

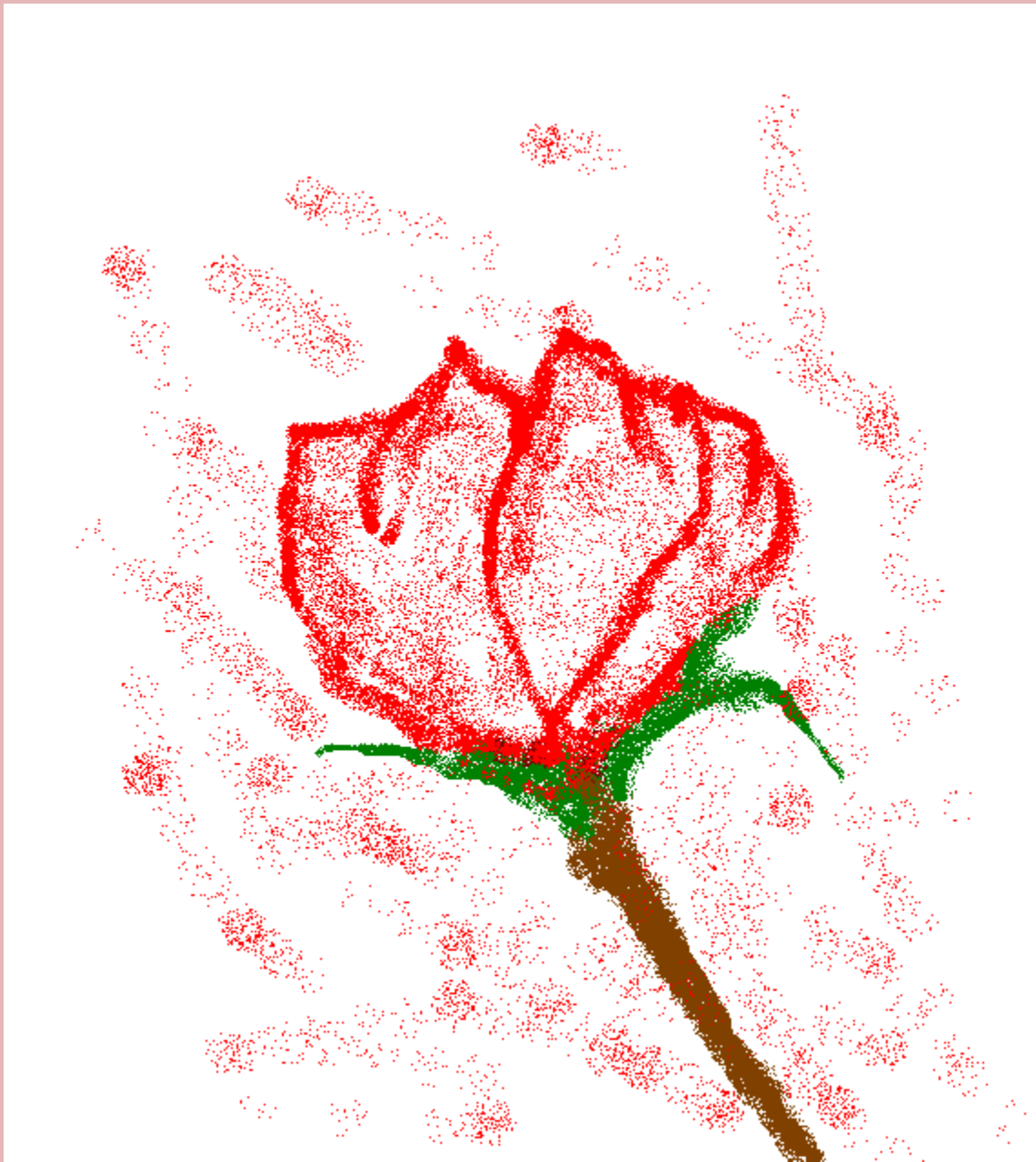
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The Heart and the Rose

Crysta Allie



Synopsis: Sparks fly when Clay comes across reformed Lake Valley whore, Shine, in a quaint little town. Conveniently passing through several months later, he was nothing but shocked and angry at the news of his impending fatherhood.

Amelia, or Shine to her former clients, wanted respectability not the baby of a handsome and aggravating drifter. Especially one not too overjoyed about having a baby with her.

Prologue

The young lady hastening her steps towards home didn't have the luxury of stopping to pick a few wilds flowers for her room at the boarding house. In fact, only two thoughts resided in her mind at present. The first one involved the need to remove her boots from her feet. And the second? Screamed for her to flee.

He followed her at a slowed pace and she frowned upon his intent to unnerve with his presence.

At least he wasn't too obnoxious to stay out of sight if not have the good sense to be quieter. Just around the rocky bend and some ways back, the loud canter of his horse's hooves resounded like a lone echo in a canon

Then it came. The fine tune floating around the corner and stirring her feet.

The melody was unrecognizable. Not like the crude ones which constantly assaulted her ears over the years but now only lingering like specters of a nightmare. She cringed at the thought and hot anger knotted her shoulders and creased her brow.

What could he possibly want with her this time? For almost a minute, she recalled her feet refusing to move, petrifying her in the middle of the street as she recognized the man who sat proudly in the saddle. At first, she prayed his face was only a trick of the waning evening sun. Some other drifter passing through town and maybe... just maybe possessed shoulders as wide and as powerful as the man she

imagined he was. Instead, she'd been wrong, so wrong there was no other option but fleeing from his pursuit.

Oh heavens, she never thought to see him again. She'd gone through extremes to encounter none or have anyone from her old life recognize her. Gone were the heavy rich paints she wore for the past five years, the excessive voluptuousness of a life of leisure and indulgence. Her hair, no longer cropped and stuffed beneath that awful red- curling wig, grew to reflect its dark radiant health. These days even she didn't recognize her own reflection. So how could fates be so cruel to have someone else recognize her? Or worse to have *him* recognize her.

He called her by her name. Amelia. Not that silly stage name, she'd made up but the one he'd acquired in her stupor the one night she'd been too free in sharing his flask. She'd feared he would've shouted from his seat but only a silent formation of the word came from his lips. To her shame, he might've recognized the terror of their association in her eyes.

She'd always thought him too big for his britches, too arrogant and just plain... too much. In her reluctance to indulge him, he made a mockery of her defenses, her control. Made her respond to his touch as a call to her bluff. She'd been madder than a bear with a thorn when he left her for another girl.

He'd done more than any other man could ever hope to do. And she had been jealous... and humiliated.

And how he must've laughed at her too with the knowledge.

She almost slowed her pace when the darkened rot of old wood came into view. She was almost there.

It wasn't his intention to charge her. The single thought crossed her mind and gentled her pace as she welcomed her impending sanctuary. It was obvious he wished to approach her and possibly have words with her. Perhaps he aimed to cause some mischief for her because he'd seen more than enough to know she lived a different life here. A less than comfortable one but still a different one compared to her other life before.

He needed only to follow her into the boarding house and open that mouth of his. He could make known all her sordid affairs. She could deny it but the suspicions casted upon her character would be indelible.

Her haste forgotten, her steps dragged as one by one lies and excuses made their way into her mind. Suddenly, the tiny ache of misery expanded viciously, almost crippling her.

Not one of her contrived lies sounded strong enough to parry the sure suspicions to follow. She'd be lucky if she didn't have a harder time warding off unwanted attentions here.

There were no bouncers to protect her, Amelia reminded herself.

But if she faced him...

He might just leave her in peace. After all, she already knew he wouldn't hurt her. He had too much pride to resort to such a thing. In the past, he said as much with his fists when he saw one of the girls being handled a little too roughly by one of the other paying customers.

Her mind clutched at the thread of idea. It frightened her to know facing him now was the safest option. She'd play the damsel in distress of his presence. He wasn't like the others but Amelia would never say anything of the sort to his face. A part from frustrating her to her wit's end, he'd always been kind and considerate of her. One would've

thought he had been more than a patron of her services, and she, more than a servicer, if she really wanted to put more to it.

Her shawl fell loose from her shoulders and the slight wind twirled at strands of her hair.

She heard nothing. Not the natural melody of the insects coming out at dusk or the faints sounds of his animal. Amelia turned around and walked slowly in the direction she came.

Her posture was apprehensive, wary and incongruent with the knowledge that he wouldn't hurt her. But what if he did? Several months had passed since she'd last seen him. Maybe he'd changed.

Her chest palpated for a single beat.

When she paused at a wide willow tree, she saw she had no further to go.

He was standing there, uncaring that he had his back to her but obliging of her perusal.

It was almost like he'd known she would return and was gently soothing his horse in interim as he waited.

Her fist clenched around the thick material of her skirt.

When he turned that knowing smile towards her, Amelia wanted to slap him.

“What do you think you're doing? Why are you following me?” She snapped, concealing that breathy helplessness fluttering inside her chest.

“Did I scare you, Amelia?” He patted gently at the horse's shoulder and smirked.

It was hardly the time for such thoughts, but Amelia had never forgotten how dangerous a good-looking man like Clay Brennen could be to woman when he put his mind to it.

“I didn’t think a woman like you could be scared. Mad enough to sting a wasp maybe, but never scared.” He started to move towards her and Amelia held herself in place with more will than she felt. She wasn’t going to retreat from him no matter how much that wild part of her wanted to.

When he stopped in front of her, Amelia had little control over the wretched labor of her breast. Both of them stood in the evening shadow of the willow tree, his eyes hooded with the looming darkness and the brim of his hat.

He leaned across the willow bark and touched her already goose pimpled forearm with his knuckles. Such a light touch. A stranger in a rickety buckboard could knock her over on the road and the impact wouldn’t have been even close to it.

“You weren’t where I let you the last time, I saw you.”

Was that all he had to say? After... after he moved on to the next girl without a thought to her feelings.

“Should I have waited for your return?” Not the tongue lashing he deserved but she hoped her hostile tone was enough to show how unwelcomed he was.

“You always did before?” he whispered, his voice deliberately low and heated. “Can’t see why you want to up and leave a good thing. Even prickly as you are darling, a man could get use to the idea of you waiting for him. Anytime he’s in town that is.” He glanced out into the lingering rays of the sun light before returning once again to her face.

It was probably a good thing the evening sun wasn't illuminating her face. It didn't save him from seeing how riled his words made her, but thank God, she'd squelched that other piercing feeling. "I'm sure the other girls were more than happy to wait. *You* don't need another to do so." She said pointedly. "I was only there whenever you came and now I don't wish to be anymore." It hadn't been that simple but Clay Brennen didn't need to know that. "So if you think for a moment, I'll allow the same liberties before, then you can just get out of here."

