward nails outstretched determined to make a bloody mess of Jonathan Taylor’s face, I only got one long scratch in across his cheek before Papa gripped me by the waist and hauled me away.

“You monster!” I screamed at him, but he didn’t seem to

notice me.

“Doc. Get two of the men and put Wes in the wagon. Tie him down so he can’t escape.” He turned to look at Papa and me. “I’ll write off the debt you owe me Cegan.” He said staring directly into my eyes. “That would compensate more than enough if my boy has...touched anything he shouldn’t have.” His implication was clear and tears started to roll down my cheek.

“I expect that to settle any matter.” Taylor said and Papa nodded his agreement.

“We don’t want anything from you!” I screamed. “Wes and I don’t need your money, we just want to be together.”

“I’m not a bad man, child. But my son won’t be marrying you. Your a mighty beautiful girl, but your family don’t have the kind of prestige to marry a Taylor.”

“Wes will come back for me!” I screamed confidently.

Gabriella had come to and she and Ms. Leslie were patting my shoulder comfortingly and Rex and Ma had drawn close in a comforting circle.

Taylor looked sad for me and he glanced across at my brother Rex.

“Wes has never seen life, I intend to show him the best that money can buy. Women, wine, song. He’ll be in charge of businesses, people and whatever he wants will be his. If you could have all that...” Taylor was saying his eyes focused on my brother Rex even though I knew meaning was meant for me. “Would you come back for the girl you have now?” He finished. Rex blushed so brightly that I knew that he agreed with Taylor. If he were free to roam the world and have whatever woman he wanted, he would not give it all up for Gabriella, and she was his legal wife. I was nothing to Wes. My heart sank but I held my chin forward stubbornly.

“Wes isn’t my brother.” I said, and that was certainly true.

“No. He’s not, but he’s a man. I’d suggest you get yourself married as soon as possible. No point wasting away your life waiting on him. He won’t be coming back.”

“I love Wes and he loves me.” I insisted.

“Puppy love honey, that’s all it is. Puppy love.” Taylor said and then he strolled out of the door followed by his full

entourage. I would have followed them, but Papa was still holding me firmly. It wasn't until the sound of their wagon was disappearing in the distance that he let me go.

"Marissa." Ma said and everyone's face looked so pitifully at me.

"Don't say anything!" I screamed. "You don't know Wes like I do. He'll be back for me as soon as he wakes up!"

Chapter 32

Wes' point of view

When I came too I was in the back of a wagon and it was travelling in territory that I didn't recognise. I figured we had to be on our way to Taylor town, well it was formerly Tinsor Town, but Taylor owned so much of it they changed the name. I could hardly believe that Taylor was my father. I shook my head to clear it, part of me was upset at him for kidnapping me but a part of me felt flattered that I had a father that actually cared enough about me to want to go to such lengths to spend time with me. The reality was though, I didn't want to be anywhere that Ris wasn't, as flattered as I was, I wanted to go back to Ris. We had waited too long to lose out now, now when every thing seemed to have lined up so neatly.

"You can't keep me with you against my will you know." I said firmly.

"Once you see what's out there boy, you won't want to be anywhere else." Taylor said confidently.

"I love Ris. Marissa. I want to be with her."

"No." Was all he answered.

"Well we have a problem, Sir." I said frankly and he laughed.

"You can call me Pa." He seemed to be thinking about it. "Maybe Papa or Paw?"

"I'll be calling you an undertaker if you don't cut me loose and let me go back to Ris." I said. He laughed, that really needed me. "I'm not kidding. Father or not, you cross me and Ris and you're a dead man."

I glanced down at my belt, darn it, they'd taken off my holster and guns.

"Where are my guns?" I demanded.

“You think I’ll leave you in your guns? Cegan told me how deadly you are with those things.”

“I’m pretty deadly with my fists too.” I said.

“I can keep you tied up until you simmer down.” Taylor said.
“I have all the time in the world.”

“This is how you want to spend time with your son? Me tied up in a wagon and you driving it? This is what you waited all those years for? As soon as you cut me loose I’m out of here. So are you going to keep me tied until I’m a hundred years old?”

Taylor laughed and glanced back at me.

“I know men, boy. As soon as you get into the outside world, you won’t even remember the name of that girl. She’ll be just one of many, just a nice girl you used to know.”

