

Nine at Night

by S. Y. Affolee

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Chapter 1

Nine briefly touched the cool glass of the window in the train berth as she looked outside at the passing scenery. The autumn was closing in on the landscape, turning the grass yellow and tipping the trees gold. As the trip progressed, the gray-blue mountains in the background loomed closer, giving her the impression of weight. It was enough to send someone into a panic, she thought. She was already having second thoughts about her decision and this entire trip.

The whole reason why she was coming out west lay in the fact that she was trying to escape her destiny, what she had been originally made for. Back east, she had been created in the Laboratory of Genetic Studies in New York, created to help staff the factories in which natural born humans were not designed for. Nine's original designation had been the Rennell Line, after a template developed by one of the lab geneticists, Dr. Robert Rennell, who had used his own dead daughter Lily as the template. But it wasn't long after development that Rennell and his assistants discovered that there was something terribly wrong with the Rennell Line. Every single one of the individuals in the Rennell Line except for the ninth, who was Nine herself, either died inexplicably or later terminated for gross psychological abnormalities.

Only Nine, apparently, seemed normal. Although there were many times when she thought that perhaps she did have a flaw, except that it was hidden far better than in her other clones. Because if she wasn't flawed, then why would she be coming out here in the middle of nowhere instead of staying "safe" at the factory?

In the beginning, the factory was the only thing she knew. She had been designed that way, to be an expert seamstress, to see in the dark so that the factory owners could save on electricity, and to be quick with her reflexes, especially among dangerous machinery. But as the only one left in her line, she was obviously different than all of

the other factory workers who came from the more successful Tudor Line or Greyson Line. They had many of the same physical characteristics that she did. But their difference was their complacency. Nine wasn't complacent. It didn't take her long to be dissatisfied with life in the factory, especially after she noticed that the factory owners lead much different lives than her kind. The Tudors and the Greysons never noticed the difference and they both berated her for her disobedience when she dared to broach the subject to them.

The train disgorged the mail-order brides who fluttered into the station like a flock of nervous pastel-colored doves. Nine Lily Rendell hung back a few paces. She looked no different than the others in her light blue-gray traveling frock, matching hat, and purse. But it wasn't an ordinary purse. It contained a Colt single action .45 with several metallic cartridges loaded in the revolving cylinder. One of the bullets was intended for her would-be husband.

Well, Nine amended to herself, it would be used as a last resort if her current plans to become a free woman went seriously awry.

The exhaust from the resting steam engine choked the air with fumes. Nine covered her nose with the back of her hand as she made her way across the station platform where the rest of the women mingled, with part excitement and part apprehension. There was a small iron gate which separated the station platform from the other side of the station and the men who were waiting for them.

The women had come from various towns out east. As Nine was traveling with them, she learned that many of them had taken a chance on moving west and marrying strangers to escape their hometowns which had little opportunity for spinsters with no apparent prospects.

Nine was escaping for similar reasons, although she couldn't really care less if her prospects for marriage were positive or negative. Instead, she was heading west for far more basic reasons. To be free. Especially from the endless factory drudgery that she had been born into.

One of the station managers tipped his hat to the women and went over to the gate to open it for them. They spilled over to the other side, most of them taking cautious steps towards the crowd of people waiting on the other side. Briefly, Nine looked back at the train which had been her home for the past two days. Workers were

already heading towards the baggage car to get the trunks and bags which the women had taken with them on their journey to a new life. A second group of workers were at a couple cars ahead to take other cargo out--materials sold from the east. And a little further from that, she saw a herd of cattle standing by, probably ready to be shipped out to the slaughter house.

Finally, the woman in front of her had stepped passed the gate and now it was her turn. Nine was aware that the passing of this threshold was a step towards a completely different life, a life that she was at the moment completely ignorant of. Too many questions crowded her brain and she could only muster a weak smile at the station manager as she passed him. The man gave her a sympathetic expression, perhaps mistaking her nervousness for the nervousness in meeting a prospective husband.

But once she stepped out towards the front of the station, she was suddenly in the midst of an even stranger gathering of people, of mail-order brides attempting to find a men they had only corresponded before by letter. And, Nine supposed, she should be doing the same thing.

Back when she had been working at the factory, she had seen an advertisement in the back of a newspaper that she had seen disgarded in the street right outside of the tenement house that she had been living in. For some reason, the advertisement had sparked something in her, to find a way out of the drudgery that so far, had been her entire life. So she had written to the man who had placed the advertisement, mostly thinking that it wouldn't hurt to try even if numerous better prospects had also sent letters to him. And to her surprise, she heard back. And after a few exchanges, he offered to pay for her train ticket out west to see if they could suit.

She had written back saying yes, and that he could recognize her because she was wearing a brass pin in the shape of a sleeping cat on the lapel of her jacket. She figured that it would be simple enough. It would be too hard to describe herself as she had never been created to look particularly distinctive. And from his last letter, which came with the train ticket, he had said that she would recognize him by the white carnation in his breast pocket.

At the station, there were a number of men with flowers pinned to their suits. What were the chances, she wondered, that more than one of them had the same flower? From her conversations with the other women on the train, though, she knew that no

one else had a cat pin so if worse came to worse, if she couldn't recognize him, certainly he would recognize her.

Several men glanced at her, but once seeing the cat pin, turned elsewhere. Momentarily at a loss at how to find anyone in the crowd, Nine was easily distracted by the commotion on the other side of the station as the train workers began hauling all of the trunks and baggage off to one area where the passengers could more easily find their things. It was then, while she was watching the workers, that she became aware that someone was watching her. Slowly, she turned around.

A figure was standing next to one of the supporting struts that held up the station roof. The man was smartly dressed in a dark smoky gray jacket and trousers. His dark leather boots were shined to a high polish and his hat, a Stetson, was slightly tilted forward so that from her vantage point, she could only see the strong line of his jaw and the curve of his mouth. The head of a white carnation sat in his breast pocket.

But before she could step towards him, she was sidlined by another man, a thin man with a mustache and his hair slicked back with pomade. He smelled strangely of talcum powder.

"There you are, Ingrid! I've been looking all over for you!" He grabbed her shoulders, which made her reflexively jerk away. Her mind immediately went to the gun in her handbag. "What's wrong, Ingrid? This is Bob, from the letters!"

"I'm not Ingrid," she said, surprising herself with how calm her voice sounded to her ears. "I think you've mistaken me for someone else."

The man narrowed his eyes and that was when Nine noticed that he only had one ear. The other was a prosthesis, a fake wooden ear painted to match the color of his flesh. He could have gotten a plas-flesh prosthesis to match better, and considering the fact that he was here to meet another mail-order bride, she suspected that he had the money to actually buy one if he wanted one, but the fact that he didn't made her pause for a moment.

"Ingrid said in her letter that she had dark hair and she would be wearing a blue dress," he said. "You're wearing a blue dress."

"I'm sorry, but I must insist that you've mistaken me for someone else. There are other women here who are wearing blue. I am looking for a man named Caleb Justice. You said your name is Bob?"

At the name of the man she was looking for, Bob made a disconcerting hiss between his teeth and released her like a hot potato. "Justice is an idiot for ordering something like you," he spat before he whirled away to find the real Ingrid.

Nine finally took a deep breath and found that her hands were shaking. Intellectually, she knew this would happen sooner or later, but she had rather hoped for later. For some reason, she had the thought that no one in the west really knew anything about the genmods created to do menial work in the factories. And that even if they did, they couldn't tell that she was one--after all, she had been based on a natural person. But she had been frank with Caleb Justice in her letters. And perhaps this Caleb Justice had told his neighbors about her.

"You'll find that a lot of people around here don't think too highly of me," said the man in his dark gray suit, perhaps his Sunday best. His voice was a gruff drawl, thickly liquid compared to the more clipped east coast accent. "Some things may not be entirely incorrect of them."

"Does that mean you're an idiot?" Nine replied coolly.

"Touche." He stepped forward and took his hat off. Unlike Bob, his dark hair was simply clean and combed back, although a little long compared to the fashions that Nine had been accustomed with back east. He stood over her, a head taller. His eyes were also an odd shade of green, almost silver, but she dismissed it as a trick of the light and her fanciful imagination. The only genmods out west were the ones created to do the hard, dangerous labor. The mining and the railroad building. This man, though a little rough around the edges, seemed a little too well-groomed and intact to be doing such things.

"I assume you're Mr. Caleb Justice?"

"One and the same. And you must be Miss Nine Lily Rennell, who prefers to be called Nine in her letters." He cocked his head. "Do you also prefer to be called Nine in person?"

She briefly ducked her head. "Yes, although Miss Rennell would be fine as well." She did not elaborate even though he slanted her an odd glance. She thought of herself as Nine, even though in some ways it uncomfortably reminded her of her origins, being called Lily Rennell was worse. Lily Rennell was her creator's dead daughter. She wasn't Lily Rennell and she never would be. On that account the others, who usually

complacently worked at the factories, also took nicknames to differentiate themselves from their origin line.

Many natural humans, however, didn't bother to learn their nicknames if they were obviously a genmod and simply called all of them Abigail Peters or John Eldritch--the names of their origin lines. It was only to Nine's luck that the other twenty-four clones to the experimental Lily Rennell line had died or been terminated because of flaws.

Not that Nine didn't have any flaws herself.

"Did you bring luggage with you, Miss Rennell?"

Jolted from her uncomfortable reverie by the question, Nine nodded her head again. "I don't have many things. Just a trunk. It's blue."

He put his hat back on his head and his mouth slightly curved upward. "You must like the color blue."

"It reminds me of the sky."

"Well, you're going to see a lot of it here. This isn't called Big Sky Country for nothing."

The two of them walked toward the baggage area which had already become crowded with people. Reflexively, Nine craned her neck and stood on her tiptoes to try to see if she could spot her trunk. But she couldn't see anything except the backs of other people's heads.

"Here, let me try," he told her. He edged forward and almost miraculously, the people in front of him parted a bit to let them squeeze through. Then again, perhaps it was his apparent reputation with the townspeople that allowed him to do that--as evidenced by Bob's reaction to his name and the barely veiled expressions of some of the other men in the surrounding milieu.

In a few moments, they found themselves at the front of the crowd and it was from here that Nine easily spotted her blue trunk. It was medium sized, three feet across, one foot in length and two feet in depth. It was no bigger or smaller than any of the other trunks. But still, when Nine pointed it out, she didn't expect him to take it himself. Perhaps he would drag the trunk out of the station or at least ask someone else to help him.

But he simply hefted the trunk onto one shoulder and headed out of the station,

scattering everyone else. Nine was left following in his wake and shooting furtive glances at everyone else around them. The men, who knew of his reputation, looked at him in awe and maybe even a little fear which Nine found curious and not a little worrying.

The women, all who traveled with her on the train, gave more admiring glances, reserving darker looks at her. They had no need to be jealous, she thought. Physical appearances could be deceiving. Many of the genmods engineered for more illicit pleasures were very beautiful, but they were as intelligent as rocks and just as cruel when they weren't at work. But their flaws were considered very minor by their creator--because if it didn't detract from their performance, why bother fixing it? All genmods were engineered for their productivity, not their personalities.

Back outside the station, Justice headed toward a horse-drawn cart at the other end of the main street that led into town. At his master's approach, the horse pulling the cart, a brown coat gelding with a white blaze on his forehead, whickered a welcome. He placed her trunk at the back of the cart before helping her up onto the front bench. The touch of his hand was firm, almost impersonal, but his grip lingered a moment longer than what she would have expected. She found herself staring ahead at the horse's ears as he vaulted into the driver's seat beside her. The cart was small so that their seats were close together, but they weren't sitting so close that they were touching.

With the flick of the reins and a loud clicking sound Justice made with his mouth, the horse perked up and began pulling the cart out onto the road. The cart jolted hard once on the gravelly ground, making Nine hold her hat with one hand and the edge of her seat with the other. They headed towards the large congregation of wood clapboard buildings lining the main street. Even from the train station, she could see the hand painted signs advertising the services of a local dentist and the masonry society.

"We're heading into town?" she asked. "I thought in your letters you lived out on a ranch."

"I do," he replied. "But the ranch is south of town. The train station is north of town."

"So we have to drive through town," she murmured, mostly to herself. She wished that she were more blase about the whole thing, but she was acutely aware that she was on display riding in this open air cart. Any pedestrian could gawk at her as she

rode through town. She imagined that all the eyes were upon her, curious, watchful, possibly suspicious. After all, she and the rest of the mail order brides were strangers in town. In a larger city on the east coast, no one would particularly care as people were always moving in and out of the cities. But here out on the western frontier where the towns were smaller, any stranger, man or woman, natural human or genmod, would stand out simply because they weren't familiar.

"Cat's Eye isn't as large as your average east coast town," Justice said, as if reading her mind. "There are probably about eight hundred people in the town proper. There are about a thousand more in the surrounding area and about five hundred working for the mining company even further south."

"That still sounds like a sizeable number of people."

"It may sound like a good number on paper, but in reality, you don't see all those people at once," he said. His tone was even as if he were stating a fact, but she didn't miss the undercurrent of warning in his voice. "Most people spend most of their days out here without seeing anyone except other members of their family and the rest of the elements."

"But at your ranch, you're not the only one there, are you? You mentioned in your letters that you have a number of employees. Your foreman, about ten other men you called ranch hands, and a cook who also does some housekeeping duties."

At her mention of the cook housekeeper, she turned her head in time to see the line of his mouth tighten. "About the cook. Unfortunately, she quit just last week. She decided to move with her husband to Virginia City to seek their fortune in the latest gold rush."

"Oh." That bit of information churned in her mind for a bit as she watched the rest of the town go by. For some reason, the passing shops and even the church with its high steeple did not particularly register. Instead, she thought about cooking and housekeeping and all the other drudgery that entailed. When she lived in tenement housing with the other factory workers, they had all shared their chores. So she didn't mind that. But out here on the frontier, she suspected that she would be expected to do all of that work since there wouldn't be any other women on the ranch.