"Liberties? I paid you then, what makes you think I can't pay you now." He reached to touch her protruding curls at her ear but Amelia swatted his hand away in an almost painful reproof.

"How dare you even suggest such a thing?" A dark brow arched skywards and the disbelieving expression on Clay's was the closest he's ever come to speechlessness. However, half supported by the tree, the last thing Amelia needed was to have him touching her. "I don't want your money."

There she'd said it and Amelia still didn't know how she'd managed to form the words. Who didn't need money here? Surely she did. Especially since leaving the saloon meant an honest way of life meant an impoverished one.

The cool air of the evening tickled her fingertips and brought into focus the nervous titter lurking beneath her skin. Her eyes darted from one shoulder to the other, almost a task in itself when up close he'd always overwhelmed her.

Could he tell she was lying through her teeth? The warmth of his breath tumbled its way across her forehead like a little dust devil, soothing her senses and sending nips of excitement through her with each breath. *He left you, foolish girl.* She thought of anything, any word

with which to bolster her anger against him. Had it been so foolish of her to think he cared just a little bit more for her than he did the others? Could it be that she'd once built impossible dreams around this man?

He brought his lips down and pressed them against her temple. It was a caress of a kiss but somehow the heat of it found dried kindling beneath her skin, burning a path along her spine. "I don't think I've ever known you to refuse a coin." Amelia felt the tight contour of his chin gentled and knew he found amusement in her statement. "Coin enough to help buy that pretty piece you were gazing at outside the window. The skirts, I saw you looking at earlier then. I could tell you wanted it."

Clay Brennen wasn't convinced she didn't need his money. By the tight set of her shoulders, he figured it almost killed her to refuse. What he couldn't figure out was why she wanted to.

He reached towards her again, this time her momentary shock allowing him to make contact.

"So what if I was looking at it. It's a pretty garment any woman would love to have." He must have seen when it dawned on her because her eyes suddenly got brighter. He felt her wariness as he slid his arms around her small waist and pulled her to him. "There's no crime in looking ...?"

"Maybe- maybe the crime is only looking when you should be wearing it." Along her skirt folds of her buttocks Amelia felt the weight of his hand lingering. Lingering and waiting as if he desired some sign of permission to touch her more than he currently did. "I was close enough to touch you," Clay whispered. "But I thought you'd unman me with that shin of yours if I had."

“I’ll unman you quite easily now if you don’t release me.” Oh why couldn’t she resist him? He made her so mad most times and other times...

“You don’t want me to touch you?”

Yes, but if you do... “No. I don’t want you to touch you.” She started to pull away but it was no easy task to break his embrace. “What I want is for you to leave. I don’t know if you notice but I live in the boarding house up ahead, not in a room above the saloon.”

When he brought his lips close to that junction of her neck and shoulders then breathed the words, “Does it matter so much where?” she almost buckled with the tremor down her body.

Amelia admitted to herself it didn’t matter. No change in abode could stop her wanting of this man.

She leaned into him and for one moment, relished the power of his body, surrounding her, engulfing her presence and touching her. His hand moved over her hips, creating wide spans of heat upon contact. Her sigh was the very sign he waited for and she’d given it to him.

It would be so wonderful to submit to him. To remember the day she’d been so enthralled by him despite her resolve to hide his affect on her.

“You—you shouldn’t do that. Clay...”

He could always affect her this way. Make her forget that she hated him, that she wanted a new life with respectability.

Cool air prickled her skin with goose pimples. Behind her, her skirt was clamped in one of his hand while the other kneaded at her behind.

“You never did like too much under-things.”

She still didn't. He lifted her up against him, molding her against his hardness. His prodding insistence had her tilting her hips even before she could stop herself.

Oh, she was so hot. So heavy with wanting him that stopping him grew further in her mind with each caress. His hand moved over her bodice, kneading her there then circling her through the material. Amelia arched into him, her fingers gliding through his dark hair and pulling him towards her lips.

He wouldn't kiss her.

They'd never kissed before and she'd accepted his reluctance even if she didn't understand it. A smack maybe but never a real kiss. The way he kissed the others. She hated him but she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"Touch me." Even in this, he intended to command her and she couldn't say she minded at the moment. She was too consumed with lust and a wild ache to care.

Maybe this was the way to convince hm. His words came back to her as she tilted her neck towards his exploring kiss. He didn't intend to stay, that much she knew, but maybe she could placate him and he'll go without jeopardizing her position here. No one would have to know.

And if he came back?

He lifted her thigh, opening her further to his attentions, never once taking his eyes off her dazed ones. "Tell me you like that."

"I—I like it. You know that I do, Clay. Do it again."

“Know what you want, do you? Be a good girl and tell me what you want.” He teased her again, the probing head of his sex adding fire to her core.

Amelia groaned her frustration in his chest. How like him to hold back now. Did he have to prove he could torment her?

“Tell me, Melia.” His voice shook with the imperative proving he wasn’t as collected as he wanted her to believe. He began a slow trek towards her nipple, nibbling sensitive skin along the way, coaxing a response from her as he got closer to his target. He lingered just above the hardened nipple, resisting her gentle insistence for descent. “Tell me what you want__”

“You, Clay, y—you know I only want you.”

She couldn’t see the smile on his face, but she was more than happy to allow him to gloat when he plunged into her.

“And don’t you forget it,” He murmured, as he set on the slow and deep pace to pleasure them both.

Chapter 1

One month later

Amelia was going to lose it. Again. And she didn't think it'd be a prettier sight than the last time she did. Her throat felt scorched and raw with every heave of her body. There would be nothing left inside her stomach if she continued at this rate. How could this have happened?

Pushing herself away from the hedges where she'd dropped to her knees not too long ago, Amelia lingered with her forehead resting on her forearms and her bottom raised high. Somewhere, at the back of her mind, she told herself she didn't care if someone happened to pass by. Not when she felt sicker than a dying prairie chicken and not in the least bit better looking.

She didn't think she could move a muscle to save her own life if she needed to. And at that precise moment, her consciousness felt more in jeopardy in any other position besides the one she was currently in.

It wasn't difficult to imagine the warm blood rushing to her head. Amelia preferred it a great deal more than the airy lightheadedness that plagued her throughout the day.

The constant nausea however was her undoing. It was an unwelcomed companion, inflicting the most damage in the mornings.

Like this one in particular.

She'd thought it a fine morning to take to the creek to wash her few pieces of clothing followed by an afternoon of working for Mrs. Hardy, the proprietress of her current place of residence. Nothing had

gone according to plan since breakfast. Well what little she had of it anyway.

Still resting on her forearm, Amelia drew her other arm towards her stomach, her fist balled and braced against the area of her womb.

Clay

Her stomach clenched with an inkling of pain and Amelia exhaled forcefully hoping to stave off any further precipitation.

Then she thought of him again. Of how much she'd wanted him gone from this no-account town where she'd thought she'd never meet anyone from her life before. Of the sacrifice she thought she'd made. Of the great lie she told herself.

Quickly, the sting of tears pierced her eyes and quietly she allowed them to dribble like raindrops from a leaf down to the grass below. It was only a few tears. Not a reflection of the torrent she felt falling inside but a fitting overflow to it anyway.

She was going to have Clay Brennen's child.

Clay Brennen's child but no Clay Brennen around.

She took a deep breath and slowly started to raise herself up. Would he believe she was pregnant by him? Would he even come back? A miserly half smile spread across her lips as the unequivocal answer came to her. Her carrying a child he would believe as she was certain to be larger if he returned before the child was born.

But believe it was his? That was another matter. She couldn't imagine him being overjoyed of the prospect of a reformed whore carrying his child. Not when she hadn't acted as reformed as she should've on the evening he'd tumbled her.

No reformed whores in search of respectability pursued the carnal needs she'd shared with Clay Brennen. They acted like respectable young misses who knew the importance of keeping their knee closed and ankles crossed.

Not at all like Amelia Sherwood who hadn't the sense of a peahen to resist a ruggedly handsome drifter with lips that seared whenever they moved over her skin. A drifter who probably hadn't thought of her at all and could care less that he left his seed behind to find succor in the womb of a Lake Valley whore.

Amelia wiped furiously at the tears but unable to stop them.

Maybe he was in the habit of leaving bastards behind. Maybe he had enough children to man his own platoon by now. Who knows what that devil was capable of? If he'd managed to charm her, however could some poor innocent miss resist such an onslaught?

You're being such a sop, Amelia and your face's probably red as a dolly's rouge. From this moment on, she would put Clay Brennen out of her mind. The same way he, without a doubt, put her out of his.

She was going to have this baby and as daunting and as frightened as the not too distant outcome was, Amelia couldn't help the little bud of happiness deep within her.

It was such a normal thing to have a baby. She remembered one of the girls at the saloon had fallen prey to the affliction and unlike many before her had chosen to keep her child instead of visiting that telltale doctor she'd heard rumors about. Of course the girl hadn't stayed after that, but Amelia could still remember the woman's expression. Terrified of leaving but finally thankful for a greater reason to do so.

She looked across at her small heap of apparel and suddenly realized how ill-fitting they'll be in several more months. Perhaps she could spare enough of her meager savings to purchase the necessary amount of material to fashion a more maternal frock. She didn't near enough skill at the needle as she would like but it was adequate to make whatever she set out to.

And clothing for the child when it was born?

Her temple tapped to a rapid beat as she looked ahead. She had so little money as it was and it certainly would cost a bit to get the material she needed for the baby too.

What could she do? She was already working on Saturday afternoons for Mrs. Hardy in exchange for paying for five days of boarding per week instead of seven. Amelia had long days at the restaurant in the week and apart from searching for more work, she couldn't envision how she would come up with a bit more money.

But that, she realized, wasn't the worse of her concerns. She would have to leave in a few months and she hadn't the slightest idea where to go.

All she knew was she'd arrived in town a single woman several months ago and without a husband, there would be no credibility to any reasonable tale she could put forth for that one passionate eve she'd shared with Clay Brennen.

Chapter 2

Two months later

The day was too hot for Amelia and even more so was the clogged space of her waiting station. She whirled around in the small space in the bustle of the lunch crowd after refilling a patron's glass with the last of her lemonade. Oh how she wished for the time to enjoy a glass herself. But nothing of the sort would happen anytime so soon. Not with so many shoppers stopping by to have the Wednesday special.