“That’s not true. Ris is special. Not like I never knew other girls, other girls have been interested in me before, but Ris is different. Ris is like my soul mate.” I said. Taylor laughed again, he was getting annoying.

“The first girl you...well, you know what I mean, she always seems like she’s your soul mate, but she isn’t. There’s someone out there better for you.” My father said.

I inhaled deeply; he was a stubborn man, set in his ways.

“You said you loved my mother. Wasn’t she your soul mate?” I asked. He was quiet for awhile, reflecting I guessed.

“Yeah. I blew it. I was older then, I knew what I wanted. I made the mistake of marrying too young. I don’t want you to make the same mistake.” Father said.

“Your mistake wasn’t marrying too young, sir, your mistake was marrying for the wrong reason. You married for money, when love came along, well, there simply was no room for it. I don’t want what you had. I want love, and I have that with Ris. We were made for each other.” He didn’t stop driving the wagon, and if my feet hadn’t been tied as well as my hands I’d have kicked him in the back and knocked him off his seat.

“I’ll make a deal with you, son.” Father said.

“I’m listening.” I wasn’t in much of a bargaining position.

“You want to go back to your little...girl and I’m telling you that after two weeks you won’t want to see her again.

Maybe we can make a compromise. You stay with me, willingly, no trying to run away, and you learn my business, and you travel with me, let me show you life and everything being a Taylor means and if after twelve months you still want that girl, I'll take you back to her myself." He said.

I stared at him, he was the kind of man that got his way, I could see that. I knew negotiations, I didn't have much to negotiate with except my father wanted me to want to be with him.

"You release me and I'll spend one month with you and do whatever you want." I offered.

"Six months..." He said. "And you call me Pa."

"Three months...and I go back to Ris. I never called anyone Pa in my life." I groaned. He laughed.

"Four months and I give you your inheritance and if you never want to see me again..." Pa paused and I could see he was fighting with his next words. "That would be okay."

"Okay." I said. He was willing to give me money and just let me ride away from him; all for the chance of having a relationship with me. I bit down on my lip and stared out into

the distance. I loved Ris, but part of me wanted to find out if I could learn to love this stranger as a father.

Chapter 32

Marissa's point of view

After the first day past and Wes did not return the pitiful looks grew even more pitiful, by the end of the week Gabriella looked as if she would cry every time she saw me. I kept up a brave face, not allowing their doubts to affect me. Once Rex went into town to negotiate for product sales and came back with news from one of the sophisticated ladies that lived in the town about Wes and Jonathan Taylor. It seems it was making the papers how Jonathan Taylor and his son were travelling to all the major cities. She had told Rex that Wes was quite an eligible bachelor and greatly sought after. I pretended that the news didn't bother me, the fact that Wes had left town and his exploits with women was being noised about locally.

I maintained a stiff upper lip when I was around the others, but when I crawled into my bed at night I broke down in tears. The days had shifted to weeks and there was still no sign of Wes. I missed him so much, I prayed that he had not

been hurt or killed; I knew in my heart that if he could come back to me he would. Wes loved me, I knew he did!

It must have been a month after Wes left that Gabriella came to my room.

“Pa has asked that you dress nicely for dinner tonight.” She said. Papa took precious little interest in such things and I wondered why he would take such an interest now. I did not argue, however, for the spirit to fight seemed to have left me when Wes did.

“Of course.” I said simply.

“Things will be find, Marissa. You shall find another young man, just as fine as Wes.”

It was pointless to argue with her, these were comments that I received ten to fifteen times a day. I seemed to be the last one holding on to the hope that Wes would return.

When I reached the dinner area I was surprised to find that we had guests.

“Oh.” I raised an eyebrow and glanced about the room, everyone else was already there. Anisha was sharing the meal, she and Luke had not found any work as yet and had agreed to stay on for food and board. Mark had gone off on his own and Papa had force Maise and John to leave,

claiming they were too old to be of any use to him now. Ms. Leslie was to be packed off at the end of the month and no one knew what work she would be able to find. Papa had insisted that with Wes gone running the plantation would be an uphill battle, all the extra mouths to feed were dragging him down. Rex and Gabriella stayed on and helped with the work, Rex doing Wes' job but Papa had to go with him to town for Rex had no head for negotiations or money. Secretly I felt Papa did not trust Rex with the money bag.