"I hope this isn't too much of a problem for you," he continued. "The other ranch hands and I will help, of course, until you get into a routine, but it will be something

you'll have to do if you, ah, decide to stay."

Nine went west with the sole intention of being free. This was just part of her plan and a small setback. If she found a way to get out of the factory system in the first place, she could very well find a way to get out of this. "I am not entirely adverse to work," she replied. "I have worked in a factory. I am not one of those women who have spent her life pampered in a genteel household."

"I'm glad to hear of that. There have been some women who've come out here and decided that life in the frontier didn't suit them. That happened to my foreman. Unfortunately, he fell in love with her right before she decided to quit Cat's Eye and go back east."

"I see."

"It made him cynical about this whole business. It might be useful for you to know that he was against the idea of me placing an advertisement in the papers back east."

"Obviously, you didn't follow his advice."

"No. But that doesn't mean that I'm not cautious. I will tell you right now that life out here on the frontier is hard, even at the best of times. Only the people who've been born here or are desperate enough to make a living stay here. That goes for men and women."

"And where do you lie on that spectrum?"

"I didn't begin my life here in this particular town," he replied. "But I did grow up on the frontier on a ranch a hundred miles east of here. My older brother still owns it."

"And so you wanted to start a ranch here on your own, away from your brother's shadow?"

"Something like that." He seemed to lapse into a silent brood after that comment which gave Nine the chance to look more closely at the town that they passed.

There were a number of shops lining the main street. The architecture, however, was rustic and somewhat random, each of the wooden two-story facades painted in different colors. Nine made a mental note of the general store and the telegraph office, the doctor's clinic and the saloon. Despite knowing what all these shops were, it was still a bit alien as these same shops back east were all housed in neat Victorian style buildings or a more modern gothic style built entirely from brick. Back there, the

houses were far more stately and sturdy. Here, Nine could easily imagine all of them blowing away in a cyclone.

But it wasn't long that they passed the main street and turned on a more dusty trail heading south. The buildings immediately thinned out, giving way to flat land lined with yellow-green grass and the further off forest which sloped up steeply into the mountains. Not far from the road, she could see a herd of black cattle grazing on the grass. None of the animals looked up as they rolled past.

It was then that Nine realized that not only was the land here more wide and open, but the air was clearer. On the train, she had not noticed a difference between the air inside and that of the city from where she came from. Perhaps it was because the air inside the train carriages were enclosed and whenever someone opened a window, the air rushed past too quickly to make it inside to give anyone a fresh breath.

But here out in the west country, there was a cool crispness to the atmosphere. Yes, some of it was due to the changing seasons from summer to autumn, but it was also the quality of the mountain air itself. No doubt, the clean air was also due to the fact that the landscape was not littered with rows and rows of factories belting out smoke from their smelters.

After a moment of staring out into the open space, she turned back to look at the man who was sitting beside her. "Tell me about Cat's Eye, Montana," she said. "You mentioned the population and what there is to do here. They all sound interesting even though I'm not quite sure what you mean by rodeos and cattle roping."

"Rodeos involve cattle roping," he said, finally pulling himself out of his brooding reverie. "The two events aren't mutually exclusive. But it's probably not the sort of event a proper lady would think to attend. It's rough men's work. It's just a contest for something that many ranch hands end up doing on their daily schedule."

Nine didn't think of herself as a proper lady. She was more of a commoner, really, and had no contact or experience with society's elite in the city. Of course, she had heard about all of their doings, the fancy dress balls and sumptuous dinners, the scandalous affairs and the financial takeovers. But all of this had been printed in newspapers, filtered out by the discerning eye of the reporter. So the concept of "lady" might as well be a fairy tale concept to her. But she didn't think that Caleb Justice really meant anything when he said it. It was probably some sort of local colloquial saying.

She was anticipating that there was going to be a lot of things that she didn't understand out here. And she would have to be a quick learner if she had planned to be on her own in the not too distant future. But she didn't doubt her own abilities to pick up things quickly. She had been raised in a creche with others of her kind. They were taught the basic knowledge of what every other natural child learned, up to the age of twelve. But by age eight, they were also being trained in the trade skills that were necessary to work in the factory. Those particular skills, Nine found that she had picked up rather quickly. Maybe it was because she had been designed on the outset to do those things. Most would say that she had.

But unlike the others who were simply content with what they learned, Nine knew that she didn't have to be so rigid that she stuck herself into a box of skills that she already knew that she was good at. Perhaps in her secret self, she wanted to prove that she could be somebody who wasn't like everyone else.

So at the moment, even though she spoke with Justice about the peculiarities of the town of Cat's Eye, she also was observing how he handled the reins to drive the cart. Because someday soon, she knew, she would have to do the same thing. And she might be in a situation where she couldn't really hesitate on what to do.

"So your ranch hands do a lot of cattle roping?"

"Most of it happens when it's time to round up the cattle to go to market," he said. "That's about at the end of every month or so. Otherwise, the ranch hands are there to keep a watch on the animals, to see which ones are sick or pregnant. There are other animals on the ranch that need tending, too, and they do that work as well."

"I suppose I'll see all of that once I get there."

He murmured an affirmative and then said, "I'm not the town historian, but I do know a little about Cat's Eye. It was originally founded as a mining town. You might have a chance later to wander around the town on shopping day, but what you'll see is that the west side of town is an abandoned dig site. It was about fifty years before that some fortune hunters discovered a vein of gold. But that gold soon ran out and they had to move elsewhere. The people who started up Cat's Eye in response to that small gold rush, however, remained here and flourished despite the lack of gold. Some people took up farming. But most took up ranching."

"But you said before that there was also a mining company here."

At that reminder, he gave a sigh and said, "Yes, there is that. It's south from my ranch a ways, but I suppose that you could even call the mining company our neighbor. They came here late, just six months ago, but they've already rucked up the land good."

"Then why are they mining next to your property if there's no gold there?"

"There might not be gold, but apparently there are other minerals, according to some surveyor the mining company sent out earlier. They're here digging for copper, and it is in some ways worse than gold. They've already set up a lot of industrial equipment and it's already pouring out a lot of smoke which hangs like a black cloud over that area. But as far as I've heard, they haven't found much copper yet."

"You don't sound happy about that."

"I'm not. I was on my land first. And people should respect that. But unfortunately, there are some who respect money more."

"I have no argument with that," she replied, thinking of her own circumstances. She was quite sure that the beginning of her very existence owed itself to that of someone's greed. But that didn't mean that she would live the rest of her existence catering to that greed. "So why is the town named Cat's Eye?"

"Some say it's because there are mountain lions and cougars living out here in the wild, hiding in the mountains," he said. "There's a story of an old man, back in the mining camp days, who went to check on a noise that he heard in the middle of the night, thinking it was another miner trying to take over his claim. But he came face to face with a mountain lion instead, a mountain lion with bright shining eyes in the night. And that's why they say it is named Cat's Eye."

"Hm. It's a very fanciful story," she replied. "But you don't sound like you believe it."

"People like to tell tall tales in the frontier," he leaned back a bit to stretch his long legs while still keeping an eye on the ambling gelding that pulled their cart. "It's to entertain ourselves during the dark winter nights when we have nothing else to do. Or to pull a fast one on gullible city folks."

"I'm a gullible city folk, so why aren't you telling me that it's true?"

The edge of his mouth quirked upward. "You seem like the sort of woman who wouldn't tolerate being pulled a fast one. I saw how you handled Bob. You were as cool as a cucumber."

"I might have only seemed to be cool under pressure, but really, I think that whole thing at the train station was luck. There were a surprising number of people there. I had the impression that Cat's Eye wasn't that big of a town. When I went to Central Station at the city, there were even more people there, but it wasn't unexpected." she shook her head as she kept her eye trained on the rutted road ahead. "So what do you think is the reason why Cat's Eye was named Cat's Eye?"

"Well, Cat's Eye used to be a mining town. And there wasn't just gold here. Some people found some silver and some other precious stones. Mostly garnets. But one of the men who was on the committee for naming the town had a stake where he found a lot of peculiar gemstones called cat's eye."

"I've never heard of it."

"It's yellow, like that of a cat's eye, and if you polish it the right way, there's a shining luminescent band which makes the whole gem look like the slitted eye of a cat. They're rare, though, so not many people around here have actually seen one even though most know what it is."

"So this man who had a mining stake with those gemstones, he managed to convince the others on the committee to name the town after those gems?"

"It's a good guess as any," he replied. "We would not really know for sure as all of the files on the meetings that the naming committee attended are currently sealed for the next fifty years."

"Sealed?"

He shrugged. "I suppose it's to prevent people from challenging their decision right after they made it. Although there have been rumors that the town could have been named Mildred, after the mayor's mother-in-law. Or possibly Moose Scat Gulch."

Nine involuntarily made a face which elicited a chuckle from him. "Moose Scat Gulch? Why on earth would anyone think that was a good name?"

"That's pretty much the same comment every woman makes whenever she hears about it," he said on a last chuckle. "Perhaps it's just something that grates on a woman's sensibilities. I don't pretend to understand why."

"It's disgusting, that's what," said Nine. "If you want to take pride in your town, why name it after the leavings of a large animal?"

"Probably because that's what a lot of people who hunt here see sometimes."

Especially during the month of January. From what I hear, moose usually keep to the forests a bit further south from here, but sometimes some of them roam up further north, probably in search of food as it becomes scarce during the winter."

"I've only heard of moose. And from what I've heard, they can kick someone to death."

"Oh, I suppose that may happen, but I don't personally know anyone to whom that has happened to. I think the only person I know who has had the fortune to encounter a moose was one of the junior cow hands, Jesse. He was out hunting with a couple of the other cow hands from a neighboring ranch and they thought they saw one from a distance on a ridge."

"Then there's little chance that I'll see a moose while I'm here?"

"I would never say never."

The road curved a bit, turning ever so slightly towards the mountains. Nine spotted a long fence, stretching onwards onto the flat part of the land. A mile further down the road, there was another fence that ran crosswise, dividing up the land from the parcel before. When Nine asked about it, Justice explained that land that they were passing belonged to the ranches of his northern neighbors, John Morton and Ronny Dale. It would only be a couple more miles until they reached the Justice Ranch.

But as they neared the edge of the Justice Ranch, Nine became acutely aware of a burning smell reaching her nose. Her suspicions were confirmed when she saw gray smoke rising from behind a copse of trees. Justice had detected the smoke, too. When she glanced over at him, his face had turned grim and with a subtle movement of his hand, which Nine committed to memory, he urged his horse to go into a canter.

Nine didn't complain. Instead, she grabbed the edge of her seat and her hat again as the ride became a bit bumpier. She craned her neck to see if she could catch what was on fire.

"That doesn't look good," she said, pitching her voice above the creaks and rattle of the rolling cart.

"Well, if it eases your mind, it doesn't look like it's coming from the ranch house," he replied. "It's supposed to be empty land right there so I'm not sure what's happening."

When they rounded the corner and finally saw what was on the other side of the

trees, Nine simply blinked and stared. There were a number of men standing a good ways from the fire, men wearing the uniform of cowboys and cowhands, the chaps, the flannel shirts, the distinctive hats, and the leather boots. They turned at the sound of their approach and a couple of them hailed Justice by name.

But those men did not hold Nine's attention. Instead, it was the bonfire that was burning not that far from the copse of quivering aspens. The fire itself burned high with bright orange flames licking outward. The smoke spiralled upward into the blue sky. But the things being burned had already turned bone white from the searing heat, bubbling strangely into the ground.

Whatever was burning in the pile next to the copse of trees might have been living at one time. Nine couldn't be sure. But whatever it was, it was definitely unnatural despite being warped even further from the flames. The shapes of those things were nothing that Nine had ever seen before. So she voiced her thought, "Is that natural?"

After waving to the men standing next to the bonfire, Justice turned back to her with a quizzical expression. "Natural?"

"Those things in the fire."

Overhearing her comment, one of the men closer to the cart, a thin younger man with orange hair sticking out from beneath his hat, "It's nothing to bother your pretty little head about," he said.

She gave him a glare from her perch on the cart. "My head is not little."

Justice gave a gesture with his hand which had the orange-haired young man stammering out an apology and heading back to the cluster of other men on the other side of the bonfire. "Of course it isn't," said Justice. "But Ian is right. It's nothing that you should worry about. It's just a little alarming to see such a big bonfire if you're not expecting it." And a little louder, he said, "And my men should have remembered to tell me about it before I left this morning."

"Sorry, Justice," said another man who had walked over to the other side of the cart to directly talk to him. "This came up at the last minute when some of the men, uh, spotted some things at the edge of the property line."

It didn't sit well with Nine that the men were effectively dismissing her curiosity. That they were dismissing her concerns because she was a stranger and a woman let alone something else. And it irked her that these men thought that she wasn't

intelligent enough to really understand what was happening either. She knew whatever was burning in that bonfire wasn't natural and it was no small thing if all of Justice's employees were gathered around it.

But then again, she realized that Justice was their boss and that if she questioned him, it would also be seen as questioning authority. Justice wouldn't like it. And certainly, his men wouldn't like it either since they owed their loyalty to him. They knew nothing of her. She was very familiar with this dynamic, especially when she had lived out east and she had finally worked up the courage to question her supervisors on certain policies they had with workers who had been created to work in the factories. Needless to say, the responses that she had gotten then weren't positive. And she was sure that whatever responses she would get now wouldn't be any different.

So she sat back in her seat and bit her tongue. She would bide her time. Perhaps, when she was talking with Justice without an audience, she would put the question to him again.

There was some more chitchat that Justice talked with the larger man. From overhearing his comments, Nine found out that this man was the ranch foreman who was named Anderson. Nine wasn't quite sure if that was his last name or his first name, but since everyone else addressed Justice by his last name, she assumed that Anderson was a last name, too. There wasn't anything else interesting about their conversation, except from what Nine gathered, they were probably talking about the day-to-day operations of the ranch.