Boiled sweet potatoes tossed in brown sugar and fried steak. It was enough to make her salivate and hurl at the same time. A while back she was more than happy to augment her barely existent cooking skills but now she was glad to be away from the disagreeable melee of scents.

Her feet might take the brunt of such a decision but her stomach and its current inhabitant seen happier that way.

“Ah young lady?” He could've meant someone else entirely but being in demand as she was, Amelia doubted the gentleman was referring to anyone else but her.

“Yes, Mr. Merlot?” Amelia responded as he stopped beside her. It was very rare that Amelia came across a man shorter than her but she couldn't help her awkwardness at conversing with him.

“Well gel, it's been quite a wait on that cook. Do you think he'll be through before the dinner crowd comes in?”

The glasses clanged a fine pitch as Amelia set them down gently yet close to each other. In the mean while, she worked at hiding that grin on her face. He had always made her smile too.

“He really is doing all that he can and as fast as he can, Mr. Merlot.” She gave him a dainty smile as she flicked her wrists in hope of cooling her heated skin. “I’m sure it’ll be but a few minutes more.”

He gave her a patient nod then trudged through the crowd to get back to his seat.

Amelia watched him return, thankful for his kind understanding and wished many more were like him most days. She mopped her brow once more then proceeded to wade through the tight crush herself.

All she needed to do was to get to the back of the diner. She was sure someone had sat down a few minutes ago. When she finally got there, she was more breathless than she’d ever been in a long time.

“I’m sorry for the delay, Mister.” She worked at removing her writing papers from her apron even as her annoyance grew “Our Wednesday special seemed to have attracted quite a crowd this week. What will you...” But the last few words of her inquiry never came forth as she really took notice of the face looking up at her.

“You?” Did that weak voice belong to her? That small voice wrought with stunned panic and fleeting dismay. She glanced around, suddenly conscious that someone heard or seen her momentary display of emotion. She didn’t want a soul to see her reaction to this man, not if she could help it. “What are you doing here?” Amelia whispered furiously.

When he removed his shale gray hat and tilted his lips in that smile of his, Amelia knew Clay was up to no good. “I don’t know about you

honey, but a man constantly on the move gets tired of his own cooking sometimes.”

“Y-you know what I mean? What are you doing here... in town? If you think that I’m going to let—”

“—Just passing through sweetheart,” Clay interrupted her

He was only passing through the last time too but Amelia didn’t throw that at him.

“But what about you? This is hardly the place I’d expect to find you in, Shine. With your particular skills, you should be in the biggest house in this town.”

She wanted to slap him. She wanted to slap him so hard her fingers burned with the thought alone. But she knew there would be repercussions to act in such a manner. So instead she found herself clutching her writing paper too tightly and her lips working perceptively with all the icy words she wanted to say to him.

It probably didn’t sit well with him when Shine, as she’d been called back in Lake Valley, Colorado, choose to remain tight lipped enough to steam the roofing above his head. Clay could read her well enough: She was furious as a lava pit yet the only thing she did was glare at him before she got her papers together.

“You got something to say sweetheart?”

“What I’ve got to say to you would burn the ears of everyone in here. How dare you say such a thing? My...” Her voice raised a fraction higher before she caught it, “...skills are what I make of them. They are of no concern of yours.”

Gone from his face was that irritable smirk of his and in its stead was the cool severity of his guarded attention. Had he finally seen her as more than an amusement? More than a woman he enjoyed goading to anger because it pleased him? Or worse, made him angry at her?

She watched Clay as he slowly took in the heavy crowd, the mingling sounds of the conversations taking place about them then finally settled back on her. How scruffy and flushed she must look to him? Amelia held herself straight, suddenly peeved that she should be self-conscious of his perspective of her. It wasn't like she had cared what he'd thought before. Yet she found herself glancing down at the worn apron she'd gotten from Sophie when she'd started at the restaurant. Without a thought to her actions, Amelia began to reach towards the ill-tamed curls at her temple only to forcibly halt the nervous reaction to this man.

Surely, it wasn't naturally to want someone who made her so irate all the time. Amelia was wrong to think she could just put him out of her mind. How could she do so when he was the first thing she thought of in the mornings and the last thing as she laid down to rest at nights?

“What kind of game are you playing at woman?”

“Game? I—I'm not playing at any game—.”

“Are you trying to tell me you work here? Come on Shine, you've never even lifted a hand to dress yourself back in Lake Valley. What do you know about woman's work around an oven?”

Her jaw dropped as if it were suddenly unhinged.

The grimace distorting the fine dark hairs of her brow reflected her disbelief poorly. She found herself glaring at him, her palms propped against her hips and her lips in a most unladylike pout. “Shows what you

know Clay Brennen.” Amelia began to reach for his empty glass but quick as a riled viper, Clay snatched it from her reach.

Clay’s brow arched in bewilderment as he noted her reflexive withdrawal. Damn, had she grown such highfaluting airs that she would recoil any potential contact with him. He felt the flare within his gut but couldn’t decide if he was irate or about to laugh. His gaze dipped to her clenching fist as if he sought some confirmation for a theory of his and his eyes went from midnight black to the molten abyss with the tilt of his head.

“I don’t care to explain anything to you. You are nothing but a vagabond. A no good drifter to every woman you’ll meet.” She pried the glass with such force Amelia found her breathing deep and loud by the time she was steady and safely out of his reach.

“Well honey,” Clay whispered low, “You never minded before.”

The heathen!

Amelia groaned deeply then retracted a step, wanted to get away from him if not the memories of her lure to this man. She shook her head slowly, blurring their intrusion. Her fingers stole to her stomach, reminding her of the tangible evidence of one of those memories.

Pivoting on her heels, Amelia missed the curious expression on Clay’s face but she had to have moment’s release from his presence. “I’ll get you the special,” she spat.

“But I didn’t order the special, Shine” he countered hotly.

She wished he’d stopped calling her by that hideous name. It reminded her of so much.

“Well, you’re getting it anyway.”

Chapter 3

Same day, in the evening

Clay's actions didn't convince Amelia he was only passing through as he'd said. The last time, he'd rode in, concluded his business, tossed her skirts up, had his way to her to both their satisfaction, then rode out in a sunset just like the one slowly creeping in.

That wasn't the case on this occasion. What he'd done was to take a room at the hotel. Not the attitude of a man intending to leave tonight, Amelia surmised warily.

The weight of her woven basket bruised her hip as she held it against her to better support it. She'd thought to put it down for a bit when she'd stopped around the bend. The same bend, Amelia recalled, where Clay had whistled his presence months ago. She slowed her pace again, all the while nibbling on a piece of bread she'd broken off the loaf.

He wasn't there. With the tilt of her right ear, she heard nothing except the welcoming homage of the night creatures. Maybe his preference to stay really had nothing to do with her. Maybe it was a fluke he happened to stop at the restaurant with no other purpose in mind besides eating.

No other purpose except eating, Amelia.

A wistful sigh, long and forcefully released, was closely followed by slight quiver to her stomach. It wasn't a good sign. She gulped disgustedly at the bitter taste at the back of her throat and wondered why

nibbling day old bread didn't work as well for her as it had for others. To her, it made no sense to be hauling around thick pieces of the distastefully dry loaf when it did no more than tumble along with her already rumbling stomach. She'd been fortunate enough to avoid being noticed by any woman with a shrewd eye for the slight thickening to her waist and her incessant need for moldy old bread.

Her hand extended through the handle of her baskets tapped her stomach lightly. If only things had been different. *Then what Meilie girl? Clay Brennen would suddenly want to marry you and leave one less bastard in his wake?*

Amelia smiled sadly but with mild acceptance. He was less a marrying kind of man than he was the staying kind.

Never one to stay in Lake Valley for more than two days, Amelia suddenly wondered of the other places Clay had spent his nights. Did he visit his family: his mother, father, sister or maybe a brother?

She came to a dead halt as if she'd run suddenly into an invisible wall. What if he had a wife already? She knew many of the patrons often had wives, but were too dissatisfied with them. She tried to remember if he'd ever, even sardonically, mentioned his displeasure in a certain lady, but nothing came to thought.

With eyes rolled towards the shadowed sky, Amelia groaned. She wasn't sure what was more disheartening. Clay not marrying her or Clay already married. "Oh it's no use," she gushed.

"What's no use?"

"Ohh!" Recognition came flooding behind shock as the deep tone lick at her already nauseous innards. "What are you trying to do? Scare me into an early grave." The basket slipped like flooded soil down a

slope in her fright. Amelia watched in helplessness as it landed at her feet and her fresh loaves and other items rolled in all directions of a compass.

“If you’re foolish enough to walk this path alone then perhaps I’m doing you a favor.”

Amelia glared at the direction of the voice, but inside her heart soared at his presence. “The only man or animal I’m in danger of is you.” He’d been there all along. Had she always sensed him?

She peered further into the small copse of trees, but not even a branch shifted out of place.

Casting her gaze downward, she took in the sight of her sprawled items. “Now look what you done!” Amelia tossed over her shoulders just before she sank to her knees and started the task of retrieving the fickle fruits. “You are ruining everything?” She continued, yet not just talking about the bruised fruits. She saw one fruit of a moment, seeing it but not really seeing it as her throat worked to overcome the lemon sized lump sitting on the top of her windpipe. One oversized apple of various shades of ripeness slipped repeatedly through her fingers, heightening her clumsiness in front of him.

Why did he not leave? Small tremors erupted on areas of uncovered skin. She knew he was watching and every second turned her to a mass of seared nerves. Oh what was happening to her? Not long ago, she could barely stand his presence without feeling a bothersome and now... Now all she could feel was her throat closing up at the sound of his voice and the frantic pace her mind kept with heart.

“You dropped this.”

He stood looming over her, tall and arrogant in her vulnerable position as Amelia's gaze crept passed his knees, up his thighs and across his... She rocked back on her knees as if she'd come near the heat of a blacksmith hot iron. When he dropped to his knees in front of her, she felt her face heat with the direction of where she'd stared.

"Thank you," Amelia muttered and began to reach for the other the other few remaining oranges. He continued to observe her fevered motions just before he stood up and away from her.

"You shouldn't be walking this path alone, Amelia. You ought to know the dangers a woman can face out here by herself, even one of your fiber."

One of your fiber? One who's practically begging for the inevitable with every breath she took, he meant. Her stomach clenched and her chest spasm with pain. It shouldn't hurt at all, and Amelia didn't understand why it did.

"Come, I'll walk you home." She looked up to find a soft expression of what looked to be concern on his face. Amelia glanced away, afraid if she stared look long enough the pain of his other words would no longer goad her anger but subtle ache of shame.