"We waited dinner on you, my dear." Papa said coming to greet me and escort me to the dinner table.

"Thank you." This, I imagined, was when Papa and Ma would fully expect me to put in use the manners I had learnt from the deplorable FARTS school they sent me to. I sighed and thought how that all seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Mr. Roderick, this is my beautiful daughter Marissa Cegan." Papa said and I held out my hand daintily and the balding middle aged man kissed it gently.

"A looker indeed." Mr. Roderick said approvingly.

"And this is Sam Roderick, his son." Papa said and my heart sank immediately. He was a good looking boy, maybe twenty four or five years old, perhaps just a few

inches shorter than my Wes but more heavy in the body. He had blondish brown hair and light grey eyes that seemed sincerely kind. My heart did not sink because of the boy, it sank because I was now all too aware of what Papa was up to. This boy was meant to be my future husband.

“Pleased to meet you, Sir.” I said and curtsied, Papa looked quite impressed with my ladylikeness, I hoped he wouldn’t get too attached to it. The young man smiled and revealed surprisingly good teeth. I had always loved Wes’ teeth, clean and strong and white, I liked that Wes looked after himself.

“Likewise, Miss.” Sam said looking nervous. The ladies sat to the table and the men followed suit. I didn’t utter a word throughout the entire dinner, I had no questions to ask Sam, I did not want to get to know him and I did not want him to get to know me. The idea of my marrying him was dead in the water from the start. I belonged to Wes, and there was no one else for me.

Before they left Sam Roderick asked Papa for permission to court me and I glared at Papa as he with the brightest of smiles gave Sam his greatest blessings to pursue my hand in marriage. When they left I turned to Papa angrily.

“I shall not marry him. I am Wes’ woman and I intend to wait until he returns for me.”

“Wes isn’t coming back, Marissa.” Papa said firmly and I knew it hurt him to say so.

“Yes he is!” I screamed. I swallowed hard, fighting to control my emotions.

“No, he’s not.” Ma chipped in firmly.

“Why are you ganging up on me?” I demanded.

“We’re not, Marissa. We just don’t want you to die an old maid, having never had a chance for marriage and a family of your own, simply because you chose to wait for a boy that can’t be yours.” Ma explained.

“He is mine.” I whimpered.

“Only for as long as he was here, Marissa. I tried to warn you.” Papa said sadly but I was already racing up the stairs to the comfort of my room.

A week later I was fully convinced in my own mind, I was pregnant. I tried to think positive thoughts but I couldn’t help being nervous. I would be an outcast and my child a

bastard with no name if I wasn't married. I didn't know what to do. Sam kept coming around, I saw him almost every day and he seemed to be getting closer and closer to me. Tonight he had told me it would be special and I had no doubt in my mind what he was planning. He was planning to ask me to marry him.

There was no doubt in my mind what I would tell him. I would tell him 'no', I intended to wait for Wes even if he only returned when I was a decrepit little old woman.

Dinner went quite uneventfully, after Sam asked me to go for a walk with him on the grounds and Papa agreed on my behalf. The truth was I didn't really mind, I liked Sam, he was a nice guy and fun to be around.

"Over the past two months I've really come to care about you, Marissa." Sam was saying as he ducked under the lower branches of the tree beside my bedroom and headed out into the garden at the back.

"I like you too, Sam. You're quite a pleasant young man." I said. He smiled and I thought how handsome he was, not as handsome as my Wes, but he would make some girl proud to call him her own.

"That's good. Because..." He hesitated and started to reach

into his pocket, I had to stop this now, I didn't want to have to refuse him. I laid my hands gently on his pocket.

"Please don't. I'm not in love with you." I said. He looked crestfallen.

"You'll fall in love with me with time." He said pleadingly.

"No. I won't and I'll just make you miserable and myself as well."

"Please..." I didn't want him to beg; I turned on my heel and headed back to the house.

"Marissa, I love you." He called after me but I was running, running back to the plantation, to my room to the sanctity of my dreams where it was Wes that was here, it was Wes asking me to marry him.

The next few days brought even more confusion. Mr. Roderick came to complain to Papa that I had refused to marry his son. Papa screamed and yelled at me, threatening to put me out of his house if I did not accept

Sam's marriage proposal. I had no idea what I should do. Anisha and Luke had moved on and Ms. Leslie had found a small teaching job in town. It wasn't much, but it was a decent living.