And then after they finished, and a cautious hat tip from Anderson to her, Caleb tugged on the reins again and the horse drawing the cart edged off, back onto the road. Nine couldn't help but turn back to look at the bonfire, smoke spiralling up into the sky. The men had already forgotten her presence as they did not look back at her. Instead they, too, were concentrating on the fire.

"The ranch house is up this way, about a mile," Justice said, drawing her attention back to him. In the back of her mind, she wondered if this wasn't a deliberate subject change. And for that, she didn't exactly blame him. If she were him, she wouldn't want a stranger's mind to dwell on something that was obviously not any of their business. "It's a bit rustic, I admit, compared to any of the houses in the cities, but it's not completely uncivilized."

"How big is your entire property, anyway?" she asked.

"It's several thousand acres, I reckon. It stretches from the neighbor's plot, which you saw up the road that was divided by fencing. And it stretches all the way to the foot of those mountains there. To the south, it goes down to the creek which divides the property from what has been claimed by the mining company."

"That's a lot of land." Nine didn't keep the surprise from showing in her voice. "I suppose it's because you let your animals roam?"

"Part of the reason," he said. "Up there, past that line of trees."

As the road rounded another bend, Nine could see the line of trees that he had pointed out. These were tall oak trees with large boughs overshadowing a significant part of the ground beneath them. She could see that there were animals lounging about in the shade. There were three brown cows and a large black bull. At the cart's approach, they briefly turned their heads to watch the horse and two humans approach. But as it wasn't anything that they hadn't seen before, the bovines turned their heads back to ignore them.

The ranch house stood on a small rising hill with nothing but tall imposing mountains in the background. The house appeared to be built of nothing but logs, but it was an impressive cabin with two stories and a wrap around porch both on the first and second stories. It was in a western style, a completely different architectural style to what she was used to on her time on the coast, but as to its impact, Nine was a bit awed. And intimidated. It was on par to what some of the upper crust elite lived in on the expensive neighborhood streets.

"It's huge," Nine said, not particularly knowing what else to say. If what Justice had said was right, that his cook and housekeeper were gone, that would mean that her task of running the house was even more daunting than she had imagined.

As if reading her dismayed expression, he said, "It does look large, I suppose. But with all the land available out here, why not build large? Some of the wives of the ranch hands do come in to do some of the work since the housekeeper has left, but it is more to tide me over until I can find a more permanent housekeeper. You would probably be in charge of that, if you decide to stay."

Nine had never been in charge of anything in her life. Instead, she had been the one being bossed around. But then again, she didn't really know what to think about

that possibility. She hadn't really thought to much further than the fact that she make herself a free woman.

They stopped in front of the house and Justice got off to help her off the cart before she could think of sliding down to the ground. But once on her feet, she got to see the house up close, craning her neck up to look up at the second floor as well. To her untrained eye, the house looked very well put together despite it being made of planks of wood. The wood itself had been weathered by the elements so that the color was as dark as rum. But other than the house itself, there were little touches that indicated that Justice had not been lying that some of the ranch hands' wives had been working on the house. There were flower boxes in front of the windows on the front of the house, planted with yellow and orange chrysanthemums. On the swinging porch bench next to the front door was a folded knit blanket on which a large black cat napped.

As Nine was surveying all of this, Justice went back to the cart to get her trunk. He did this easily, holding the trunk to his shoulder with one hand as he used the other to unlock the front door and push the door open. With nothing else to do, she followed him inside and was greeted with extremely strange and foreign decor that she had only heard about.

The main room was dominated by a wood stove and a fireplace, each in use, she guessed, depending on the situation. There was a bear rug on the floor in front of the fireplace with the head still intact. On the walls were heads of elk and deer and other assorted game animals, stuffed and mounted. The furniture was very similar to the architecture of the house--made with heavy wood and only cushioned when necessary. Past the main room was a hallway which was bare except for a small table with a wooden vase filled with wildflowers standing in front of a large mirror. They walked passed it on their way to the stairs and Nine was a bit surprised at a glance at herself. She looked mostly unruffled from all of the new things that she had encountered during that day.

The stairs were a bit narrow, but somehow, Justice squeezed himself and the trunk up the flight and to the landing to the second floor. On the first door to the right, Justice opened the door with his free hand and then deposited the trunk at the foot of a large bed that was covered in a colorful blue and red quilt sewn into the design of interlocking diamonds. On the wall opposite of the bed was a large window with transparent white curtains overlooking the land and the mountains behind the house.

And to the other wall, closer to the door, was a wardrobe and a stand with a pitcher and a wash basin. There was another small table next to the bed that had a small drawer below it and an old fashioned oil lamp on top of it.

"This is the guest room," said Justice as he turned to head out of the room. "This will be your room in the mean time. If there's anything you need, just let me know. Meanwhile, let me show you the rest of the house."

Nine followed him back out of the room without really have the chance to soak in her surroundings and briefly looked around in interest as he pointed out the other rooms on the second floor--several other guest rooms, a bathroom, and a closet. His own room was the master bedroom at the far end of the hallway. Downstairs, past the main room and the foyer hallway, there was a large dining room which could easily seat most, if not all, of the ranch hands who worked for him. Justice explained that the dining room also served as a meeting room when he had to talk to all of his men. Past that was a smaller more intimate breakfast nook which appeared to have not been used very much as the table appeared to be piled with papers and ledger books. A large kitchen adjoined the dining room, the place different in style but similar in equipment to the cafeteria kitchens that she had worked in occasionally at the factories when for some reason or another she had been assigned to. And adjoining the other side of the kitchen was a mud room which led out onto the back porch.

There was also another small hallway leading out of the main living room to the opposite side of the house where there was another guestroom, a bathroom, and a study. But Justice didn't even bother opening the door to let her peek inside that particular room.

Perhaps he considered his study his private sanctuary, she mused as she followed him back out to the kitchen where he pointed out that dinner was already in the oven, courtesy of one of the ranch hands' wives. If it was, it would be totally understandable why he didn't want a stranger to peek into the place on her first day here.

"If there's anything that you need," he said, "again, please let me know. I know this is not the city where you can find pretty much everything within a block, but we're pretty self-sufficient here, too."

"It would probably take a little while for me to adjust to everything," she admitted. "I don't think I could jump in and do everything like I've lived here my whole

life on the first day, but I would certainly try."

"I don't think anyone reasonable would expect you to know everything the first time you're here," he replied. "I have dinner covered for tonight. It will probably be ready in an hour. In the meantime, you can relax, unpack, freshen up or whatever you want to do."

She nodded at that suggestion and then headed back upstairs to the guest room that she had been assigned to. Once inside, she closed the door so that she was finally alone.

There was a chair next to the wash basin on which she put her hat when she finally took it off. She also took off her outer coat and draped it on the chair. And then heedless of the rest of the clothes, she sat down at the end of the bed and laid down so that all she could see was the bare wooden rafters of the ceiling. She closed her eyes and tried to think of nothing in particular as all the new things that she had seen and all of her developing worries started to intrude upon her.

Soon, she told herself. Soon. She would just have to wait and learn about this whole place before she made a move.

Chapter 2

Nine awoke early. That was the curse of her physiology, designed into her right from the start. The factories wanted productive workers who didn't need much rest. And so that's what the scientists who made genmods did--they designed people to fit the company's expectations instead of the company wasting time and money finding employees who might or might not do what they were asked to do.

At the factories, work often started around four or five--depending on what shift you were assigned to do. Either way, you were awake an hour earlier and you started work then, working until about ten at night, even though there were, of course, breaks in between for meals and the restroom.

Nine finally got out of bed and began her morning absolutions. She paused momentarily staring at her face in the small vanity mirror above the wash stand when she was washing her face. She looked as she usually did. Not tired. That wasn't

unexpected--as she was designed to work on little sleep. Her dark eyes shimmered a bit from the light but it wasn't noticable for anyone who wasn't looking for it. That was an artefact from her ability to see in the dark. Other than that, she didn't think she looked like a particularly remarkable woman.

And not for the first time, she thought, what would Lily Rendell, the original Lily Rendell, think of a clone wearing her same face? She knew she could never put her mind into the original Lily Rendell because hers was different. That was already proved, especially when the geneticists began tinkering with human genes and the results obviously indicated that the genmods did not think the same way or were as independent as the original from which they had been based on.

That very last face was something that irked Nine often, too. She didn't like to be thought as not independent. Although she was quite aware that there were some who would think that she was running away from her responsibilities now and that her behavior was rebellious and grounds for termination. Technically, she had left the factory system legally. But she had managed to exploit a loophole that her employers had never thought of closing because most genmods weren't smart enough to think about exploiting on in the first place, even if they wanted to escape.

She also knew that she was an investment to someone. Someone, after all, had put up the money to create her and others like her. She figured it was only a matter of time that someone, an anal retentive accountant perhaps, would find out that she had left. And from then, it would be a fifty-fifty chance that her former employer would send a bounty hunter to find her.

Nine finished her morning ritual of getting washed and getting dressed. This morning, she decided to put on a plain day dress made of a muted blue and green calico. During dinner the previous night, Justice had told her that one or two of the ranch hands' wives would be coming over to the house to show her where things were. She had also wanted to ask him about the bonfire, but she refrained, knowing that he was probably expecting that question. Instead, she thought that perhaps if she asked him at a time that he was least expecting it, he would be caught off guard and actually answer her question truthfully without evasions.

At any rate, even though the ranch hands' wives were only helping out on a temporary basis until Justice got an actual housekeeper--he had said that he had

advertised in the local paper, hoping that there was a candidate who would eventually show up to be interviewed--they were the women who knew what was going on here. And she was sure that they would feel at least a little put out that another woman, a strange woman at that, was coming in to take over the head position.

The gray pre-dawn was still leeching out over the mountains when she looked out her bedroom window one last time before heading downstairs. There was only Justice and herself living in the house at the moment. During dinner, she had asked if he expected many guests at his place since he had so many guest rooms, but he had a gotten an odd look on his face and said, no. He had in mind more permanent residents.

At the time, Nine had been a bit confused with that wording, but after a night's sleep and thinking about it some more, she concluded that Justice expected to have a family someday and perhaps he was expecting to fill all of the empty rooms with children. Nine wasn't sure what she thought about children. She wasn't sure if she could bear any even if she wanted to as no one had really talked about the reproductive capacity of genmods. She had never heard of a genmod who had gotten pregnant. But then again, perhaps any genmod who was discovered pregnant had been terminated. After all, society itself would consider the whole thing rather unnatural.

The house was quiet as she walked down the stairs and headed to the kitchen. The kitchen itself was dark and empty. The darkness didn't bother Nine very much. With her abilities, she could still see the place rather well so she went about what she thought would be what a morning at the ranch would be like. She rummaged around the cupboards to find the flour and the butter and the cured ham. There were pots and pans, too, and she made a note of where they were all located as she took them out and began musing about what she could make. She was fairly familiar with cuisine out on the east coast, but other than the pot roast that she had for dinner, she had no frame of reference for what people on the frontier ate.

The door to the kitchen leading to the mud room suddenly opened, startling her. She didn't think that anyone else would be up as early as she was. She squinted. At the threshold was a woman with a lantern and a basket. As her eyes adjusted to the sudden light change, she could make out more details of the woman's features. She was younger and rather pretty with bow shaped lips and blue eyes. Blonde curls escaped from underneath her bonnet.

"Oh, hello!" said the woman. "I didn't know anyone else was up! I don't recognize you. You must be Mr. Justice's guest, Miss Rendell."

Nine nodded, feeling a bit unsure about how to deal with her as most naturally born women, at least back in the east coast, thought themselves above talking to genmods. "Yes, I'm Nine Lily Rendell." She stepped away from the kitchen table from where she had methodically laid out all the ingredients for breakfast. "You must be one of the ranch hands' wives that Mr. Justice had told me about."

"Yes. I'm Jane Alice Dunning. Alan Dunning's wife. I know you've probably met a lot of people on your first day here and haven't had a chance to commit everyone's name to memory. Alan is assistant to the foreman, Mr. Anderson. You can just call me Jane."

"And you can just call me Nine," she replied.

Jane cocked her head. "Nine? What an unusual name."

She shrugged. "It was what I was given. It is very nice to meet you. In all honesty, I haven't really met all that many people since I got here. Well, I've seen some of the ranch hands, but I'm afraid I haven't been formally introduced to anyone. I suspect Mr. Justice was anxious to see me settled in first."

"I understand," said Jane. She began walking around the kitchen to start lighting the rest of the lamps to brighten the room. "It's a bit dark in here. I don't see how you could find your way around! It's going to be worse during the winter when the morning is pitch dark."

"I know. I suppose I completely forgot about it," said Nine with a practiced ease, injecting a bit of confusion in her voice. It wouldn't do to make the woman immediately suspicious with her confidence at handling some things with ease. She wasn't immediately suspicious with her strange numerical name so it was better not to deliberately point things out. "Mr. Justice said that you would be showing me around the kitchen and tell me the routine."

"I'll be showing you around the kitchen," she said as she lit the last lamp on the opposite side of the room. "As well as some other things that you will find necessary when it comes to cooking. Mrs. Miller will be showing you the rest of the routine in the house, later this morning after breakfast."

"Beatrice?"

"Beatrice Miller. She's the wife of one of the senior assistants." But then Jane slanted her a sympathetic glance. "I suppose it's all right to give you a word of warning about her. She doesn't like to be called Beatrice. Always call her Mrs. Miller. I suppose she's a bit old fashioned and so she is still formal about a lot of things. Even Mr. Justice calls her Mrs. Miller. And she also likes things done just so."

"I will take your warning under advisement," said Nine. She had encountered such women before in her time at the factories. Very strict women who acted as overseers and would come down on a worker hard if the work was deemed supar. This Mrs. Miller couldn't be any worse than those overseers.

"I was about to get things organized, but since you already did it, we should probably go out to get the eggs," said Jane.

"Is that what the basket is for?" said Nine curiously. "I've never collected eggs before. Are they straight from the chicken?"