She'd never had anyone to show genuine concern about her. Not her mother who left her behind. Her father... She didn't even know who he was. Oh she knew his name and very little about his life except he'd died the way he'd lived a few years ago. A drunk and a braggart with no skill to match.

Clay Brennen had little to refer him yet here he was, his hand extended and waiting for her to take the offer.

Amelia ignored it, slowing pushing herself as she held his slightly annoyed gazed. “You were never this stubborn, Shine.”

A wide grin slit his face as he noticed the rigid bracing that became her back.

“Stop calling me by that horrid name,” Amelia snapped, her hand fisted at her side and her basket at her feet. “What do you know about anything? What do you care?” Amelia pivoted from his presence, feeling confused about her momentary need to take his offer. Whatever it entailed. “You’re only here to take what you can get and ride out without a thought to those you have left behind. Without a thought of the consequences.”

“Goddammit woman, all I was doing was offering to help you up to your feet. I was thinking along the line it was the gentlemanly thing to do. But honey you’re as sweet about it as a lime orange in winter.” She saw him remove his travel worn hat and tapped it against his tightly clad thighs with a mix of impatience and long-sufferance.

“Is that what you call it. Offering to help?” She wanted to tell him just how grateful she was for the recent complication of her new life. How much she was looking forward to raising his bastard in some unnamed town where no one knew her or of her past choice of work. Somewhere where they had a chance to survive. But instead she settled for keeping her mouth shut and storming off with her basket.

“Hey,” Clay called out, “Where do you think you are going?”

“Away from you,” she tossed over her shoulder, “I don’t need your cursed help. *We* don’t need any of your damned offers.

“I said to stop! *We*?” He glanced around with the intent to see who else was around. “What the devil are you going on about?”

Chapter 4

The next second

“Wait Shin—Amelia.” She continued her brisk pace, unresponsive to his command. “Wait damn it. I don’t have a mind to chase you over this godforsaken trek.” His powerful clutch promptly put a stop to the rebellious pace.

“Let me go, you insensitive idiot. I want nothing to do with you from now on.” Trying to disengage from his firm grasp proved to be as lucrative as her attempt to squelch her body’s excited state.

“You little baggage, you will have everything to do with me until I say further. What did you mean by ‘we’ and don’t bother to lie to me. I heard every word out of that pouty little mouth of yours.”

Amelia relinquished her hold on her basket to ply his fingers from her forearm. “I have no reason to lie because I’ll say it again.” She brought her face deliberately closer and glared at him. “We don’t need your help.” She didn’t care that his mild befuddlement suddenly changed to quiet anger at her elusiveness.

Clay cocked his head and removed all her attempts at leaving his side when his other hand, just as powerful as the first, latched onto her and permanently halted all her forceful tugs. When he pulled her against his solid frame, she winced against his hard torso and relished the heady impact of being close to him again. But even then she refused to give in to him.

“Would you be still woman,” Clay demanded, his lips a hairsbreadth from her temple.

“I’ll be still when you let me go and you, Clay Brennen, can climb back on that fidgety horse of yours and leave town.” She was so mad at him that for a moment she considered taking advantage of the precarious position of his groin. But hurting Clay was the last thing Amelia wanted. What she wanted more than anything was for him to go away before her emotions gave way to more than just a carnal craving and demand more than this man will ever been able to give her.

Please just leave. Before I make a fool of myself and beg you to love me.

Without much warning she went so still Clay was unconvinced of her acquiesce. “You shouldn’t have returned here,” and Amelia had never felt more on the verge of tears around another. “I was going to take care... to take care of us.”

Clay’s lips moved across her lid and his breathe tickled her brow. “You keep talking in riddles darling and you’ll start to make me nervous.” It was just like this the last time too. His hands were strong and sturdy around her. Safe and wanting only her. “I hate to say it doll, but a man like me can’t afford for a woman to start getting ideas. You start getting them ideas of home and such then I’ll just have to say goodbye and move on.” He caressed a path up her arms, following the line of her small shoulders and then like a tradesman valuing fine silk, he smoothed his thumb over the soft flesh of her cheeks.

Was that it? Was that the reason he’d moved on to another girl and had cruelly stepped on her feelings.

Amelia wouldn’t let him see it in her eyes. For a moment she had gave thought to the idea of a life with him. Over and over, she dreamt of the idea and wondered what it would be like to have the love of the man she’d secretly wanted more from.

“You won’t get any ideas will you Shine?” he paused. “You’ve always understood what I needed.”

Shine. Shine wouldn’t get any ideas. Shine always understood and obliged any man who had a few dollars to his name and a tad bit cleaner than the rest. Oh she'd been tough to boot but her contrariness had always been her lure.

She sighed into the palm of his hand as she realized *Amelia* never got a chance to refuse. But she could now.

“There will be a child,” she said softly and more to the cotton of his chest than his face. “I’m with child.”

If not for the swift tightening of his arms at the small of her back, Amelia might’ve thought the world had come to a cataclysmic halt and time, a merciful master, held some destructive beast at bay with its cessation.

Faint at heart yet curious at his response, Amelia sought his response. She could see very little, not with the last rays of the sun already dwindling and his gaze cast to the side. His hold began to slowly loosen around her and with the loss of his warmth came the burgeoning replacement of dismay.

She watched him step away from her, saying nothing yet saying all that needed to be said. She saw little of his eyes but his jaw worked hard enough to crack granite on a cold day.

“Have you nothing to say?” she whispered across the distance. Distance that grew the breadth of a continent with each second of silence. Perhaps she was being unfair to Clay but Amelia couldn't bludgeon the clamoring of her own fear.

“What would you have me say, Shine?” Amelia flinched with the sharpness of his tone. She couldn’t possibly tell him what to say but she

hadn't thought his sudden poverty of speech to cause this rift of pain inside her.

He turned back at her, his calm persona slowly dissipating and the slow burn of a molten anger rising to the surface. "I don't get this confession of yours, Shine? Why did you tell me this? Were you expecting me to take you as if nothing has changed?"

Her own responding anger was swift, almost as tangible as the cool wind whisking through the trees. "I hoped nothing. Certainly not from the likes of you." They were not much different from each other she knew. She'd hated that he was the kind of man to seek out women like her to slake his lust. And worse, Amelia hated that she'd been the kind of woman to have made a living out of complying. "I hadn't asked you to return here. I hadn't asked you to come here in the first place. Nor approached me like a brute in heat. I told you I didn't want you here."

"You had a funny way of showing it, sweetheart" Clay returned fiercely. His chiseled face, once vibrant with dashing allure, was rigid with distrust. Suspicion oozed from the very core of him, leaving no room for further affect. He whistled a stalwart tune, winding its way through the copse of trees to find its answering call with the snicker of his horse. "For all I knew of you, Shine. I thought you had the good sense to make sure some bastard off the trail didn't plant his seed behind when he left you in his wake." He chuckled in the darkness, not a real chuckle but a vile sound declaring a fitting end to some machinations of hers.

Amelia grabbed with a single breath and thought how right Clay Brennen was. She was the fool in this mess they'd made. No good woman of her profession failed to take care of such matters before it was no longer possible to do so without causing serious harm.

She looked down at the basket, turned over on its side, at her feet and recalled how it had nearly missed her toes in its descent. And before she could help it her eyes misted enough to blur its dark outline.

Hope had been a foolish, foolish thing.

In front of her, she heard the heavy breathing of his horse and the shadow of Clay's sweeping motion upon it brought her out of a dreary self-pity. His words shouldn't hurt her so much, Amelia reminded herself. It was never her intention to be so vulnerable to another's rejection and she slowly chastised herself for allowing it.

Just when Amelia thought she'd never make it out of the void she'd dug for herself, she heard her own voice reaching out and saying, "I may not have had the good sense then Clay Brennen, but you are one bastard off the trail I can do without."

Chapter 5

The next morning, early dawn

The quiet break of dawn came with the droll swish of tired muscles moving across the dark sudsy bottom of an overused kitchen pot. Not one soul, except for Amelia and her landlady, was up and about. Both woman worked quietly around each other, one performing actions with little thought given to precision. The other was more than curious about the frank absence of words but accepting its non-verbal insistence anyway.

When another hour passed and the sun's warmth radiated through the tainted glass facing the east, Mrs. Hardy's insistence on breakfast and the shuffling in the dining area became harder to ignore.

Amelia mopped her brow but the act was more to soothe the persistent ache that lingered there since her heated exchange with Clay the night before. Whatever sleep she'd garnished had taken place in the early hours of the morning. A few hours that had seen her tossing, turning and her minimally feathered pillow damped with tears.

"Non-sense, Amelia. You've been up before everyone this morning working like old hag's put a curse on you." Amelia watched the proprietress as she made a place for her to sit and eat the sweet wheat porridge. "Now, just imagine my surprise when I heard this strange noise coming from my kitchen before a body should be rightfully up. Plum scared me to death for about a full minute, I tell you."

She was too kind for her own good, Amelia thought. And perhaps it was wicked to take advantage of such a kindness but Amelia didn't see much choice in the matter. After all if Mrs. Hardy only heard whiff of

her sordid affairs... Well it didn't bear thinking about what the older woman might do or say.

Amelia stared warily at breakfast and felt her stomach did an unpleasant flip-flop which she hoped didn't show on her face. She couldn't imagine it was sound judgment to partake of breakfast in front of anyone and inside Amelia mentally shook her head as she blotted her damp hands against her apron.

"Maybe just a bit. I would like to finish early today and go to the General store." Hopefully, she wouldn't encounter *him* because he would have left town by now. "Mr. Burns did promise to hold a few yards of cloth for me. He's been kind enough to refuse any other offers."

Not that Mr. Burns would get many offers for that atrocious piece but Amelia wouldn't allow repetition of Mr. Burns' impatient tone. She was grateful to have the bolt of cloth. She was sure to get a frock and several garments out of it for the baby. She could not afford to be particular. Not for a long time at least.

Amelia kept thinking of the patterns she needed to cut, almost oblivious to Mrs. Hardy soft but apparently trivial conversation until the words, 'gentleman,' 'asking after her,' and 'waiting in the sitting area' caught her attention.

"What did you say?"

"Well, one of the gentlemen sitting in for breakfast was asking after you." Her honeyed toast stopped at her throat. "Of course, I said I didn't allow strange men information of my tenants, but he was adamant he was no stranger. He went on to say, 'with all due respect of course' that both of you have an enduring friendship."