I sighed now and lay back on my bed. Sam would be arriving shortly and he would be proposing to me again, I was expected to say yes this time. A tear trickled down my cheek, if I told him 'no' what should become of me? There was no place in the whole world for a young unmarried woman with child, I would be an outcast. The truth was I didn't care that I would be an outcast, but I cared that my child, Wes and my child would be an outcast. Shunned, talked about, looked down on, I didn't want that for my darling Wes junior, but what choices did I have?

When Gabriella knocked on my door and summoned me downstairs I went quietly, knowing it was time to face Sam.

"I can make you happy, Marissa. My family is not too badly off." Sam said immediately as we step outside of the house.

"I don't love you." I said.

“I know that. I still want you to marry me.” He insisted. I sighed and kept walking beside him. “Your father wants it too and I’m certain he will force you.”

“You would have a bride that had to be forced to marry you?” I asked. Sam blushed though I could barely make it out in the dark of the evening.

“I love you. I will take you under any condition, Marissa.” He said earnestly. I glanced across at him, would he take me if he knew I was pregnant with another man’s child?

“I’m pregnant.” I said; I had walked three steps along before I realized that Sam was no longer walking beside me. I stopped and turned back to look at him.

“Where is the father?” He asked.

“He left.” I said flatly. There was a moment of awkward silence and then suddenly I was being pulled firmly into Sam’s arms and his lips were crushing down on mine in a needy and passionate kiss.

I knew then for sure that I could never marry another, I knew that it was only Wes that made me needy and wanting. It was only Wes that I loved, it was only Wes that I could ever

love, and it was only Wes that I wanted to love.

I didn't pull away from Sam, I allowed his kiss to reach its natural end. He pulled away from me slowly and looked down at me puzzled, clearly aware that there had been no reaction on my part to his advance.

"I still want to marry you." He said.

Chapter 33

It would be hard on my own with a child, but I knew I could never marry Sam, my heart belonged to Wes.

"No." I said firmly and turning from him I walked off into the house.

Part of me kept thinking that perhaps I should have taken the safe road and agreed to marry Sam and be looked after, it wouldn't be long now before I started showing and who knows if Papa would put me out of the house for dishonoring the family. To his credit Sam still kept coming

and visiting me regularly, and I enjoyed his visits, though I must confess that I spent much of the time together talking about Wes and plans for my baby. It was good to have someone that I could confide in.

I lay in my bed enjoying the peace and quiet. Sam had left but a few hours ago, I believe Papa felt I would marry him eventually, for he was always about, but Sam knew better, Sam knew my heart belonged unequivocally to another. Another that wasn't here...another that I had trusted...another that I could not bare to live without...another. I rested my hand against my stomach and gently caressed my unborn baby, 'we will make it' I whispered, 'and I shall tell you all about your handsome, dashing, gentle father.'

A tear slid down my cheek and I prayed that nothing had happened to Wes, that he was alive and well.

'tap. tap. tap.' The gentle knock at my window startled me and I hurried over to it.

"What...?" I muttered peeping through the glass. The face of Wes smiled back at me from the other side. I pushed the window up and wrapped my arms about his neck before he could climb in and hauled him into the room.

I opened my mouth to speak and Wes' lips crushed down on mine hungrily and his tongue slid into my mouth and his arms dragged me close to him. I forgot my words and gave myself over completely to the arms I had been dying to feel about me.

My hands tangled into his hair which had grown to just past the nape of his neck and my body pressed against his demandingly. The only thing that drew us apart was the need for air for sustenance, as soon as we had gasped our fill from the atmosphere our lips were locked again in a kiss that was both hungry, passionate and comforting at the same time.

The next time we drew apart Wes lifted me from my feet and carried me over to the bed and laid me down gently.

"I'm sorry I am late." He said as my finger continued to caress the contours of his face.

"I missed you." I whispered, a tear streaking down my cheek as the memory of the past few months flooded through my thoughts.

"I missed you too." Wes said, his lips pressing against my

cheeks and absorbing my tears.

“I was so scared you wouldn’t return.” I said. I had never uttered that to anyone, I had put on a brave face the whole time, but to Wes I could be honest.