Jane nodded. "My husband told me that Mr. Justice had mentioned to him that you were coming from the east coast, but it sounds like you're from the city, too. I've heard that everything that comes to the city is already pre-packaged. That city dwellers have forgotten what a farm even looks like."

"I don't know about any of the other city dwellers," Nine replied, "but I've been, ah, remarkably sheltered in that regard."

"Well, you'll learn soon enough." Jane gestured for her to follow her. "The chicken coop is outside, somewhat close to the barn."

Nine followed Jane out of the kitchen and through the mud room to the outside of the house. Dawn was slowly breaking over the horizon, sending streaks of sunlight glimmering through the trees. This was the first time that she stood at the back of the ranch house and the view was definitely different. There was a line of trees straight to her left that led into a bit of forested area. To her right, she saw low, flat land where she assumed that they let the cattle graze. There was also a large barn not too far from the house. She had noticed it before when she had looked out of her bedroom window, but at that time, she had probably been too struck by the mountains in the landscape to pay much attention to it.

But now, she was paying attention to it. She had seen occasionally live chickens when she had lived in the city. But they had always been sitting in cages at the market,

eyeing everyone who passed by with beady suspicion. Nine didn't think she liked the animals much, except when they were dead. And she wouldn't be surprised if they didn't like her back.

Jane seemed to be the type of woman who liked to chat a lot. She kept up a steady stream of conversation even as Nine only uttered a word in an affirmative or negative. Jane didn't seem to mind that Nine wasn't feeling particularly talkative at that moment.

"You don't seem like the other women who've come out here from out east," said Jane as they neared the barn. "I mean, for one thing, you're up early. Like anyone else who've been born out here on the frontier lines. And from what you've put on the kitchen table, it looks like you know how to cook, too. Well, that's not to say that the other east coasters don't know how to cook. They're just not as sure about it, I suppose. Because most of the things that we do from scratch here, it's already prepared there. There are a lot of conveniences out on the east coast that you won't find out west."

"I wouldn't presume to know anything about western cooking," said Nine. "I am hoping you would tell me what Mr. Justice would expect in terms of what comes out of the kitchen."

"I've never heard Mr. Justice complain about anyone's cooking," said Jane. "But if you don't mind me saying so, I find him a bit aloof anyways. I think he keeps a lot of things to himself. But I suppose that's also the result of being the boss, you know?"

They approached the barn, but to Nine's surprised, Jane didn't go to unlock the barn door. Instead, she veered right to go around the barn. Directly behind the barn was a large vegetable plot. There was a small structure at the back of the barn, next to the pig pen, which Nine assumed was the chicken coop. It looked like a tiny house on stilts. On top of the chicken coop stood a rooster that eyed them with suspicion before giving a muted squawk in annoyance. Next to the chicken coop were two dogs of indeterminate breed although it was clear they appeared to be related as they had the same features. One was brown and the other a dirty white with black spots. At the two women's approach, they came forward to eagerly Jane. They more cautiously sniffed at Nine, but as she was accompanying Jane, they seemed to accept her readily enough.

"This one is Percival," said Jane pointing to the brown dog. "And the other is Galahad. The two were littermates and they hated to be parted from each other. So Mr.

Justice decided to take both of them on. They make excellent guard dogs."

Nine gingerly patted each dogs' heads in turn. They licked her hand and wagged their tails as they looked back and forth between the two women as they spoke. "Are there a lot of foxes here then? I've never seen a fox before, except in drawings, but I heard that they like to steal chickens."

"Well, there are foxes. And sometimes the lone wolf. In that case, it's a good thing we have two dogs as one couldn't possibly take down a wolf. There are mountain lions here, too. But sighting them is few and far between. And as far as I know, they stay far away from the human inhabited areas. I don't think any have been spotted on Mr. Justice's property ever since I've been here."

"And what about the rooster?" Nine inquired. "Isn't he supposed to be the alarm clock in the morning?"

"Oh, that rooster," the other woman said dismissively. "That's Old Faithful. He's not named that because he's the morning alarm clock. He's more like the lunch clock. You'll hear him crow at noon. Every time. I suspect it's because he knows one of the assistant farm hands will be here with the extra feed around that time."

Jane then walked forward to open the door to the chicken coop. She stooped in to get through the short door and beckoned for Nine to follow her before heading into the darkened interior. The interior of the chicken coop felt slightly warmer than the outside air, Nine found. And as she wrinkled her nose, it also smelled a bit of ammonia, probably from bird droppings. Jane showed her how to check underneath each hen for eggs. Most of the hens still appeared asleep as they gathered the eggs. Some of them only watched her with slitted eyes. But otherwise, they did nothing to hinder their progress. They were used to this morning ritual.

Once they had the eggs, they headed to a nearby well to collect a bucket of fresh water before heading back inside to the kitchen. All the while, Jane chatted about the different recipes that she used for breakfast. And all the while, Nine hoped that she would be able to commit everything to memory. In the kitchen, Jane helped her take out the rest of the ingredients that they needed and they split up the tasks even though Nine also tried to make a note of what Jane was doing as well.

They would be making biscuits with gravy. Scrambled eggs and fried ham. There would be coffee as well as some sausages that Jane had pointed out was stored in a small

alcove inside the pantry that Nine had not noticed before when she had been rummaging around the kitchen. They made all of this, probably in a quicker time than Nine would have done alone. Nine suspected that once Jane was satisfied that Nine wasn't a complete disaster in the kitchen, she would be on her own, unless Justice decided to hire a cook and housekeeper. And as the breakfast was warming and frying, Jane showed her everything else in the kitchen that she might need to know. And told her about the vegetable plot where she could get more ingredients for lunch.

"I'll have to keep the vegetable plot weeded, don't I?" said Nine. "I'm afraid I don't know how to do that since, well, I grew up in the city. The most I had been able to do was to water a daisy in a pot."

"Once everything's been planted, things usually go on by themselves without too much extra work," said Jane. "The person who would be able to tell you the most about it would be Ellie. She's Pete Green's wife. Out of all of us, pardon the pun, she seems to have the greenest thumb among all of us. I'll tell her you're interested in the garden. She's always eager to teach another person about it."

Just as breakfast was about finished and the coffee poured in a large silver coffee pot that seemed strangely out of place in the more rustic decor of Justice's house, Justice himself came downstairs to the kitchen. He gave each of the women a prefunctory good morning as they helped themselves to breakfast. As if sensing that she was probably being a third wheel, Jane made her excuses saying something about seeing her own husband to work for the day and made her leave. That left Nine and Justice having breakfast informally at the kitchen table with just the two of them.

"How was your night?" Justice inquired politely. This morning, instead of the more formal gray suit that he wore when picking her up at the train station, he wore the same uniform as his employees--denim trousers and a button down flannel shirt. His dark hair wasn't combed back as severely so it had a more relaxed look on him. That should have made him look more approachable. But after Jane's comment about Justice being a bit aloof, Nine still found him as intimidating as ever. Probably because whenever he looked at her, she had the impression that he was trying to get in her head. To find out how she ticked.

"It was fine," she replied as she took a bite of the scrambled eggs that she had made herself. Scrambled eggs were hard to mess up, but one never knew.

Unfortunately, Jane had not stayed long enough to sample any of the things that Nine had made to tell her if anything that she made was wrong. The eggs tasted fine to her but she knew as well as anyone that she was a poor judge of cooking. She was used to the cooking from the factory cafeterias and of her fellow factory workers who only cooked for themselves when it was necessary. And with Justice not remarking on the food at all as he worked his way methodically through his plate, Nine was still unsure.

"How did you sleep?" he prompted. "I've heard from a lot of people who've come from the east coast that they had to adjust for it for a while. Because it's very quiet here in comparison to the city."

"I slept well," said Nine. Or what there was of it, as Nine didn't require much sleep in the first place. "You're very gracious in letting me have the guest room."

At that, he gave her an odd smile, his gaze curiously intense. "It is only proper, after all. We're just seeing if we would suit. We're not married."

After that, he turned the subject to the weather and what he thought it would be like. Nine listened, or rather pretended to listen, and waited until he finished breakfast, thanked her for the food, and pushed back his chair.

"I'll be heading out into the range," he said as he shrugged on a jacket and a hat when he went into the mud room. "I'll probably be back at noon. I hope you can find your way around. Did Mrs. Dunning show you around yet?"

"Yes. She also said that Mrs. Miller will be here next to show me some other things. From what I've seen and heard, Mrs. Dunning and Mrs. Miller grew up on the frontier? They seem very familiar with the frontier?"

"Mrs. Dunning grew up in the same town as her husband," he said. "So yes, she is one of the few women around here who are familiar with frontier ways. They have two young children who aren't old enough to go to school yet. Mrs. Miller, however, was born in St. Louis. She moved out to the frontier when she was young. She and Mr. Miller have two grown sons who are out working the gold rush in Virginia City."

"I see."

He nodded to her as he went out.

That would be what life would be like if she stayed here, she mused to herself. She would be doing the chores and only seeing her husband during meal times which wasn't particularly conducive to talking either. Then again, Justice didn't really have to

do any talking in order to draw her in. There was just something about him that prevented her from really looking away. So there was definitely something there. An animal magnetism, she decided. But that didn't mean that she was going to do the foolish thing like Justice's poor foreman and fall in love with him.

As Nine gathered up the dishes to put in the tub to wash, the black cat that she had first seen when she first came to the house wandered into the kitchen, first looking about before coming to her to sniff the hem of her dress. The cat meowed and feeling like it would be a waste if she just threw it away, put a little of the leftover sausage into a bowl and set it down on the floor. The cat wasted no time in eating up the scrapes. Nine patted its head once before turning back to the dishes.

Nine liked cats. Mostly because she admired them for doing what they liked without anyone else trying to box them in. She wanted to live like that, too. She craved the freedom of doing her own thing. When she had been living back at the coast, she had lived with several other factory girls in a large tenement building. They weren't allowed to have pets there. But then again, no one there had been designed to be pet lovers in the first place. But that didn't mean that there weren't strays who wandered in and out from time to time.

Sometimes, a stray cat or two would wander by their window in the evenings, climbing up to the ledge from the fire escape ladder. She and the other factory girls would coo over the strays who would put up with their petting in exchange for scraps of food. It was then, in those little moments when she hadn't been dwelling on her own unhappiness in her situation that she decided that she really did want a pet.

But here on the ranch, there were animals galore. And here was a cat, who once finished with his meal, twined himself around her ankles and purred, even when she bent back down to take the bowl back up to be washed. The cat must be Justice's, she thought, even though he wasn't the sort of man who struck her as a cat person. Perhaps the cat was here to do something purposeful, like catch mice.

"You will spoil the animal if you keep doing that," said an older woman's voice behind her. "The animal must earn its keep."

Nine turned around to see an older, matronly looking woman standing in the doorway. She wore a homespun brown dress decorated with a bit of white lace at the collar. Her graying hair was pinned up in a bun. Her face was a bit careworn, but that

was not what struck Nine first. It was the woman's frown. Apparently she very much disapproved of Nine's handling of the cat.

"Are you Mrs. Miller?"

It was a rhetorical question. Nine couldn't imagine her being anyone else, especially after Jane's description of her. And in response, or rather non-response, Beatrice Miller showed no signs of acknowledging her question. "Everything has its place and time." She gave a disapproving sniff around the kitchen. "I see you have been attempting to follow Miss Dunning's instructions. I suppose it looks like you're doing a passable job. For someone who has been out west for the first time."

Damning with faint praise, Nine thought. It would probably be the best that she would hear from Beatrice Miller. And it was quite possible that perhaps when the foreman Anderson had invited a mail-order bride out here, she was frightened and intimidated by the older woman, especially if she had grown up in a more genteel east coast family. So steeling herself, she said as she turned back to wash the last of the dishes, "You will be showing me the routine of Mr. Justice's household?"

"Mr. Justice likes things a certain way," she said. "And he would abhor any deviations. It is very similar to my own viewpoint. Any deviation from routine is not to be tolerated."

Nine wondered if this was really true or whether it was just Mrs. Miller's view superimposed on what she believed Justice wanted. And she sent a mental prayer for Mr. Miller for enduring what was no doubt Mrs. Miller's heavy handed ways.

"Everyone has their own way of doing things," Nine decided to say diplomatically. After washing the breakfast dishes, she dried them and put them away before turning to face Beatrice Miller fulling. "I'm sure the Justice household has a certain routine done. I am not adverse to learning it."

Mrs. Miller gave a huff and crossed her arms around her ample bosom before quickly turning away and marching out of the kitchen. Nine briefly looked down at the black cat sitting at her feet. The feline looked back up in what seemed to be a quizzical expression although it could have been just as likely that the cat was also admonishing her for being so silly. She shrugged and followed Mrs. Miller out of the kitchen. The cat also tagged along.

From the kitchen was the hallway which branched out to the dining room and the

living room. Mrs. Miller went to the dining room first and pointed out the tall cupboard at the side of the room which held all of the dishware that would be used when company would come over to the Justice house. She mentioned that the table cloth would have to be set out, whether it was just Justice's employees coming over or the men with their wives on a more formal occasion. Mrs. Miller also seemed quite keen on silverware placement, giving an entire lecture on the use of the soup spoon as if she thought Nine was just another heathen who was completely unaware of its existence.

Throughout the lecture, Nine decided to just nod with Mrs. Miller's statements, even though she didn't completely agree that dinner should be an elaborate production all of the time. She doubted the men would really care all that much exactly in which position the soup spoon or the salad fork should be.

In the living room, Mrs. Miller went on and on about the upkeep of the house and how serving company should be. By that time, Nine had almost completely tuned out Mrs. Miller's lectures, even though she had made an earlier promise to herself when she came to the ranch with Justice that she would try to pay attention to everything so she could learn how to survive out here by herself. By the time they had gone upstairs so Mrs. Miller could lecture about the bedrooms, the black cat had pawed at her ankles and she had bent down to pick it up so it could sit in the crook of her arm. Noticing that, Mrs. Miller gave her another disapproving stare, but she didn't stop in her lecture of the household chores.