Clay. How did he know she was staying at Mrs. Hardy's? Amelia chided herself for such a foolish question. Of course, she'd been stupid enough to volunteer the information.

The frown appearing on Amelia's brow didn't in any way halt Mrs. Hardy raving of the 'gentleman' who'd come asking after Amelia. Luckily Mrs. Hardy didn't see her distressful habit of biting the corner of her lips. But one thing was for sure, Amelia gathered, Mrs. Hardy had been thoroughly charmed.

"...said he was in no hurry and insists on waiting for you to finish with whatever work you were doing before joining him."

Amelia examined the contents of her plate, but no longer care to consume anything more from it. Just what was Clay Brennen up to now? There was no doubt in her mind he was the one sitting out in the dining area waiting for her. She began to ponder on anything he could have to say. Any words that could hurt any worse than the ones he'd already said.

The deep hollow that had nearly swallowed her from the inside throughout the night suddenly expanded with a vengeance. She pushed away from the table with such force the torturous shriek rent the flow of Mrs. Hardy's voice.

"I'll send him on his way."

The response on Mrs. Hardy face was akin to horror. "Why ever would you do a thing like that dear?"

Because I absolutely want nothing to do with Clay.

We have nothing further to say to each other.

But Amelia said nothing of the sort. Instead she whispered the strangest words she'd ever thought to come out her mouth. "Well, it is not proper for him to—to come calling so early in the morning." Pitiful excuse, Amelia thought, especially since she wasn't entirely sure of the appropriate time for such a thing. It was something she never gave consideration to before.

"He is sitting in a roomful of my tenants having breakfast as well. He'd be hard pressed to do anything that's ungentlemanly towards you. But if he's been false in the telling of your relationship, I'll be sure to have Mr. Hardy throw him out on his too handsome ear of his."

Amelia glanced at Mrs. Hardy and saw the sly twinkle to her pale blue eyes. "Believe me dear, he's not the first charming young man, this old lady has come across. Don't worry about anything."

Mrs. Hardy motioned to stand and Amelia quickly reacted to stop her. "No, it's okay really. I'll... see him."

Chapter 6

The hour before noon

A whisper of conscience inside Amelia's head informed her it was an arrogant if not diabolic thing to make him wait. In good faith, it also told her she shouldn't relish in such a small victory either but did she listen. Of course not! She'd taken her time in completing her tasks before setting out to the diner. She felt vindicated in wake of the cold words he spoke the night before.

He hadn't been there waiting as Mrs. Hardy said he would but decided outside with his horse was more to his suit. That's where she found him.

"I didn't figure you'd wait long."

"Hoping I'd leave did you, Shine?"

Amelia didn't respond immediately. She wouldn't allow him to goad her. For whatever reason he came to see her, Amelia refused to let him stir her to anger.

"Don't worry, there's no one around to overhear us." His hands moved across the coat of the animal and it wasn't long before Amelia noticed the animal practically preened beneath the soothing administrations. "I took a room over by Hanson's place last evening." That Amelia knew but she felt no inclination to interrupt whatever he wished to say only to admit her knowledge of where he spent the night. "I've been up all night mostly..." Clay paused. Choosing to avoid looking at her, Amelia took full advantage of looking at this man who suddenly looked like he wanted to be anywhere else besides where he

stood. “Doing a look of thinking and well I think we have a lot of talking to do.”

“There was nothing else to say.” She tried for a delicate, soft voice but Amelia could hardly recall being either soft or delicate in temperament.

“You’ve never been short on words before. If not for that short-fuse temper of yours, I’d thought you were someone completely different.” She could see in his face his dislike. His discomfort at dealing with an unfamiliar Shine.

Amelia didn’t respond to that either but she did say, “I have to see Mr. Burns at the general store. Will you be staying long?”

“I suppose I deserve that. Seeing as how I acted like a fool last night” He wasn’t too happy. Amelia saw the apparition of a grimace before it was molded into grateful acceptance. “But I was under the impression these things take time to resolve.”

And by things she knew he meant the unfortunate complications of her and a child. She had thought the same thing several weeks ago. The baby had been no more than a complication, a problem that would change her life as nothing else could. She saw nothing beyond a sense of betrayal at the time. Respectability had been the only aim of her wretched life and even that she’d failed at. “You need not solve anything. It was never my intention to presume you would. I only thought you should know.”

“And accept your word for it?” The single question was loaded with incredibility. She could see the sudden change from the tranquil veneer to what he really felt. Hate. Anger. Betrayal.

She didn't want to look in his direction. Amelia was certain he would see how much she wanted him to accept her word, but instead started in the directions of the gates. It didn't bother her that she had left him behind. He would follow her eventually and then he would no doubt say his piece.

The quietude behind her made Amelia tense and she wondered if Clay deliberately slowed his pace to unnerve her more. Any longer and she would sure to betray her true feelings to his presence.

"You look . . . thinner," he said from behind not two seconds later. He fell in step with her moments later, the reins of his horse in one hand and her on the opposite side of him. "I hadn't noticed how much so until now." Of course not, he'd been too busy feeling trapped and outraged by her precipitous bit of news. He lingered over his observation before proceeding as if he realized caution was an essential. "But you do not look as if you are pregnant. How long did you say, Amelia?"

Bastard!

"I hadn't mentioned it but I'd assumed it was the first time we had... seen each other here." She could hardly coerce herself to speak beyond whisper. It was there in his voice, the subtlety of denial. Clay knew very well the day, the moment yet he sought some reprieve from her for some reason.

She wouldn't give it to him.

"Are you certain it is mine?" He looked across from her, noting the fragile set of her calm composure and quickly added, "Is it an unreasonable question to ask?"

She agreed without appreciation. "The child is yours. There's been no one else after – after you left," she quietly confirmed. And why was

that? Because of one fervent confession of wanting only him? The memory rose rampant, adding more a flush to her body than his proximity did.

His reaction to that quiet admission was little more than he could hide because before Amelia knew it, he had her elbows inescapably grasped.

She fairly tensed in reflex before she found herself foisted against him and the hard edge of speculation coating his handsome face. “Why do I find that so damn hard to believe? For two years, I’ve been making regular trips to Lake Valley saloon and not one day since I’ve been in town, have you refused one of your fine paying clients, myself included.” His lips took on a contemptible tilt before slowly disappearing. “So you got another thing coming if I’m going to believe you suddenly got religion.”

Amelia shuddered at the venom of his words and the partial accuracy of them. She hadn’t gotten religion, not really. She was just tired of being a cesspit for the swill a man’s body. But Clay wouldn’t believe that either. He would believe only what he’d seen and knew of. Her, in his bed, in the beds of other men, and putting a smile to the business of pleasuring.

Perhaps she’d enjoyed it at one point as well. But before he’d come across her three months ago whatever she’d ever liked about Lake Valley had faded like the pain of a deep wound. “You’re angry but—”

“Anger doesn’t describe what I feel, Shine. Dammit why hadn’t you taken care of it? Anyone other woman would have?”

Amelia felt so breathless, she might’ve climbed over a hillock. “You do mean any other whore, don’t you Brennen?” Her eyes met his

with more contempt than she'd ever shown towards another person. He seemed momentarily knocked from his pedestal as he stared back at her, his eyes still fierce but his silence loud with contrition. "Of course."

He denied nothing, but he released her with a modicum of reluctance than she thought he would.

"I'm sorry," Clayed uttered with genuine sincerity as she stumbled away from him. She saw the abrupt deflation to his tight shoulders and wondered of the turmoil of his thoughts.

Perhaps he hadn't fathered as many bastards as she'd given him credit for before.

Perhaps she was carrying his first.

And he didn't care for her being the mother of it?

Chapter 7

Sometime later, the road to town

Unlike his horse's appreciation to Clay's unconscious petting, Amelia couldn't find herself so at ease with his careful glances in her directions. The fire of his fury had been dampened but if she looked closely enough, Amelia felt she could feel the sizzle of it whisking towards her.

He turned away from her again, his gaze lost in whatever held it ahead of them. "It's a long walk to town. Take my horse. You shouldn't be walking so much."

There was no hesitation to his offer. There was nothing in his mannerism showing the oddity of him offering her the use of his horse. It was unlike the others he'd extended to her. Like an extra half dollar for a good romp. A kiss on the cheek when he was done. A sip from his personal flask of whiskey. "It is your horse, you should ride him."

"But I'm offering him to you." He appeared at a loss at her refusal but then chalked up her refusal to fear. "If you're frightened don't be. He's more mild-mannered when I tell him to be and even more so when he's got skirts against him."

She sighed warily. Like any other man she supposed.

It wouldn't hurt to let him know. One thing she suspected was he might find it contradictory to her character. And amusing to him.

"I cannot ride your horse."

“Mind you Shine, I’d offer another but as you can see, mine is the only one available. I see you intend to be stubborn about it.”

“No, it’s not that I don’t want to ride *your* horse.” Never mind she’d never ridden one before and had walked or taken the coach to wherever she needed to go for most of her life. “It’s— it’s just that everyone will see and they’ll think we were... together.”

An unthinkable occurrence indeed, Amelia thought.

“Now that’s a tidbit of news, sweetheart. I’d have thought you at least would’ve accepted that we’ve been together.” His eyes roamed over her face, warming her bosom on its way down before overtly settling on her stomach. “You certainly wasted no time with telling me.”

“That’s not I meant at all,” Amelia snapped, the warmth from her bosom shot to her face like a geyser. “They might think we’re together like a man and a woman should be.”

“What difference does it make? In another month or two, it won’t matter what they think, will it?”

Of course not, she thought fleetingly, she’ll be as unmarried as when she came and exposed for the light skirt she was. The impending outcome hurt just as much as his resentment of her did. This had been her chance and she’d lost it. Lost it because of one mistake with the man strolling besides her.

“I’ll be gone by the end of the month.” It was no use agonizing over spilt milk. Besides her heart no longer bled as profusely as it did last night.

“You’re leaving town,” Clay echoed. His voice lifted but his thinking was abrupt in surmising he would’ve come to the same

conclusion had the tables been turned. “Next you’ll tell me you’re planning on becoming a widow too.”

The corner of her lips tilted into a delicate shadow of a smile. Unforced, without manipulative polish. It was unlike anything he’d ever seen on her face before. “I would be lying if I hadn’t thought of it but...” *She hadn’t nearly enough money to pull such off a ploy.* “... I hate wearing black. It makes me as dreary in mood as its namesake.”