“I’m sorry, my darling.” He pressed his lips against mine once more, his lips telling me of how much he wanted and loved me. “Pa made me promise to give him four months of my time before I could come back here. He was so sick of me pining after you after three months we headed back early.” Wes said with a grin.

“You like him, this Mr. Taylor?” I asked, my voice nervous. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

“He’ll like you.” Wes insisted. “Because I love you.” Wes pressed his lips gently against my hair.

“How was it, I heard word that you were an eligible bachelor.” I muttered. Wes grinned.

“Sorry. Pa did every thing in his power to make me forget you. Girls, parties...I didn’t know there was so much out there to do. But none of it was as satisfying as even a moment in your company.” Wes said earnestly and I hugged him tightly.

“Thank you for coming back, Wes.” I said, another tear slipping down my cheek.

“You don’t have to thank me. I came back for my own selfish reasons; because I love you.” Wes confessed and I smiled again.

“If you’d been a little later I might have been married.” I teased him. He looked appalled.

“That would have been very unfortunate, I would have to kill the man.” His tone was serious but I laughed.

“I’m teasing, I could never marry someone else. I only considered it because of our child.” I said coyly.

“Our...” Wes’ entire face lit up like a candle flame. “You’re...I’m...we...we’re going to have a baby?” I nodded my head and regretted telling him immediately for he lifted me from the bed like a rag doll; jumped to his feet and swung me about him until I was completely dizzy.

“Wes! Wes! Wes!” I screamed at the top of my lungs as he seemed to be showing no signs of stopping and the huge smile on his face showed no sign of fading either.

“Wes!” I screamed again, by voice this time bringing Papa,

Ma, Rex and Gabriella rushing into my bedroom.

“What...?” Papa yelled as he barged through my door and then stopped so suddenly that all of the others crashed into his back. “You came back.” Pa muttered, a tear trickled down his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Wes is back.” Rex said and Gabriella collapsed on the floor in a faint.

Prologue

Wes insisted that we be married immediately and within three days I was Mrs. Wes Taylor. When we told Wes' father that I was pregnant he was almost as excited as Wes. I think perhaps he sees this as his chance to spend time with his grandchild in the way he never got to spend time with Wes.

Wes and I live at the Taylor plantation, it is a huge place and it will take me quite a while before I learn where all the rooms are. We brought Ms. Leslie to live with us, as a babysitter, Wes insisted I would need all my energy to look after him. All the ex slaves came to work on our plantation

too and they were so grateful to Wes they gave more than a full days work for their pay.

Rex and Gabriella are expecting their first baby, and they live with Ma and Papa, without too many mouths to feed in the house Papa expects that he will be able to manage. He sold off the plantation and bought a smaller property in Taylor Town with the money, I expect that Ma wanted to be nearby so she could get to see her grandchild too. Strangely enough, Rex got a job as a deputy sheriff in Taylor Town, I have to wonder if he'll live up to such a job, but he has come a long way.

I folded the frock that the maid had bought for me from town on Wes' instructions and I glanced over at Wes as he changed for dinner.

"If you keep buying me so much stuff, I'll run out of space to keep it." I said smiling. He sauntered over to where I was standing and pulled me into his arms.

"Hmmm...you're right." He whispered. "I have no idea why I keep getting you dresses. I so much more prefer you without them."

I giggled and Wes began a very stimulating caress of my

neck with his lips.

“Don’t you start or we shall be late for dinner another night.”
I warned, feigning sternest.

“If we were early I’m sure they would all be disappointed.”
He excused and I giggled again.

He swept me into his arms and laid me on our bed, making light work of getting rid of our clothes.

“Besides,” He whispered as his naked body hovered over mine. “The twins will be quite lonely without some additional brothers and sisters.” Wes explained and I pressed my lips against his briefly and drew back.

“I’m so marvelously happy.” I whispered as Wes’ knee gently pressed my legs apart.

“And I my darling, darling wife, could never be happier.” He responded. “Finally we are both free to live the life we could only have dreamed before.” He said and his face looked so peaceful and contented I sighed with joy.

“Not free, my love, for we shall never be truly free. I shall

always be a slave to my love for you.” I whispered and Wes nodded understandingly.

“Indeed, my sweet.” He said, “Your love is one slavery I shall never wish to break out of.” He finished even as his body pressed into mine and I arched myself into him savoring his sweetness.

THE END

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