What interested Nine the most, in her chagrin, was Justice's bedroom. He had pointed it out to her the previous night, that it was located at the end of the hallway. But this was the first time that she had been in it when Mrs. Miller pushed through the door without a by-your-leave and started lecturing about the laundry and the dusting and the cleaning. And in between every practical fact, she interspersed a warning about moving anything that belonged to Justice as apparently he liked things "just so."

Nine only listened with half an ear. There was an enormous bed in the center of the room, made of a thick frame of varnished oak. The bed was probably built for an army to sleep in. Unlike the bed in the guest room that she was staying at, this bed had a canopy of white curtains that hung over a mattress with neatly made sheets and blankets. There was a small chest of drawers next to the bed, also made of oak. And a wash basin at the opposite corner, along with a coat rack, a chair, and a small table with

a vanity mirror and a variety of shaving implements. Otherwise, the room was very neatly kept and there was nothing there that would counter Mrs. Miller's assessments of Justice's habits.

But she shouldn't really care about that, she thought. It wasn't as if she was planning on staying at this ranch forever. It was just a stepping stone to something better that she had long envisioned for herself.

After Mrs. Miller gave her even more instructions on the care and maintenance of various things around the second floor, they went back downstairs and headed toward the opposite end of the house where the remaining guest room was located as well as Justice's study. She made some perfunctory remarks about the guest room.

But when it appeared that Mrs. Miller was finished with her lectures and exhibited every indication that she was going to leave Nine to do all the chores herself instead of helping her like Jane, Nine managed to ask, "What about Mr. Justice's study? I will have to clean it at least every week, don't I?"

"You leave Mr. Justice's study alone," Mrs. Miller said curtly, her eyes narrowing in annoyance or suspicion. Nine wasn't quite sure yet. It could be both. "That is his private place. The only people who go in there are invited by Mr. Justice himself. You have no need to go in there ever, even if you do become mistress of this place."

As Nine had no intention of really becoming mistress of anyone's place except her own, she replied, "I was just curious, that's all. It's just one less place to clean if no one wants it cleaned."

It was then that Mrs. Miller left her, telling her that the household tasks were easy enough for even a blind midget with one arm to do, and finally Nine was alone in the house, except for the black cat on her elbow that seemed very keen on looking around in his new vantage point. She would begin with the first floor and work her way up, she thought. These household chores weren't anything different than what she was used to before at the factories, so in some ways, one could say the familiar drudgery was somewhat comforting in this new and strange place.

Nine manage to scrub down the dining room before it was time to start lunch. Remember all what Jane had told her, Nine quickly made some bread and let it rise before preparing the soup. While she worked, the black cat scrambled out of the kitchen to survey the rest of his territory rather than to watch her do mundane human chores.

When all of it was done, she heard the door to the mud room open and close. Justice was back.

He greeted her with a nod and asked her how her day had gone. She gave him a perfunctory answer, which probably told him nothing at all. She still wasn't quite sure how to interact with him. Despite their journey together to the ranch the previous day, they still hadn't spent all that much time together for her to really get a good grasp on him.

"The boys will be here for dinner," he remarked as he got up to go back to work for the rest of the afternoon.

"How many should I expect?"

"Ten, I should say. All of them are part of my senior staff."

She found herself standing up too, so she could look at him closer in the eye, even though he was a head taller than she. "And when should we talk?"

He arched a curious eyebrow. "Talk?"

"I came here for a reason," she said, slowly, cautiously. "I'm not just a housekeeper or a cook although I understand that those are just some of my duties. Perhaps we should talk about our boundaries, our expectations. I suppose anything and everything, really." She didn't really want to do any serious talking, but if she was going to play a part, she might as well do it somewhat convincingly. She figured that any other nervous mail-order bride would want to try to figure out her potential husband as quickly as possible before she really made the irrevocable decision.

"I understand your concerns, Miss Rendell. They are my concerns as well as this takes, well, two people to get it right. We'll talk. After the dinner." And with that, he left her alone again.

With the rest of the afternoon, she used to tidy the living room and the remaining guest room on the first floor. The living room gave her a vaguely strange and creepy feeling, especially with all the fake glass eyes of the dead animal heads staring sightlessly through her. It reminded her that in some ways, she was still and never would be like everyone else. If Justice only wanted to marry someone so they could do all the work to keep his ranch house clean, it would mean that he viewed her as nothing but as some kind of worker drone. That would not be surprising as everyone knew she was made naturally. To some people, she would be a thing. A thing with a brain, sure, but

something unnatural that others could treat as they saw fit.

In the long run, it wouldn't matter whether she married Justice or not, but still, the thought that he might think of her as a thing made something in her chest twinge a bit. She definitely did not want to be referred to as a thing.

The rest of the afternoon came and went. During her cleaning, Nine discovered that there was a clock in the living room, hiding in the corner under the shadow of a gigantic stuffed elk head. It was a grandfather clock that appeared to be of the design of a company called Westerly and Brothers. Nine recognized the name as a prominent watchmaker's company out on the east coast that was most well known for making time pieces for the scientists and the wealthy. Why Justice had this clock, too, seemed to be a mystery. The clock itself seemed to be precisely at the right time, according to the small ormolu clock in the kitchen, but even as she noticed that the hour struck, there was no sound coming out. Perhaps the chimes were broken.

She started preparing dinner, not quite knowing what ranchers and ranch hands preferred, but guessing that whatever it was, it contained a lot of potatoes and meat. So she made a stew containing potatoes and meat, guessing at what she should put into the pot as Jane had not mentioned to her what she should do. But she guessed on her experiences at the factory.

And, as Mrs. Miller had strongly suggested in her own autocratic fashion, the table was set just so with the silverware placed just as the older woman had said. Just as her stew was finished, the men came in through the mud room, following Justice. There were a few familiar faces. Justice introduced all of the men to her. As they sat down around the large table in the dinning room, Nine brought out the stew and the bread and the other vegetable sides that she had prepared alongside everything. But it was only when she sat down next to Justice that she suddenly began to feel nervous as all of the men served themselves and started eating.

They said nothing about the food. There were a few furtive grimaces which Nine supposed she could have ignored, but there was no ignoring the Anderson's suspicious glance at her. For a big man, it was extremely conspicuous that he did not finish his plate. When she asked if he needed any more, he stonily told her that he was already full. And even worse, Justice said nothing at the obvious put down.

I should not care, Nine told herself as she cleared away all of the dishes and the

men verbally shut her out as they immediately delved into the concerns of the ranching business and of the borders of their land with the nearby mining company to the south. Justice had warned her of the foreman's possible hostility to her arrival. But still, there was a small part of her that wanted to be accepted even though intellectually, she knew she wasn't going to be here long enough to make any real friends.

She washed the dishes and cleaned the pot. But even after she had finished all her evening chores, the men were still talking in the dining room. She rummaged around the cupboards in the kitchen but didn't find any indication that Justice kept anything to drink there except coffee. Nine really wanted a cup of tea right then. Even back east, especially when she had a particularly difficult day in the factory, she found that some hot tea would help her relax and at least allow her to go to bed in a somewhat calmer frame of mind. But there was no tea. And if they were going to go back to the town any time soon to see the grocer, that would be one of the first things she would purchase, even if she had to do all that she could to convince Justice to splurge for that particular good.

So instead, she made some coffee instead, even though it was not her preferred drink of choice, and sat down at the kitchen table and looked at nothing in particular as she sipped the bitter drink. As if sensing her uneasiness, the black cat made its way back to the kitchen to climb on her lap. She gently stroked its fur and it purred, lulling her senses into a relatively more tranquil mood. And it was just as well that she was not carrying the Colt .45 and had instead stashed it at the bottom of her traveling trunk for now or who knows how that would have tempted her despite her other strategies for calming herself.

She didn't know how long she sat there, letting the coffee cool on the kitchen table, but when Justice and the other men started to file in to leave through the mud room again, Nine found herself spurred into action, asking if any of the men wanted any coffee before they left for the night. All of them made their polite excuses no and left promptly, leaving her with an even more deflated sense than when she had come back into the kitchen.

Justice told her that it was already ten in the evening and that he had not expected them to go overlong in their conversation. He suggested that they talk later since it was so late. And with her sudden dejection, Nine found herself agreeing. Justice

went upstairs first, leaving Nine to clean out the coffee pot and the cup that she had used what seemed like only minutes before. Even at this point, the cat decided to leave her, escaping out of the mud room to do his cat business, which she assumed was catching the mice in the barn.

Eventually, she made it back upstairs and warily prepared a bath which she quickly took before changing into a nightgown and getting into bed. In the darkness, after she blew out the lamp, she kept reminding herself that she was here to learn as much as she could before she left. But she couldn't help feeling a keen sense of disappointment in herself before sleep dragged her under.

Chapter 3

Nine found the rather tattered cookbook the next afternoon when she was cleaning out one of the unused guest rooms on the second floor the next afternoon. The guest room had been partially converted into a storage room. While there was indeed a bed and other furniture similar to all of the other guest rooms including her own, half of the room was also filled with a number of trunks, boxes, and unused objects and furniture. Nine wasn't quite sure what to do with all the stuff. And since at the moment, she was still considered a guest, she figured that she would not do anything to any of it unless she was specifically told to do otherwise. But she couldn't help taking a peek into some of the trunks as she couldn't imagine that Justice, Mrs. Miller, or anyone else would know that she had done so.

Some of the trunks didn't contain anything that was particularly unexpected. Some of it was old clothes, old bits of equipment, old ledges which appeared to be accounting books from several decades before. But one of the trunks--which on the surface didn't appear any different than any of the others except that there appeared to be letters of some sort scratched on the surface--contained actual books. The scratchings on the trunk lid were faded so that Nine couldn't really tell what it was trying to say. But the books inside made it obvious that it was part of someone's library.

There were fictional books of all sorts. Classical poetry. Penny dreadfuls which appeared to have been published all they way from London. There were also a lot of

scientific textbooks. Some of it pertained to engineering. And others to biology, particularly genetic engineering. Nine glanced through some of them and looked more closely at the genetic engineering books. Whoever had owned these books before were rather knowledgeable about the subject, she concluded. The previous owner could have even been a scientist.

But whoever the previous owner was, she was fairly sure that it wasn't Justice. He didn't strike her as someone who was particularly interested in the scientific field, except maybe in a peripheral way as everyone else was.

As she got through those, it was then that she noticed the small battered cookbook at the bottom of the trunk. What struck her most about its existence was that it did not seem to go at all with the rest of the books in the trunk. It was as if it had been thrown into the trunk as an afterthought. But the title on the cookbook also was one thing that made her pick it up. It said, "The Collected Recipes of Montana Territory."

Flipping through the cookbook, she noticed there were a number of recipes for pasties and pot roasts and a variety of side dishes that she had never heard of before. There were also recipes for pies and making various holiday meals. It was probably good night time reading, she thought, and perhaps something to think about when preparing future meals.

That day, she and Jane had prepared breakfast together again, but this time, Nine had thoroughly questioned her on the eating habits of the people in the area. She found out that it was as she had thought--mostly meat and potatoes based--but a lot of the food was also drawn on what the local natives, or what was left of them after the settlers had moved in, had eaten, too.

Jane had also told her that Ellie Green was very amenable to teaching her how to take care of the vegetable plot behind the barn. She told her that Mrs. Green would be able to take her through the vegetable plot the next day after she got some important chores that needed to be done this day. Nine readily agreed and had mentally set herself the task of cleaning out the entire ranch house so she would have free time the next day to attend the vegetable plot.

And hence, the cleaning of the guest rooms. The cookbook was curious and of interest, so Nine set it aside after flipping through it to determine its contents and went back to finish cleaning that room. Afterwards, she took the book back to her own room

and set it on the nightstand next to her bed to remind her what she wanted to do that night. At least it would be something to occupy her time. As she needed little sleep, she hated the thought of just lying in bed and staring up at the ceiling. It was those times, in the gray hours of the night, that doubts often crept into her mind about the plans that she had made for herself.

This time, though, Justice wasn't meeting with his senior staff to talk about ranch business. So on this day, they were to have dinner by themselves. And while this time, she didn't have to suffer the censure of the other men on the low quality of her cooking, it was still intimidating because she knew it would only be her and Justice in the kitchen for the rest of the night. If they chose to stay there.

It was after dinner when Nine dared to broach the subject of a talk again with Justice. She had just poured the coffee when she asked him what he really expected of her, as a possible wife or simply as a wife in name only.

"A helpmate and a companion," he replied promptly. He blew on his coffee mug to cool it a bit before taking a sip. But his strange green eyes were fixed on her.

"Someone who would be in charge of the household while I'm gone attending the rest of the ranch. And of course, a companion. Despite all the other men working for me, they have their own lives. And sometimes, it gets lonely here, especially in the winter time."

"If you simply wanted someone to warm your bed," Nine said dryly, "I'm sure there are professionals who would be willing to do so, for you."

"But they would only do it for the money, not for the companionship or whatever conversation we might have." He then gave her an odd smile. "I'm not asking that you jump into my bed right away. A man and a woman need to know each other first. It might even turn out that we wouldn't think of each other in that way."

"If that's the case, then my coming here would be a waste of money and time."

"I'm sure it won't come to that."

"So you're sure that I would eventually agree to stay here permanently?"

"Well, I would never say never." He finally set his coffee cup down so that there was no mistaking the fact that his attention was on her.

"Still, you see rather confident that I would decide to stay."

Instead of replying to that particular comment, he said, "Your letter was unusual."

"My letter?"

"It wasn't like the others."

She frowned. "It wasn't?" Writing wasn't particularly her strong point. After all, she hadn't been bred to do that particular task. But she had managed to learn and was a keen observer of other writers. So she had tried to be careful in her correspondence. But in the end, she had had to guess at what a typical mail-order bride would say. After all, the only people she knew at that time were other factory workers who had no inclination to do anything different. "What was unusual about it?"