She wouldn’t be the only woman to don the cloak of widowhood to conceal bastardy. What he didn’t understand was the importance to her? He’d been as close to drunk as he’d ever gotten in his life the past night when her words finally sunk in. She hadn’t wanted anything to do with him. What was it she said? *I was going to take care of us.*

“Was that your plan? To go off somewhere and pretend to be a respectable widow?” He slowed his pace but not before intertwining his fingers with hers and bringing both of them to a stop.

“Me? Respectable?” Amelia chuckled lightly, her nerves clamoring as loudly in her insides as her flimsy chuckle sounded on the outside. She stared at their joint hands, her heart no longer listening to her maddened plea to rest its wild gallop. “I don’t think either of us knows the meaning of such a word Clay Brennen.” He stood there holding her hand, his fingertips caressing her paler skin at the wrist.

It was an answer, but not really an answer at all in Clay’s book.

She could feel the weight of his perusal but more than anything the gesture frightened her. Nothing about him was predictable, not his thoughts, his actions, the effect of his touch. Her emotions behaved like a hopeless puppet when it came to Clay. Wanting, vulnerable, malleable once then tormented and angry if not hurt the next. She should be made

at him. Not allowing him to touch her as if those hurtful words hadn't nearly destroyed her.

In Lake Valley, It was a wonder he chose to see her. She hadn't been exactly clingy as many of the other girls but she'd been just as susceptible to him. Maybe even more.

Clay Brennen always used her temperament to bend her to his will as he did the others. He just hadn't counted on her swelling with his child as a consequence.

She didn't think she could meet his eyes without hers glossing over. Instead she moved to untwine their fingers only to have him stop her with a hiss of his breath. "No, Shine," Clay whispered. "Can't you look at me?"

"Must you call me by that name?" she uttered with distraction in mind.

"Must you dole out my name like an old headmaster? The only thing missing is the Alexander?"

Her jaw dropped with his slight criticism of her tendency to do exactly as he pointed out. It wasn't the same thing, not at all and before she could censor her words she was saying so. "It's not like it isn't your name," she fired rapidly. "I didn't think you'd notice or care about such a thing," she voiced more calmly, "and—and it's not like some woman would recognized you because you provided them... certain pleasures. Besides you do know my name, my real name."

She hadn't meant for him to see her passing shame, but Amelia was sure he'd noticed anyway. Maybe she had gotten soft, like those maudlin females she saw at the town dances sometimes. When he didn't move to release her, Amelia became more self-conscious about the

revelation. He would pity her. He would laugh at her. She was the reformed whore who wanted respectability but hadn't the discipline to hold on to it.

Chapter 8

The following week, Friday, early evening

Amelia sat waiting at Clay's insistence by the boulder in the vicinity of the old tree where he'd taken her. The torrid scene of both of them conjured itself each time she peered over. She'd taken him too if Amelia should admit.

Without much effort, her wicked mind convened on the torrid image of tangled arms and her legs wrapped tight around Clay. She remembered the rigid surface of his shoulders, the tension in his powerful arms as he held her up... as he drove into her. The words he whispered in her ear. Amelia slapped her palms across her burning cheeks as she clapped her knees together, rebellious against the hot achy need that slowly made its way to the center of her sex.

She couldn't avoid the memory of the palm of his hand spread against her again, toying with her, tormenting her until she pleaded with him to never stop. Amelia arched her spine as her fingers bunched the folds of her skirt. Hot splotches of red marred her cheeks as she glanced around, suddenly aware she might no longer be alone.

She saw no tell-tale movements of his presence. But what if he was there, nonetheless? Waiting, watching her every move as he'd done before.

Amelia cast a concealing hand over her tightly closed eyelids quite mortified she might have very well put on quite a show for him. She began to wonder. Would Clay notice those incessant glances she made at

that tree, remembering what they'd done against it? *Oh Mellie girl, you'll never change.*

On her temple, the evening wind patted the sheen of perspiration there. *And now you have a little one to mind.* Amelia was afraid she was no more closer to making plans to leave today than she was several weeks ago. During the week, she'd mentioned the likelihood of living in another town to Mrs. Hardy. The older woman had been so shocked she took to sitting down then frowning for a good minute before she inquired why. Amelia could not tell her the truth no matter how much she wanted to. Mrs. Hardy had a tendency to invite trust especially of a woman who rarely had the occasion to give the virtue. How could Amelia tell her she'd fallen pregnant with no husband? Distress tore at her breasts as she recalled her decision to continue the lie. Surely it would have broken Mrs. Hardy's heart and Amelia couldn't quench the feeling that a portion of hers might not survive as well.

Her hand moved to the mound that was her growing stomach, lingering with gentle petting. It was uncanny the way she sorted its presence. The reassurance of a stray touch, the overwhelming urge to love it and the man with whom she'd made her baby with.

She was so confused.

Waiting for Clay in this copse of trees was the last thing she should be doing. So why had she agreed to do as he wished when she could be cleaning old lady Simmons rooms for a dollar. Two fingertips lay between her breasts, feeling the rapids thuds of her heart.

Her wayward heart had no sense when it came to Clay. Just the thought of him, his smile, his presence and it went as wild as an Indian pinto.

Somewhere in the distance, a dried twig broke in earnest, sending Amelia scurrying from her solid perch towards the ground. Behind her, the hem of her skirts caught on a sharp point, hoisting her skirts passed her knees and creeping midway up her thighs. A rip in the waist seams had her crinkling her forehead in frustration.

“Oh dammit!”

She wouldn't have noticed him with her back so turned but Clay had ample time to notice the firmness of her luscious behind. Did it seem larger even with distance? He finished tethering his horse with that old grin on his face. A grin he'd played on one woman in particular and never failed to get the reaction he wanted out of her.

With sudden alacrity, Clay realized he hadn't been his old charming self since the night he figured out he was to be a father. The impact had almost killed him and somewhere in his mind he thanked heavens for the anger that turned her from him. Clay hadn't gone several feet when he dismounted, dropped to knees like a gored bull and hacked up his guts.

Now, he figured a week was more than enough to get use to the idea. If Shine- Amelia as she preferred- was to be believed he was to be a father and there was not a damned thing he could do about it. What he hadn't gotten around to as yet was that talk he told her they needed to have. Lord knows he wasn't even sure what they needed to talk about.

Lots of men in his position wouldn't give a horse's ass when a woman with Amelia's particular past began to increase with his bastard. He'd cursed himself for being all kinds of fool and for being so free with his seed. He couldn't recall ever being so foolhardy even when he was a frequently patron to Lake Valley prettiest whores. But it had been a long

time between visits and the whore houses he'd stopped by on his travels hadn't been to his suit. He almost laughed at the thought.

Shine was different. She wasn't like the others to cast those lures out to the men. Men, like simpering pups, went to her. God, he should know. Pretty enough to draw them but with a sharp tongue to skin the hide off a man if she so chose. A man needed guts to approach her and it was a wonder she had as many patrons as she had, himself included.

Now, he was the only man on her horizon and he couldn't rightly say he wasn't pleased at the prospective. She'd painted a mighty attractive picture in that maidenly frock of hers months ago. To his frame of mind, and the other parts of his anatomy, Amelia might as well have been naked for all the deterrence the unflattering frock had made.

No use torturing yourself.

"You need some help, Melia?"

"Oh!" She made that frightful little sound he was starting to akin to exasperation. For the next moment, she stood rooted to the spot, one end of skirt still between her fingers and exposing a good view of smooth, creamy skin. He suspected it was the hungry expression on his face which made her realize where he was admiring the view. "I-I didn't realized you were so close."

Amelia couldn't look at Clay. Not when she'd almost exposed her barely clad bottom to him. She peered at Clay as he moved towards her and felt heat radiated from thigh to cheek. She felt about as red as a tomato when he stood before her.

"I know. You were preoccupied with your skirts." It was difficult to swallow with his admission.

Just how much had he seen?

“I didn’t think you would show up.” Was there more than mere uncertainty in his voice? He reached for her hand and Amelia allowed him to take it without her reluctance.

“I did promise I would but—but I’m not sure why you wanted me to be here, Clay.” Breathing deeply did nothing to dispel her growing discomfort. Instead Amelia’s voice came off husky with each tumbling word. “I mean if you intend to tell me you’re leaving soon then that’s alright I guess. I don’t expect you to stay here. So you don’t need to escort me home in the evenings. Someone’s bound to see us together. And then there’ll be talk. And if someone notices my—my stomach...”

“I notice your stomach,” Clay interrupted. Against reason, Amelia went willing against him, aware of her mound resting easily against the lower part of his firm one.

Momentarily taken aback, Amelia quickly began again, “—And if you do then someone else will also.”

“You may be right but not for a while at least. I mean I only notice because...” If he wasn’t standing so close to his chest, Amelia would have never guessed Clay was as nonplussed as his toned conveyed. “...well because I always look.”

Amelia eyes widened. “You always look?” But why, Amelia thought softly.

“Ever since you told me.”

“Has it made you uncomfortable then?” Of course it did. Amelia could tell by the look on his face he was more than a little

uncomfortable. But why did he insist on following her home if he disliked being around her?

“I gather at first I was. Never been around a woman expecting before. Not many of those where I like to go when I want a woman.”

Her lips trembled with attempting a smirk but Clay relished it. He wanted to see her smile, he realized. He wanted a smile like the one she'd given him *several* days ago. He recalled the fears, the quiet desperation, the wariness of him, the lust, all rolled up into that one hesitant smile and he wanted to see another, but this time with sometime more. Slowly parting her barely tamed locks, Clay's thumbbed the supple skin of her cheek never once breaking their shared gaze.

“Have I ever kissed you before Amelia?”

“As—as Shine, you use to—”

“No, I mean a real kiss, Amelia. Like a man kissing a woman he's wanted for a long time?”

There was no air in her chest to answer his question with words. So Amelia settled for simple shaking of her head. *No, you've never kissed me like that Clay Brennen.*

“Then I'm going to kiss you, Melia.”

Chapter 9

His Lips on hers

Clay was kissing her.

A soft, sultry kiss nipping at her insides the way his lips nipped at hers. It was more than Amelia had ever experienced in her twenty-three years of living. She tried to think of those other men who'd kiss her, the one who thought it was simply enough to smash their course mouth against her smaller ones. She remembered the dry, cracked ones which often bruised hers. The hot and sometimes bitter taste she'd forced herself to endure. Amelia slowly allowed the faces, so blurred she no longer cared to distinguish, to slip from her thoughts. All that remained was the heated rush to her cloudy mind as Clay gently plied her apart with his.

She groaned deep, her desire trembling with its ascent within her. Amelia's hands pressed smugly between them flared over the cotton of his shirt beneath his cloak. Suddenly, she needed to touch him, to his feel his taut skin beneath hers. His tongue swept over hers, delighting her in its conquest and teasing her with his retreat.

Why had he never kissed her like this before? He'd had always been free with those quick smacks with all the other girls. On the chin, the forehead, the cheek. On the lips... he had never lingered. And Amelia hated the feeling of being no different to him from other whore in Lake Valley.

Clay's hand wound its way within the dark curls, loosening the single braid with as much ease as if it had never been. He felt Amelia's need meld with his as she pushed against him. God, he had been so afraid it wouldn't be as he remembered. Months between them and one earth shattering revelation and despite his words of his acclimation, Clay wasn't sure why it was so important for this same familiarity between them.

But it wasn't the same. He moved his lips carefully over hers, moving with the gentle finesse of a feather as he cooled the ardor between. He'd dreamt of nothing except her soft, pliant body beneath his since he was returning to town. A town he could've easily avoided had he been thinking with something other than this protruding organ of his.

He became aware of their labored breathing, his skin tight with his reservations and his body humming with the need for release. He kissed the corner of her lips and slipping lower to follow the line of her jaw.

"Clay..." Amelia whimpered her distress as she dipped her head, searching for his lips.

"Mmm..." Her fingertips grazed his shoulder and Clay hissed as if the pain occurred under a blade when he doubted he'd ever felt anything more pleasurable.

He lifted her against him, surprised how light she was even with the thickening in her waist. "Please don't... don't stop kissing me." Frustration added an audible sob to her voice and Clay grinded his pelvis against hers. "I—I need you so much."

"I know sweetheart," Clay whispered against her cheek. Amelia's arms wound around his neck and Clay's arms circled her waist. She lifted her face to his and Clay realized her earlier sob held more than

frustration. Her lips, plump from their heavy kissing, trembled slightly and her eyes drowsy with arousal, could not truly meet his.

Would it always be this way between them? The feeling so intense and so overwhelming with each encounter they'd have no other choice but to surrender to it? God, each time she touched him he was in danger of losing control of his body and coming in his pants if he wasn't buried deep inside her. He pressed his lips against hers more to soothe her than to ignite their passion. His lips curved into a smile as Clay realized if he was lucky enough to find her in whichever town she decided to live, he was likely to get her with another child if she didn't find some man willing to take her and their child.

Damn. Clay wasn't sure which thought rankled him more. Her availing herself and her body to some strange man somewhere or one who was willing to take his son or daughter as his own? He never felt more like a coward in his entire life but he'd be damned if he could push her away from him.

He swept her off her feet, settling her against his chest then moved toward the flattened boulder when Amelia had seated herself earlier. In her relaxed state, he saw how fatigued she was and kicked himself for the heel she was.

"You're tired. It's been a long week for you at Elmira's." He worked to find a comfortable spot on the boulder and set her comfortably in his arms. "Are you comfortable?"

Amelia sighed and whispered, "Yes." She could not help how easily she fell into his arms or how protected she felt in them. Her heart rent a little more whenever she considered their parting of ways. Amelia raised her hand to his jaw; the strength of the contoured muscles there attracted her like a moth was to its own demise.

Maybe he would be the death of her. For surely, it would be a slow death to build her hopes until she saw him in the evenings, treasuring his presence beside her as he walked her home and quietly saying goodbye each time. Amelia wished she had the courage to tell him she loved him. To tell him she'd loved him for a long time. And even more so after leaving Lake Valley.

But she couldn't say it.

"You've never kissed me like that before. Why did you do it?"

Clay smiled hesitantly as his eyes probed hers with an intensity incapable of providing an answer for her. He turned his chin within her palm, kissing her fingertips as he did. "I think I've wanted to kiss you from the moment I saw you working at Elmira's with your apron around your waist. You couldn't have looked more out of place, Melia." *And he couldn't have wanted her more.* His lips moved over her wrist and he suckled at the skin there. Almost as if they were connected, Clay felt the rapid eruption of tremors throughout her body and began a slow caressing ascent up her thigh.

"But—but you never kissed me like that. I mean... with your tongue in my—my mouth. Did I disgust you before? Is that why?" *What a silly question to ask? Of course she'd disgusted him and now he would surely tell her so.*

"No, you didn't disgust me," Clay replied.

Amelia met his gaze directly and Clay saw her attempt to disguise her hurt. "You don't have to lie to spare me, Clay Brennen. I won't be offended if you say how you truly feel about me." No longer as lithe in his arms, Amelia sat tensely on his lap. Had she any chance of getting out of his arms Amelia would've taken it but she knew Clay would not

relinquish his hold. “You know there have been many—many men even if I was particular,” Amelia uttered softly.

Clay felt irritation at her disbelief in his words but he suspected Melia was guarding herself from what she felt were his true feelings. He saw it there, the steely erection of her spine and it said more to him than her words would ever confess tonight.

She did care what he thought about her.

And to think he had always cared what she thought about him.

He took her hand and intertwined their fingers before meeting the anticipation he saw in her eyes. “I’m not lying, Amelia. If you repulsed me then you’d have to find me and every other man who came to you even more contemptible. Besides it has nothing to do with you.” She looked more puzzled than grateful with his last. “Well if you want to know, I’ll tell you but no more about this while we’re still here. Okay?”

“Alright, I won’t ask again.”

“Well, when I was younger and my friends took to see this widow. Her name was Lucy and she’d lived a few miles outside of my town.”

“Why did you go to see her?”

He grinned as he dipped his head towards her and Clay whispered into her ear, “She was my first woman, Melia.”

“Of course. But I meant w-why her?”

“Ah friends thought it’d be easier on me. Are you shocked?”

“That would hardly shock me, Clay.”

“No, I suppose not. But anyways, safe to say, I had no idea how to please her. So I figured the safest thing to do was to start with a kiss.

Probably the biggest mistake of my young life.” And he punctuated his words with a groan Amelia felt rumbling through him.

“Why did she say that?”

“She said if I didn’t want to remain celibate until I find a wife I should keep my tongue to myself. Because she sure as hell didn’t appreciate nor want it anywhere near her own. It was nothing more than business to her, Amelia. ”

Was it more than business between them? Amelia couldn’t bring herself to voice the question. “What—what happened after?” Amelia wasn’t sure why she asked such a silly question. A nun could tell happened after but for some reason she wanted to hear him say it.

He turned his head to meet her expectant gaze and her plump lower lips held gently between her teeth. Clay had the vaguest idea Amelia was oblivious to the small act. And even more oblivious to the effect the memory of those soft lips had on him. He leaned in closer and pressed the tip of his nose against hers. The caress was gentle and special between them. And just before he slanted his lips in just the right position to kiss her, he whispered, “Nothing as sweet as kissing you.”

Chapter 10

The Evening with her Drifter

Amelia huddled against the chilly evening wind, smoothing the palms of her hands against her covered thighs. Cast over her shoulders, her shawl easily shielded her from the bite of the wind but not from the small flares of nervous quivers within her. She looked on with envy as women and their husbands, young men and their sweethearts danced an exuberant pace.

Somewhere amongst the crowd was her bold drifter, retrieving something sweet and tasty for both of them. Something, Amelia hoped would by some miracle, appeased her rebellious stomach. She could not see him above the crowds and his lengthening absence worried her. Would he return or would he leave her there? Twice now, she crossed her ankles to keep herself from following after him.

But following him wasn't her only concern. Attending the town dance was. A week ago, she would've never thought Clay Brennan to prefer her any other way but standing against a boulder, warm and eagerly waiting for him. To say she had been shocked when he came calling at Mrs. Hardy's, hat in hand and looking the sheep at the slaughter, was an understatement of her stupefaction.

What could she have said to him as they stood there staring at each other? She, transfixed by the show he unwillingly put on for some inexplicable reason and he, an unsmiling and unfamiliar expression on

his freshly shaven face. At the moment, she could only describe the look on his face as the one Amelia saw reflecting from the creek in the mornings she cast up her miseries.

“I’ve come to take you to the town dance.”

“W-What?” Shocked and confused the word stumbled from her lips.

“Sh- Amelia, I want you to go to with me to the town hall, this evening.” Except for the tight set of his jaw signifying his obvious unease, Amelia knew little of his Clay’s internal discomfort. The last time he’d ever ask a woman to an outing was... well ... he couldn’t remember the last time he asked a woman to accompany him somewhere other than upstairs to his room for the night.

“I heard you the first time.” Amelia peeped behind her, only to see they’ve attracted the curiosity of Mr. and Mrs. Hardy and two other boarders. “But—but why? You can’t really mean to want to go with me. We’ve already been seen together too much as it is.” With as much strength as she could muster, Amelia hoped her voice betrayed little of the distress she felt on the inside. She was so happy to see him. Always, he could send her spirits to dizzying heights she was certain had nothing to do with her surges of morning sickness. But even standing there looking as well turned out as she’d ever known Clay to be, the last thing she wanted to do was to draw attention to his presence or their awkward relationship.

“Well, since I heard strangers are welcome so long as they don’t cause any trouble, I think I want to – to take you to that dance.” Clay gave her a once over and slowly realized she wasn’t anyway ready for a town dance. “If you think you want to—I mean if you’d like to accompany me?”

“Clay... You’ll ride out of here and—,” she lowered her voice, “so will I—”

“Yes,” Clay interrupted her, “But not tonight.” He drew himself tall, towering over her but never more confident in the answer he wanted from her. “Tonight, we are going to that dance. So you can go up them stairs, freshen up and I’ll wait or I can carry you out of here just the same way you are. Apron and all.”

“Clay, you wouldn’t.” Amelia gasped with horror.

“Wouldn’t I?” Clay took one step closer forcing Amelia into a clumsy retreat. “Now you get on up there. The Amelia I know would fight tooth and nails before she stepped outside with one strand of hair out of place.”

But he was only half right, Amelia thought as she examined the drab cotton of her frock. Shine wouldn’t step outside with a strand out of place. Amelia was perfectly happy to do so.

She saw him as he emerged from amongst a small group and holding his parcel. What a treat it would be share a tart or a candied peach with him. She hungered for so much more than pastries. She wanted to share many quiet sunsets with him with only the voices of their children to comfort them. They’d have a home somewhere peaceful, beautiful, a valley maybe, with all the promise of life she dreamed about.

To be a wife and mother all of his children.

To whisper her love to him every night. And to hear him say the same to her.