He cocked his head to observe her curiously, as if her very comment intrigued him. "It wasn't like the others," he repeated. "For one thing, those other letters had a sameness to them, even if they were indeed written by different women. They all had the panache of an advertisement trying to pander to the buying public. They were selling themselves, if you see what I mean. Sure, if you're going to be a mail-order bride, to sell yourself as a product, you'll want to put forth your best characteristics in order to entice the customer."

"Most men wouldn't care," she replied. "They would just pick the woman who sounded like the best bet."

"But you didn't sell yourself. Or at least, you didn't sell yourself conventionally. From your letters, I had the impression that you didn't care if I responded or not."

"I didn't think that I would really have a chance to compete with any of the other candidates. I'm not out of the ordinary for what I am. I would have suspected that once I had mentioned what I really was by the third or fourth letter, you would have broken it off."

"Hm. Maybe." He sipped his coffee. "But I think your letters demonstrated to me that you aren't at all typical of your kind. Or what I think of as your kind. Are all the other factory girls like you?"

At that, Nine tightened her hands around her own mug. "They don't look like me, if that's what you mean."

"So you are unique."

"No," she denied. "There were others like me." But the others were now dead. So technically, she was the only one that now existed. But that didn't mean that she didn't feel the need to continue to prove that she was her own person.

Chapter 4

The next day, when Ellie Green, the plump wife of one of the foreman's assistants, was lecturing Nine about how to plant the squash in the vegetable plot, she noticed the smoke rising from the southern edge of the ranch, beyond a line of trees that fenced in the ranch house and the barn from the rest of the grassland. The view of the smoke was startling to say the least, and Nine found herself ignoring the poor woman to crane her neck to see what was going on.

"What's that?" she asked, interrupting Ellie in the middle of explaining the virtues of butternut squash.

The woman halted abruptly, seemingly surprised and not a little disgruntled at what was really a rude interruption. But when Nine raised her arm to point out what was the matter, Ellie Green just sighed and shook her head.

"They've been doing that quite a bit as of late."

"What do you mean by that?" Nine asked. "What are they doing?"

"I'm not sure I could tell you."

"Give me a guess at least," she replied. "Surely you have some idea. I'm just a newcomer. When I first got here, I saw the ranch hands burning something at the north side of the property, too. But they wouldn't tell me. Instead, trying to appease me by saying that I shouldn't worry my pretty little head. Do you know how condescending that sounds?"

Nine's rather breathless comment made Ellie laugh. "Pretty little head, hm? That sounds like some of the ranch hands, unfortunately. They have this idea that since they're the men, they're in charge of everything and that the women should just stay at home and cook the dinner and take care of the baby. But that is their own delusion. We do everything." Ellie's eyes sparkled a bit. "You know, if you refuse to do something, they'll start to feel that the world is coming apart from the seams. And they'll beg you to go back to taking care of the household in return for pretty much anything that you want."

"You seem to have the husband and wife relationship well in hand," Nine

remarked dryly. "I doubt I could ever get away with something like that." Not that she would have to if she left without having to tie the knot. "So what do you think the smoke is all about."

To that, Ellie sobered up a bit. "Perhaps it's not my place to say, but me and some of the other women have our ideas. It has to do with the mining camp south of here."

"The mining camp?" She recalled that Justice had mentioned that the mining company had settled on the land adjacent to his ranch. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Mr. Justice owns all of this land," Ellie explained. "And not just this land. Also the mountains you can see right in front of us. He got it all for dirt cheap when the government was trying desperately to find settlers to come out here to the west so they could stake a claim to the territory."

"Mr. Justice had mentioned to me the extent of his properties," said Nine. "But since you put it that way, it does seem rather impressive. I don't know anyone else who owns a mountain. Let alone several."

"It is sort of impressive about all the land that the ranchers out here own," Ellie replied. "But you won't hear any of them bragging about it. They would just say that it's all a matter of course since they need all the land there is to have their cattle grazing and also enough land so that they could grow their own food. Why, when Mr. Justice first bought this land, I heard that he had even helped to plant the apple orchard himself. The trees are still a bit young yet, but they're already bearing fruit. We'll probably start the apple picking and the cider making next week."

It was obvious that Ellie was one who naturally drifted back to her favorite topic, plants, if given any leeway. So Nine prompted again, "The smoke?"

"Oh, that. Well, the other women and I think that they're burning things from the mining company had snuck onto Mr. Justice's land. After all, the ranch also includes the mountains. And Mr. Justice and a couple of the ranch hands had wandered a bit over in that direction when they had more time during the summer. There are caves in those mountains. And since the mining company exists at all, I suspect there's a fair amount of ore in those mountains, too."

"Are you saying that Mr. Justice's land also encompasses a possible mine?"

"That's what I'm saying," Ellie said nodding. "Of course, Mr. Justice doesn't have

any particular interest in developing that part of his land into a mine at the moment. He cares more about the ranching since he feels that it is more valuable to feed people than to provide people with shiny rocks. Or at least that's how my husband puts it."

"From what I can tell of Mr. Justice's personality so far, I wouldn't be surprised if that indeed was his view," said Nine. "And personally, I would agree. Cattle ranching in some respects is a far more valuable and sustainable enterprise anyway. The grass will always grow back to feed more cattle. But once you take the rock out of the ground, there won't be any more left."

"And Amen to that," said Ellie. "I'm sure that once the mining company has bled their little property dry, they would waste no time into pressuring Mr. Justice and the rest of the ranchers to sell their land to them. And if that doesn't work, they'll just move on into a different area and start the bleeding again."

"So why do you think the mining company put things on Mr. Justice's land? What purpose would that serve and exactly what are those things?"

Ellie shrugged. "Who knows? Those crazy scientists out east managed to create genetically modified people to work in factories and mines. They've made those monstrous steam engines which ferry things across the country in a matter of days. Who knows what else they've made? And whether the mining company has bought it to use as spies on this land? We all know that they covet Mr. Justice's land for mining."

"I suppose your guess is as good as mine," Nine agreed. "And it doesn't seem particularly nice--or even legal--of them to put things on Mr. Justice's land without his permission. So he and his men probably are fairly justified in destroying them. But nonetheless, it's rather startling to see all the smoke out there. One would think that something far more alarming was going on."

"I'm sure we'll know if it was truly alarming or not," said Ellie. "If it was, they'd send a messenger to tell us to evacuate. Now where were we?"

At Ellie's obvious impatience to get back to their original topic, Nine found herself smiling wearily. "I think you were talking about butternut squash?"

After Ellie Green's long lecture about the rest of the vegetable plot where Nine learned more about butternut squash and a variety of other vegetables than she really needed or wanted to know, she was left to her own devices as Ellie had to go back to her home to make sure that her children were doing what she told them to do. It wouldn't

be until after the harvest that the children would be going to school and that she and the other women would mostly have the day to themselves. But that didn't mean that any of the women didn't like their children. On the contrary, they loved them. And whenever they talked to Nine about it, they all assumed that she would have them some day, once she got married.

Nine still wasn't quite sure what she thought of children. Probably because she was never around them for any length of time to really form an opinion one way or another. But she did know one thing for sure, if she couldn't have any, she didn't think that it would really bother her all that much. And in that way, she admitted to herself that she was a bit selfish. At the moment, she was only worried about herself. Not any hypothetical offspring.

She stood, looking at the smoke for one more minute, thinking that she could even smell it from all the way where she was standing, but then soon enough, she turned her attention back on the vegetable plot. The first thing she did was to pull out all of the weeds that she could find in the vegetable patch which involved getting an old fashioned rake and hoe that were stored in the barn. It was hard work, pulling the weeds and then later plucking the ripest vegetables to put in a basket that were later going to go into the dinner stew. But despite the hard work, Nine didn't mind it so much. It allowed her to concentrate on the moment and worry less about what was going to happen in the future.

After filling the basket full of ripe vegetables, Nine went back inside and began to prepare for dinner by putting the deer meat from the animal that Justice had managed to kill and butcher earlier in the day into the pot and putting it on boil. Then she went to the task of peeling the vegetables and cutting them up for the stew.

The small black cat wandered into the kitchen to see what was happening. Seeing that vegetable peeling wasn't particularly intriguing, the cat pulled a tea towel off of the table and began playing with it on the floor. Nine briefly glanced at its antics, amused, and then went back to her work. She still had not asked Justice about the cat yet and no one seemed to have volunteered the cat's name. And she was reluctant to really name the cat on her own as technically the cat wasn't hers. So she decided to bide her time to ask Justice again that night.

But it wasn't to be. Justice was having another meeting with the foreman and the

rest of the ranch hands. The foreman, especially, looked rather suspiciously at her newest attempt at cooking dinner for a large number of people. But if she had to say it herself, it did smell rather appetizing. Especially after she had taken the advice of the cooking book that she had found in that guest room and added some herbs, onions, and scallions into the food to make things more flavorful.

Her newest attempt at dinner, however, went unnoticed even though all the men promptly ate everything. They were paying less attention to their food and more attention to the ranch business. While she was there in the dining room, they kept their conversation strictly to ranch business, on the business of taking care cattle and of shipping them off to the markets. But when she left to clean the dishes, her sharp ears could pick up the sudden change in tone from the serious but comfortably known to the more urgent.

Nine didn't think of herself as being particularly unobservant. She knew that they had been burning something in the southern part of the property early in the day. No doubt, Justice had taken part in this one, too. And if what Ellie Green had said was correct, the men were probably very worried that the mining company was encroaching on the Justice property without Justice's permission.

While Nine was washing the dishes, she had also put on some water to boil. It was ready when she finished washing the dishes and she prepared coffee which she took back out to the dining room to pour for the men. Noticeably, the men stopped talking about whatever they were talking about when she had come back out and had only remarked thank yous and inanities about the weather when she poured the coffee for them.

Nine wanted to shout at them that she wasn't just some person to be ignored. Shouldn't she also know what was happening at the ranch since she was at the moment also living there too? But no. She knew that in reality, she was still very new. A stranger. And a stranger who wasn't naturally born in the first place. And to many people, it meant that she didn't have many rights at all.

She went back into the kitchen with the empty coffee pot feeling a bit dejected. She would wait in the kitchen until the men finished talking. She knew when she wasn't wanted, even though she had to wait until they were finished with the coffee so she could wash the cups before she went to bed. But meanwhile, it didn't appear that they

would be finishing their discussion yet for a while, so she settled in at the kitchen table with another book that she had found in her forays in the upstairs guest room.

This book had originally been in the same trunk as the cookbook. It was a biology book, explaining the history of genetic manipulation. In theory, Nine knew how she came about, or rather the immediate history of it, but she didn't particularly know why people first decided to do this, especially when there were groups of people who were still opposed to it. Money, she thought as she flipped to the introduction and read the first couple sentences about industry barons who were desperately looking for workers. It was always about money.

As she flipped to the next page, the small black cat leaped up into her lap, startling her. The animal pawed at her, demanding attention. As there was no more food out to give to the cat, and she was sure the animal was already well fed from what she gave it earlier, she simply patted the cat's head, hoping that was enough. Instead, the cat took it as his cue to settle in her lap and snuggle down with a purr.

She gave a small sigh at that and started reading the book again. She became quite engrossed in the text itself when she was startled by the sound of someone's throat clearing. She glanced up to see Justice in the doorway of the kitchen with an empty coffee cup in his hand. Behind him were his other employees.

"Oh!" She set the book down on the kitchen table and leaped up, nearly dislodging the cat from her lap. But she caught the animal up in the crook of her arm before the feline could tumble ignominiously onto the floor. The cat, however, didn't appreciate having his perch suddenly disappear so he hissed at her and swatted at her arm before settling on a new position on her shoulder. "I didn't notice that you were all done!"

Justice moved through the doorway and put his coffee cup into the sink in the kitchen. The other men followed suit and gave her polite thanks for the dinner and coffee before they made their way out of the mud room. When they were all gone, it was just she and Justice again. And feeling suddenly awkward, she took the book from the kitchen table and put it up on a high shelf next to the cookbook that she had been referring to earlier, and went to the sink to do the final chore for the night.

"I've noticed that the little devil has taken a shine to you," he said. Justice stood a few paces away, his hip cocked, leaning against the counter as he watched her wash the

rest of the coffee cups. "I always thought he liked being on his own and only tolerated the rest of us since we just happen to live here."

The black cat had decided to drape himself over her left shoulder and was idly batting at a loose lock of her hair. Nine decided to ignore it and concentrated on washing the cups, not looking at Justice since she knew that his intense gaze already unnerved her.

"Do you mean the cat? Is that what you call him? Little Devil?"

"A nickname, at best," Justice replied. "I've never really named him. He just wandered onto the property and basically became the ranch mouser."

"From what I hear from Mrs. Miller, you took the cat in and the animal is supposedly yours."

"Mrs. Miller often makes up her own mind on what is what regardless of what anyone else thinks or what the evidence points out," he replied. "So whatever she says, it's pretty obvious that the cat has made you his own."

"From your tone of voice, it doesn't sound like a good thing."

"Probably because I've been trying to entice the cat to sit on my lap for ages but you charm him in a day or two."

"I don't think of myself as a charmer."

"No, you're right about that. Being a charmer is probably not one of your traits," he said, making her frown. "Your letters certainly didn't hint at any of that either. You're rather blunt and straightforward, aren't you?"

"I try to be."

"Yet there's something about you I can't quite put my finger on either." He didn't move from his position at the counter, but she had the sensation that his stare felt like a physical touch. She shook off the strange feeling and tried to concentrate on his words. "I think a person just looking at you would say that you're an open book. But I would disagree with that assessment despite all of your remarkably plain talking."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you were reading. And you weren't reading the Bible or an almanac or even one of those cheap fictional penny dreadfuls that women find so interesting these days. No, you were reading a science book. One, I think, you got from the storage room."

She paused and finally turned to look at him. He didn't appear angry at her for taking something from the guest room. Just curious and not a little puzzled. "I just wanted something to read, that was all."

"You just wanted something to read?" he raised an eyebrow. "For some reason, I don't think most people would really pick that sort of book if they just wanted something to read."

"Maybe I just wanted to read something unusual."

"Most people don't read textbooks on genetic manipulation for fun."

She tensed at his comment, but then she fired back, "Well, that's what I found. Besides, why do you have a book on genetic manipulation anyway? You don't strike me as the type to own such a book."

"You're right, I'm not the type to own that kind of book. I'm a rancher, not a scientist. But it used to belong to someone who was a scientist?"

"Oh?"

"My mother."

"Your mother?" That answer surprised her. As far as she knew, all scientists were men. When she had been raised in the creche with the other young genmods, the only people, other than the nurses, to show up to monitor their growth and progress were doctors and scientists. And the people from those two groups were all men as far as she remembered. So now hearing that a woman had been a scientist seemed like a bit of a shock to her. Intellectually, she believed that women could do anything. But in reality, it wasn't like that.

"She and my father visited last year," he said in a rather off-hand way, that told her little about what he really thought of the idea. "They had brought some things with them. Maybe hoping that I would take some interest in those things. I didn't, but they still left those things here."

"If you don't need all of it, you could certainly give it all away or sell it in order to free up some room," she suggested.

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I don't want to get rid of it right now. Besides, I haven't gone through all of it myself so who knows, maybe I do need some of it in the future. But I'll

probably go through it later. And it's not as if I really need the room now, do I?"

"I suppose not," she agreed. By this time, she had finished washing the coffee cups and she placed the last of them on a rack near the sink to dry. She wiped her hands on a tea towel before reaching up to take the small black cat off her shoulder. The feline meowed once, mostly in query rather in distress, and then settled back in the crook of her arm. "You and the others seemed serious in there. Is something wrong with the ranch?"

He gave her a more wary look. She wondered if he was surprised that she had paid any attention to their behavior. It was hard to ignore it. One would have to be a rock to not notice that he and the other ranch hands were having a serious meeting. "I don't think you have to worry yourself with whatever we were discussing. The business of the ranch itself is doing well, so you don't have to worry on that score."

"But you are worrying about something."

"We have the problem well in hand," he replied brushing her off. "It will probably resolve itself in a day or two. Meanwhile, are you settling in all right?"

She opened her mouth, mostly because she wanted to call him on changing the topic of conversation, but then thought better of it. It probably wouldn't be such a good idea to antagonize that man who was giving her a roof over her head so early in the game. "I'm settling in all right," she replied. "Jane Dunning and Ellie Green were very helpful showing me how to do things around the ranch. I suppose Mrs. Miller was also helpful."

"I hear a but in your voice."

"She makes me think of an overseer," Nine said bluntly. "You know, the kind of overseer in a factory who inspects your work for any minute flaw. She came in earlier today and told me that I had not cleaned the living room properly. She told me in no uncertain terms that she would be coming back tomorrow afternoon to see if I had rectified the problem."

He seemed amused by her grievances. "I'm afraid Mrs. Miller isn't the sort of woman who likes giving praise. She demands perfection from everyone. Probably that's why her sons moved away from her as soon as they could. And Mr. Miller often stays out late with the other ranch hands to get away from her nagging."

"I'm not surprised to hear that."

"But even if she is displeased with your work tomorrow, I'm not. I don't see anything wrong with how you are tidying up the ranch. And it was a good dinner tonight. You've been asking for recipes from the other ranch hands' wives or reading that cookbook you have stashed on the shelf, haven't you?"

"All I know is east coast food, so of course I had to ask people and read the cook book," she replied, feeling disgruntled. "I'm new here. What do you expect?"

At that, he laughed and he stepped closer to her so that they were now only a foot apart. His eyes definitely looked silver green now in the light. A trick, she told herself. Nothing but a trick of the light. He reached out so that he could tilt her chin up so that they were eye to eye. His hand felt strong and a little rough on her chin, but she didn't mind that. What she minded was the fact that they were staring at each other now. Any normal person would be looking away now, after getting a good look at her eyes which were far stranger than his.

She had the strange feeling that he was trying to read her mind, but then again, who didn't want to read someone else's mind? It was difficult to tell what was anyone thinking without them having to voice it out loud. And it would be damned near impossible if the other person didn't say anything at all.

That was one thing that she felt lucky about, that the scientists still had not figured out a way to develop telepathy. She had heard rumors and sensational news stories about how some researchers were trying to figure out all the paranormal and psychological phenomena out there. There were a number of people who thought they believed in mediums and teleportation and all sorts of other mad things that normally, someone would be committed to an asylum for admitting that they believed in the stuff. But as far as she knew, everything that seemed to be observed was actually a hoax or trick of some sort. So far, there was no evidence for things like speaking to the dead, levitation, or even mind reading.

But at the moment, she felt as if he really was trying to read her mind, and she found that she didn't like that idea at all. The only solace she had in the fact was that reading anyone's mind was impossible as no one had proved it yet.

He gave her a small strange half smile and then he bent closer and covered her mouth with his own before she could even register what he was about. Her previous racing thoughts scattered and she could only feel. His lips were warm, soft even, and he

wasn't particularly aggressive with the kiss. Instead, it felt like he was testing her, gauging her reaction. Whatever he was doing, it was the complete opposite of what she had thought of him. He gave the whole appearance of a hard man who had no patience for gentle or soft things. After all, he worked as a rancher. Surely he had to have feelings of steel to direct all his employees and to make his ranch run.

But this was completely at odds. The surprise made Nine gasp, but since he was kissing her, he swallowed the sound and all she could get out was a muffled murmur. Reflexively, she reached out to grasp the counter, thinking that it would help her keep herself grounded.

The black cat jumped from her arm and yowled at the two humans in irritation before running out of the kitchen with his tail high in the air, miffed. But Nine couldn't really pay any attention to the cat's feelings then. All she had were her own feelings, which suddenly felt very foreign to her, and that of the physical presence of a man who was close to her--closer than any other person had been before.

He finally stepped back after what seemed like a long moment. He watched her curiously, perhaps noticing the flush on her cheeks and her sudden rapid breathing. It was as if he was examining a bug underneath a microscope. Clinical, scientific, detached. But the sheen of his eyes betrayed the fact that this wasn't just some experiment.

"Were you just checking to make sure that I was a human?" she finally said.

"Oh, I know you're human, no matter what you say you actually are or what you call yourself," he said. "I was just checking to make sure that I wasn't imagining it."

"Imagining it?"

"Imagining that there was something between us." The strange smile appeared on his face again. "You might try to argue that it is too premature to conclude that you will ever stay here, but that just proved that there is at least a chance."

"Just because we're attracted to one another?"

"It's a better basis for marriage than what some other people have."

"I suppose you could say that was true, if you subscribe to the romantic notion that people need to be attracted to each other or even in love with each other to marry."

At her acerbic tone, his smile only widened. Any other man, she would have guessed, would have stepped away and put distance between them. What was he, some

sort of masochist? She had thought that his tale about his heart-broken foreman would have made him more distant and thus more easy to avoid--especially since she had no intention of staying at the ranch if she were to become a free woman, but apparently it was just a story he told, not something that he really believed in following through himself.

"You don't subscribe to that notion yourself?" he said. "I thought a lot of people subscribed to that notion, especially since the practice of arranged marriages have been phasing out, particularly among normal people. I don't know about the people in high society. I suppose they would like keeping the old money in the family more than marrying someone who they could tolerate."

"I don't know what I subscribe to," she said honestly. After all, she wasn't really planning on marrying anyone. "But I just wanted to point out that that particular notion is something that people seem to find the most compelling if they want to do something that seems good right then. They don't consider that fact that maybe their ardor will cool down in the future. And that they've realized that they've actually married the wrong person."

"Now, we're getting into philosophy then, Miss Rendell," he replied. "There are certainly people who find their feelings cooling after the first hot flash. And there are certainly people you could love but not live with." It was then that he took a step backward, giving her some space. "Then again, there are others who know their minds very quickly and rarely change it. Everyone is different. And every relationship is different. Don't confuse what you hear about things to the reality of things."

"I am very aware of the realities, Mr. Justice." As she had finished her chores in the kitchen, she found no reason to really linger. And again, Justice's look at her was unnerving her. She didn't feel she was in danger, however. But she was certain that whatever she was feeling now was making her want to hide until she figured out what it was. "I must thank you for allowing me to stay here. And for paying for my trip all the way out here, even if it is not certain what I will end up doing."

"Perhaps I should let you go for the night, then. At least for now." As she stepped even further away, toward the door to the hallway, his eyes seemed to take on an eerie glow. She must be imagining things, wasn't she? Perhaps she herself should get her eyes checked, although all the way out here in the western boondocks, she doubted there

was any physician around who would care to look at her eyes without contacting her former employer for more information about her physical status.

"Good night, Mr. Justice." And with those final words, she fled out of the kitchen and back upstairs to her room.

Chapter 5

"This is the last weekend that we have for ourselves before the real work begins," said Ellie Green.

It was Saturday morning and it wasn't long after the sun had come over the horizon. Nine and some of the other ranch hands' wives had commandeered the foreman's cart, since he was obviously not using it, and Jane Dunning had volunteered to drive the cart. Another woman had also joined the group, she was the wife of the foreman's third assistant, Fred Warner. Sally Warner stood in contrast to the other two. While Jane Dunning had that pretty blonde look that wouldn't be out of place in high society, assuming that she wanted to wear the expensive frocks that such ladies wore, and Ellie Green's more country wholesome look accented with sunstreaked chestnut colored hair, Sally Warner had a more fey appearance. Her hair was red and curly and her face was dusted with freckles. Nine remember reading some fairy tales, for their educational and moral value which her teachers had said in somber tones, and Sally reminded her of what she thought a fairy would look like. She seemed a bit fragile to Nine's eyes. But then again, that didn't really mean anything. She knew of some genmods who had fragile appearances but were literally as strong as an ox.

The entire idea had been the other three women's. They had decided to ask Nine to come along with them as they had reasoned that she was probably longing for some activity, especially coming all the way from the city on the east coast. Nine, on her part, didn't really mind staying out in the middle of nowhere, but a small part of her was grateful that the women had even thought of her to ask her to come. Back in the eastern factories, genmods generally did not befriend strangers. It was simply not in their make up.

Nine had never really had any friends who weren't genmods before. And

remembering the man's reaction at the train station when she had first arrived, she didn't doubt that the gossip that she wasn't really like a normal person had already gotten out to everyone. So it seemed even more remarkable to her that these women would ask her to come with them. But that didn't mean, of course, that the townspeople would treat her the same way.

When the women had invited her on the shopping trip, she had told Justice about it over breakfast. He didn't seem particularly surprised at her request to leave the ranch for the Saturday afternoon and had even suggested that while she was there, she could purchase things there she felt the ranch needed. He said he already had lines of credit set up at the stores in town and that she didn't need to worry about paying for anything. Other women would have been delighted with the fact that they were suddenly given access to their prospective groom's bank account. But all Nine felt was a bit of embarrassment. She didn't say so much, but she would have rathered to purchase things with money that she had earned on her own.

And perhaps that's why an idea slowly shaped itself in her mind as she and the other women drove to town and she listened to their gossip.

"I know," said Jane. "Next weekend, the harvest starts. And then it will be non-stop work of pickling and canning for the winter. And curing the meat that the men start bringing in. There are a number of us, but even then, it always seems every year that we're short hands. Even after enlisting the help of every able-bodied child in the county."

"It is a lot of work," Sally agreed. "But you're always grateful when the snows start settling in. And you can't get to the town grocery store even if you wanted because the snow had blocked off the roads."

"So you're effectively snowed in?" asked Nine. "During the winter? No one goes anywhere?"

"Not really," Jane replied. "And there really isn't anywhere interesting to go, especially since it gets very cold. You have winters out on the east coast, don't you?"

"Yes. But the city has a number of workers working for it to clean up the streets. Normally, during the summer, it's to clear out the garbage. But during the winter, it's to clear up the snow."

"I suppose we shouldn't be surprised by that," said Sally, wryly. "Haven't they

made genmods for practically ever service job out there? It's amazing that we aren't out of a job yet."

Nine bit her lip and then couldn't help adding, "Maybe I'm just an advance guard for that."

Sally shook her head with a smile. "I don't mean you, my dear. It is obvious that you're not like the others. Most of the genmods around here are miners or train workers and they all tend to stick together. All genmods, from what I hear, like to stick together. That's why right now they're not ideal to send out to the frontier to help colonize it, because they need each other and don't have any independent thinking skills, if you know what I mean."

"I know it."

"The weather here is sometimes unpredictable and so you just need flexibility to roll with things."

Jane patted her shoulder. "Everyone has been warning Mr. Justice that he's making a big mistake picking a factory worker instead of the usual east coast spinster, but for us, who have met you, it is obvious that you don't quite fit that mold. In fact, anyone just hearing about you should realize that. Factory workers don't just spontaneously come out west to seek their fortune."

It didn't really matter to Nine whether or not Justice thought he was making a mistake. Or whether anyone else, really, thought that he was making a mistake. But for some reason, it did make her feel better that there were people who thought that she was her own individual and not just another genmod. Maybe she was getting better at passing. And maybe later, when she found herself in a place where absolutely no one knew her, she wouldn't bother telling anyone about her origins, even though most upfront people would.

It was just the four of them. Sally mentioned that the other ranch hands' wives would be coming along later in the day or possibly do some shopping on Sunday afternoon after church. And to that, Ellie Green mentioned that to her relief, Beatrice Miller had never bothered to come with any of them to town before. The older woman thought all the younger women were too frivolous, or at least that was what the three other women told her. However, they all disputed Beatrice Miller's assessment of them.

And as Jane pointed out, "The older generation always thinks that what the

newer generation is doing is wrong or improper. When Anderson had advertised for a mail-order bride, she didn't like it either. And I think she also did all she could to drive the young woman away. I bet she's been doing the same thing to you, hasn't she?"

"She's been more critical than helpful," Nine admitted. "And I figured as much that she didn't approve of me once she set her sights on me. So I suppose I've just learned to ignore her as much as possible."