She wanted all of them. But they would never come true because at the end of the month Clay would leave her. This time, she knew she would never see him again.

“I don’t think this will help your stomach much, Mellie. All the things can’t be good for you.” Her eyes watered as he came within touching distance of her which was enough to stiffen other any protests from Clay. “But you can have as much as you can manage. No need to cry about it. God, I didn’t think I’ve ever seen you cry.”

“I know,” Amelia mumbled as she tried to smile. “It’s because of the baby, I think.” Hastily dabbing at the eyes, Amelia felt foolish at being caught. She reached out to take the parcel from him but found her hand captured by his. “I don’t think I’ve ever cried as much before the baby,” she confessed.

“Does it—does it hurt much?” Clay heard himself asked as he took her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He didn’t know much about women in this condition. He’d been an only child as a boy and hadn’t cared to eavesdrop on any conversation concerning the matter. Now, he simply wished he had. He felt like a fool, an oddity on the horizon and he wasn’t sure how to go about changing that circumstance.

Amelia found his question peculiar, but shook her head anyway. Why did he ask such a question? He was aware of her upsets and though she recalled how embarrassing it was to confess her proclivity for day-old bread, this caring, curious Clay was all too new to her. “On the good days, I’m afraid the retching is confined mostly to the mornings.” She smiled up at him, despite the surge of warm radiating from him to her.

“When will it stop? Do you know? You hardly weigh much when I first saw you, Amelia. Now, well you’re barely filling out. You should see the doc. Maybe he can give you something.”

“You know I can’t see him, Clay. Why, if I go then before the end of the day then the whole town would know,” Amelia pleaded, then pulling away from him.

But if she were married, Clay thought, there wouldn’t be damn thing to keep her out of the doctor’s room. Not the fear of rumors, no threat to her work at Elmira’s. Christ, he still couldn’t believe his Shine-no, his Amelia- took orders and fetched food all day.

“Besides, I think it is normal. One of the girls got in the family way a couple years ago. I think the same thing happened to her too, but maybe not as much. I’m just not sure when it’s suppose to stop or if it ever does. ”

Clay wasn’t too convinced but he couldn’t contradict her when he clearly knew so very little. Perhaps he could go see the doctor. He figured he would convince the man to see Amelia after dark. That way, no one in town would be the wiser, Amelia would be less distressed and his worries would lessen. Amelia might need convincing as well but a few well-placed kisses and Clay was certain she would agree with him.

Yes, first thing tomorrow he would find the Doc.

Tonight, he aimed to take her dancing and nothing was going to stand in his way.

“Do you suppose that man playing the harmonica knows a livelier tune than that one?” Amelia asked, grimacing at the nostalgic tones of the current tune. Funny, there was no home but the one she sort with Clay, to be homesick for.

“Well, I gather there is only one way to find,” he replied, the grin appearing on his face warning of something she would not find too

agreeable. Before she knew it Clay had her hand firmly grasped in his and pulling her towards the doors of the town hall.

“Clay! Wait, no! You can’t. We mustn’t go there.”

“And why not, Mellie? Who’s going to care if you have one dance with a stranger from out of town? What are you afraid of, huh? Or don’t you want to do that fancy footwork with me? ”

“Oh, I didn’t say or mean that, Clay.” Amelia was hurt he would think such a thing. Why she practically loved—. “I—I would love to dance with you. I’ve been looking forward to dancing with you since you first asked me Clay Brennen,” she confessed quietly.

Still sheltered from the eyes of passersby, he pulled her closer to his torso and rested her palm against over the wildness of his heart. God, he couldn’t believe. Clay couldn’t explain it but within his chest, his heart expanded until he was sure it would explode at the joy her words brought him. He lifted her chin, not seeing the blotches to her cheeks but as he grazed them he could feel the heat of them as sure as he’d seen them in the light of day. He leaned in, touching her lips gently with his and loving the feel of her as she reach up against him.

What changed about his Amelia? She’d never been lovelier with her short ringlets curling around her face and small plump lips flushed pink. Her face was scrubbed clean and not a shred of face powder Clay had seen before could make her prettier. He felt the sharp bite of desire and knew he’d never wanted another woman more. He wanted her so much that if he didn’t take her dancing soon where there were people looking on and he was forced to behave himself, he was afraid he would do something foolish and really sealed their fates. Like tossing her over his shoulder like a sac of meal and hurry to his rooms.

Desperate for some semblance of control over them or mostly himself, Clay slowly broke the need he had for her lips. He nibbled at the corner of her lips and he felt her lips curved against his. “We’re missing the dance, darling.” He continued along the slender curve of the jaw, halting to at the delicate curve of her ear. “That old harmonica’s slowed down some.” Hard as it was, Clay leaned away from her, allowing rays of the burning lights to wash over her, the way she seemed to flow over his soul. “Dance with me,” he whispered.

She gazed up at him and as she did so, Clay could see her eyes sparkling like spring water on a new morning. “Yes,” she consented.

And he saw that he eyes were filled with tears.

Chapter 11

Later, much, much later

Amelia laced her fingers with Clay's as they glided along to the distance pull of the music. She felt transfixed in the wave of quiet exhilaration his embrace brought. He was so close to her that Amelia's thigh perspired under the heat generated from his more powerful thighs. His hand caressed the length of her sleeved arm, traveling up her shoulder, tickling her desire with each light stroke. Gently, Clay's hands enclosed the warm column of her neck moving across the rapid patter at the base. Darkened lids fluttered closed as Amelia arched further into him, breathing deeply as if he took her breath away.

Amelia took his breath away. With every subtle movement of her body against his, she burned him. His body, his mind, his soul, all felt consumed by her. And Clay could do nothing to stop her. Nor did he want to. He kissed her lips slowly, building her passion, lolling them gently with his own as his tongue darted to taste even more of them.

They were sweet. Sticky with the remnants of honey and he'd never tasted better.

He felt small dainty taps against his the robust built of his shoulder and for a second, he felt fear. Fear and the desperation that she wanted no more of him. He groaned deeply, almost as if he meant to plea for the kindness of another kiss as he encircled her waist and sealed her against him.

"Oh Clay," he heard her breathe as she hugged him just as fiercely.

“Stay with me, Mellie,” The plea sounded husky at her temple all due to his rabid heart. It thudded so vigorously Clay felt it was no longer lodged within his breast but somewhere in his throat. “Stay with me tonight,” he uttered again, attempting to overcome the pounding no longer confined to his chest and throat but now filled his head.

Beneath his hand, Clay felt lithe muscles corded from the small of her back to her shoulders. Amelia began to extricate herself from him but only enough to allow movement of her fists between them.

“Wait.”

“I wasn’t going to leave, Clay,” Amelia confessed. She felt his lips pressed against her forehead. She looked at him, garnering his expression but his slow grin was an infectious one.

“Oh Mellie.” God, he could hardly contain how overjoyed her acceptance made him. He lifted her from her feet, stealing her cry of surprise as his laughter filled his rooms then he kissed her, long and deep.

All he could think of was never letting her go again. He thought of keeping her in his bed, isolated from the world and loving her in ways he’d only dreamed about. No, he would never let her go. And first thing, first thing tomorrow he would see that doctor. He could take care of her and their child.

He could only hope she could forgive him after he behaved like some low-down dirty rotter. Did she care for him at all? His mind clung to the hope that she did. She just had to.

He lifted Amelia square off her feet and he damn near shivered when she rested her palms against him. They no longer heard music from the Town Hall and in the quiet of the room, Clay stated, “I aim to

take you to bed, darling. . .” And even if it killed him, he wasn’t going to touch her if she didn’t want him to. “...but you ain’t got to stay because I want you to. I reckon I’ve been a fool to say them hurtful words to you when I did.” She opened her mouth to say something but Clay continued. “And I’m not saying so just because I want to take you to bed. Lord knows I want to in a bad way but you tell me to take you home and I’ll do it, Amelia.”

He was waiting for an answer but Amelia could scarcely swallow the anguish his words had indeed brought her. “Maybe I am a bigger fool to let you, Clay Brennen.” Tensed shoulders dropped wearily as she gazed into his darker eyes. “No one ever said words that hurt me before. And that’s because I never cared what anyone said. I never cared what anyone else but you said. But you didn’t care about me did you? You left me, Clay.”

She wanted the truth, Clay knew, and he didn’t feel any less guilty giving it to her. Had he been so silently cruel to her? “I did care Mellie. Just not like I should’ve. Not like I do now.” His hand moved within soft curls and he brought her lips closer to his. “It isn’t easy for me to say what’s on my heart. The way I see it, I’ve got no experience with saying the things a woman want to hear but I—I want you with me Mellie.” She was shaking her head before he even finished and Clay felt frantic. He grew desperate with every second that passed by... “Come with me at the end of the month, Mellie. We’ll go north to my land. I’ve got a cottage there. Well, there’s just one bedroom but come next summer we’ll have another room added for the baby...”

All the things she had ever wanted from him. Everything except the one thing she craved. “Oh Clay, why? Why do you ask this of me now?” Her voice struggled with the event of tears but only long enough for Amelia to shed them on the dark cotton of his shirt. Why now when

she already resigned her heart and soul to never seeing him. Why would he dangle this unattainable dream before and expected her to accept it without question or voice of fear?

“I don’t know, darling.” His voiced struggled as well. “But I can’t let you go. You go off and my gut tells me I’ll be making the biggest mistake this side of the earth. Say you’ll forgive me, Mellie. Say you’ll stay with me. Say you’ll love me though I don’t deserve it.”

Shock widened her eyes, causing them to simmer in the dim light. “Clay Brennen, damn you for making me cry again. I didn’t want to cry over you ever again.” But tears strolled down her cheeks anyway. “You blind fool. I’ve always loved you.” Above the sniffles she could no more control sprouting the words on her heart than the tears. “I’ve loved you from the very first time you touched me. I loved you when you left me and even more when you came back. Don’t you see? I couldn’t stay in Lake Valley anymore. Not when I loved you.”

“You love me now, Mellie? ‘Cause I reckon I’m about crazy in love with you.”

Amelia caressed the smoothed contours of his jaw, delighting in the masculine feel of him and basking in the joy that radiated from her heart to all parts of her body, blooming like a rose.

“With all my heart,” she whispered to him.

About the Author

Crysta Allie is an aspiring author from the beautiful Caribbean. If it's one thing she's inherited from her father is her love of Western genre. Since moving to the United States, it was natural to find her to be fascinated with the vast history of the American West.

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Happy reading.