The town of Cat's Eye came into view not long after a bend in the road. Jane steered the cart towards the east side of town to the large grocery store that dominated that side of the road. The grocery store itself was constructed similarly to all the other buildings in town, of clapboard wood, painted with an eye-catching color. In this case, yellow. There was a hand-painted sign stretched over the entry way, proclaiming the grocery store to be the Lee General Store.

The door to the grocery store did not sit directly on the street. Instead, it was up a bit, past a short platform that customers would have to walk through from either side. When the women went into the store, the door creaked open and a bell tinkled their presence. Nine hung back a bit, to see what everyone else would do, and saw the store manager, a slick young man in a black suit and apron walk forward to greet them and to tell them that if they had any problem, they should go ahead and ask him. Sally stepped forward to talk with the store manager about something that she needed back home, leaving the rest of the women, Jane, Ellie, and Nine to themselves.

Nine decided to look through the grocery store systematically, so instead of immediately heading to certain areas of the store, like Jane and Ellie, she started at the front and looked at all of the shelves, wondering about what she should buy, if anything.

Fortunately for her, she was left alone. It was either that or the store manager had forgotten about her. That day, she was wearing a not particularly distinctive yellow dress with a matching bonnet. It was very similar to what every other woman was wearing so she didn't particularly stand out. And with the bonnet, it wasn't easy for anyone to see her face. So even in this town, though smaller than an east coast city, she was able to be anonymous, relatively.

She found a section in the store which sold a variety of kitchen implements. Seeing several tools which she thought would be useful for cooking, she took some of these as well as a couple sacks of spices which she remembered were listed in some of

the recipes in the cook book she found. She had wanted to try out those recipes earlier in the week, but she had had to pass on them or at least modify them, especially since she discovered that she didn't have all of the ingredients on hand.

When she was finally ready, she had also discovered that the other ranch hands' wives had also gotten their share of things they wanted from the general store. With all of them ringing out at the same time, the store clerk had little time to really notice that Nine was among them. The young man did do a double take when he noticed that she was someone different, but as he simply asked her if she was new to the Justice Ranch and she had just nodded an affirmative to that, he didn't particularly ask any more questions. And since he never took a direct look at her, he never realized that she was the strange mail order bride that had come to Cat's Eye earlier that week. Even when she said that she was getting everything on Justice's credit line.

With all of the groceries, the women loaded up their cart and Jane drove them down to another store that Ellie needed to go to since she was telling all of them that some of her children needed some new clothes. But instead of going to the tailor, as Nine had expected, they had passed by that storefront and went instead to another store at the end of the main street that sold fabrics and notions. Jane volunteered to stay with the cart to make sure that no one took any of their things and told Ellie and Sally what she wanted from the store.

Ellie and Sally also already knew what they wanted from the fabric store, so they mostly occupied that clerk with their orders while it left Nine a bit of time to look around as well. There were all sorts of fabrics on sale, from the more demure calico to the rather risque and bold colors of silk. With certain things in mind, Nine picked her selections and took the bolts of fabric to the front counter to have everything measured and cut out. Then she took a look at some of the buttons and other notions that she saw on sale and took some of those.

When Ellie and Sally were finished with their orders, both women told her that they would be going out to put their things away and that they were also going to head to the post office across the street to pick up some mail. When she was done with her own order, she could just meet them there. To that, Nine nodded and told them to go on ahead while she attended to her own purchases.

The clerk of the fabric store was a short little man with a mustache. But unlike

the man she had unfortunately bumped into at the train station, this man didn't look like he had dressed up just for the occasion. Instead, his well tailored shirt and waistcoat seemed like a natural part of him. He had a yellow tape measure draped around his neck and a pencil stuck behind one ear. He had that Far East look about him, which was confirmed when he introduced himself as Zu Chan, the owner of the fabric store.

Nine wasn't ignorant of the world. She had seen others from the Far East before when she lived in the city. Many people from that area had immigrated to this country in search of a better life. And while they had the fortune of not being conscripted to the factories or other menial work which was now done by the genmods that now dominated those industries, they were still marginalized in certain places because, well, frankly they looked different and had different customs that most people in this country didn't understand. They congregated together in enclaves called Chinatowns where they mostly specialized in things that no other person wanted or had the expertise to really do. They did many artisanal things like setting up bakeries or restaurants, making elaborate handcrafted objects that were reminiscent of their homeland that genmods could never recreate. Or they could, if the scientists thought it would be worthwhile to make and train such genmods.

And in that respect, Zu Chan wasn't any different from his fellow countrymen. Owning a fabric store was also considered quite artisanal although the industry itself had not segregated itself as it had done in some others. But what was remarkable was that he was out in the western frontier at all, relatively alone. He might have his family with him, she supposed, but other than that, she had not seen too many other people of his kind out here. Probably because it seemed, to her, that they would have rathered to stick together.

But Mr. Chan didn't seem perturbed by her sudden examination. Instead, he was already taking the bolts of fabric that she had selected and was asking in accented English how much she wanted. She told him. And then because her curiosity compelled her to, she asked, "Pardon me for asking, but it doesn't seem typical for a fabric merchant to live all the way out here in the west. Do you get much business?"

The store owner seemed to take her question in stride. Perhaps he had been asked about this many times. "I view it as a new opportunity, Miss," he said. "Where

I'm from, the business of selling fabric is already quite crowded. I needed to either distinguish myself or find a new market. And since I thought that doing the first would be much harder than the second, I chose to move out here. After all, everyone needs clothes, don't they?"

"Yes," Nine agreed. "Everyone needs clothes. But there's also a tailor down the street and then the general store, even though they only carry a few bolts of fabric, it seems, just for form's sake."

"The tailor specializes in clothes for men," said Mr. Chan. "Especially for men who don't have any wives or daughters to make clothes for them. And it's a bit more expensive compared to what I sell, so we're not particularly competing for the same customers, if you see what I mean. And the general store sells groceries and assorted hardware and tools. They don't specialize in fabric either. So there is plenty of business for me at the moment, unless another fabric merchant decides to move to Cat's Eye and undercut my prices."

"That sounds reasonable," Nine said. "You seem like a rather enterprising gentleman in this rather rough and tumble environment."

"There are risks, of course. There are always risks. But you probably know better than most what it is to live free and on your own terms. Sometimes it's not about the profit." Mr. Chan's expression was still impassive, but the words struck something inside Nine. He knew.

"Yes, I would agree with that," she said, as he cut the fabric and then folded it into neat squares to be put in brown paper packaging and wrapped with twine. "It might be dangerous out here, but like everything else, there are risks involved, even with freedom."

Mr. Chan then gave her a small enigmatic smile before saying, "You look like someone who would be very skillful with the needle, Miss Rendell. Mr. Justice would be very lucky if you decided to stay. Well, I've put everything on Mr. Justice's account, so you don't need to worry about that. I hope to see you again soon."

Nine said her good-byes to Mr. Chan and headed out. Across the street, she easily spotted the post office. The other women had said that she should meet them there. She had nothing that she wanted to send through the post. And she was quite sure that no one that she knew from back east wanted to send her anything--after all, pretty much

everyone she knew in her former life thought of her as just one of the others--so she was quite reluctant to even go.

She noticed that Jane was still sitting at the cart, looking over their things. She went over to tell Jane that she could take over her post and that she could join Sally and Ellie at the post office since she wasn't expecting any post anyway. Jane seemed eager to join the other women, so she eagerly agreed to the swap. So while Jane hurried away towards the post office where the other women were waiting, Nine put her packages in the back with the other purchases and got on the front seat of the cart. For a brief moment, she watched the gelding which pulled the cart, but the horse seemed rather content to wait patiently, so Nine settled in to scan her surroundings with a bit of idle attention.

There were several other stores in the vicinity, selling everything from porcelain trinkets to leather saddles. Some of the stores she wondered how they would even stay in business since they seemed even more useless than those porcelain trinkets, but she figured that there might be enough people in the town of Cat's Eye to justify the business. But that didn't mean that she would ever go into such stores. She didn't think that she was that frivolous.

Townspople bustled to and fro on the main street, from in and out of those stores as well as the post office. They didn't appear to notice her which was just fine with her. She was content to watch without drawing much attention to herself. But then she noticed a bit of commotion further down the street. Several people spilled out of a building which was labeled with a sign saying "Cat's Eye Saloon."

Nine had heard about saloons, mostly from the chattering of some of the other women at the ranch while they were trying to pass time while doing some tedious chores. The saloon was, to Nine's thinking, very similar to a bar or pub back out on the east coast where people, mostly men, came in to escape the home life and do some drinking, socializing, and possibly even some gambling. Nine herself didn't have much of an opinion on that. If other people wanted to fritter their time and money away on something silly like that, it wasn't really much of her business.

But there was one fact which made saloons far different than their drinking counterparts in the east. The saloons out on the frontier were often paired with another business practice--the brothels. Often, both the saloons and brothels were one and the

same, making the whole establishment a den of iniquity, an adult playground for men only. The other women often spoke of the place with disapproving tones, often loudly proclaiming that the establishment should be completely torn down and obliterated. They were all preaching for its abolition.

And while Nine herself thought that people should be able to do what they wished as it was their own lives and not hers, there was something truly wrong about brothels that didn't sit well with her. Even if the brothels out west didn't have prostitutes who were genmods specifically bred for the purpose, women were still selling themselves to make ends meet and having no other recourse to live their lives. But of course, what could she do? The whole institution existed, it seemed, even before history began and it would probably exist far in the future if human nature remained the way it was. So she supposed she could only be disapproving like the rest of the women but also not having the power to change any of it.

The commotion in front of the saloon continued. Two men had tumbled out of the saloon doors, fighting like dogs and cats. They were furiously pummeling each other with fists and kicks. Some of the other saloon patrons had also wandered out to watch the fight, as well as some ladies of the night decked out in bright silk finery. Nine sighed at the scene. She supposed Sally, Jane, and Ellie would immediately demand the details of the fight when they got back. She had no doubt that someone was running into the post office (or looking out of the post office window) getting the basic information and telling everyone else. She thought the whole thing rather silly, since she was really an inadvertent observer, although she supposed that other people would be fascinated by the entire drama. That was the one thing that separated her from everyone else, she privately mused. Some things just didn't affect her. And it was a subtle flaw that even the observant scientists had missed about her while she was growing up.

She wondered, briefly, what would happen if she took her Colt from her handbag and took a shot up in the air to break up the fight. It would certainly draw attention to her. Unwanted attention, certainly. And it would waste a bullet she could otherwise use on something far less idiotic. The horse pulling her cart seemed to take her view. The animal's ears flicked at the noise, but otherwise, the horse seemed rather unfazed by it all.

While the fight was going on, the owner of the saloon came out to speak with one

of the spectators about getting the sheriff. That spectator took off on foot, passing her cart without another glance. The owner of the saloon also admonished the women who worked for him to come back into the saloon, but the ladies of the night completely ignored him and continued to stay outside watching the fight. Some of them even started yelling in encouragement to one of the men. At their lack of response, the saloon owner just threw up his hands and went back inside.

It was then that one of the saloon ladies looked her way and decided to walk closer. The woman was dressed in a deep jewel blue gown that was cut low at the bodice which exposed a vast amount of snowy bosom. Her blonde hair was piled up high on her head and her eyes were a striking bluish-purple that Nine didn't think she ever saw on a person before. She had quite a bit of rouge on her face, but even then she had the sort of stunning beauty that would bring men to their knees. Nine had no doubt that she was quite often requested. Even if she was a genmod, she seemed quite exceptional. Nonetheless, even though she gave off the impression that she was a naturally born human being, there was something really familiar about her. As if she had seen this woman before in a long ago dream. "Good morning, miss. A fine day for some entertainment, eh?"

In her experience, prostitutes very rarely socialized from anyone who was obviously out of their class, so this was somewhat startling to her. Nine quickly figured that perhaps this woman was maybe as bored about the fight as she was, especially since the sheriff was probably on his way already to break up the fight, but didn't yet want to go back to work in the saloon. So she was simply amusing herself with her, hoping to shock her by drawing her attention to the sudden violence on the street.

"Good morning," Nine replied. "Is this normal around here?"

"Happens every day," the woman replied, cheerfully. "You must be new around here. Sometimes it's even more dramatic. Gun battles and knives and everything. You should have been here last week. There was one particular fight that the sheriff had to call his deputy and some of his other friends to help mediate. A rather insane sort of criminal had come into town, thinking that Cat's Eye was some kind of gold rush hub. One of the locals said something rather innocuous and he completely went off on him. There were both guns and knives at that one. And a sword, come to think of it. Somebody apparently was a Civil War veteran and he still had that thing about.

Anyways, the sheriff and his boys had to come to subdue everything. And meanwhile, everyone was hiding inside, peeking out the windows."

"That sounds more dangerous than exciting," Nine remarked.

"Well, I suppose when you put it that way, I suppose it is," the woman said. "I'm Miss Philomena. Everyone calls me Mina, though. Mina Rendell. Although the sheriff for some reason likes to call me Phil." At that, she gave a small mock scowl.

The last name made Nine jerk in her seat as if it was she who had been slapped around rather than one of the fighting men rolling around on the ground in front of the saloon. "Mina Rendell?" she repeated faintly.

"Yep, that's right. As you can see, I work at the saloon. Officially, I work as a bartender and a dancing girl. I also get paid to keep the books for Virgil Njinski, the owner of the saloon."

"I've heard of you before," Nine said.

Mina narrowed her eyes at the comment. "Oh? Have your more proper lady friends been gossiping about me?"

Nine shook her head vigorously. "No. I've heard of you when I lived back east. Perhaps my own name would explain it. I'm Nine Lily Rendell."

Mina's expression cleared. "Oh, so you're the one I've heard vague rumors about ever since you arrived earlier in the week. A rather obnoxious little man named Bob has been complaining about you every time he has gone to the saloon this week. Personally, I think he's just disappointed that he got the raw end of the deal. Apparently, the actual bride he ordered from back east wasn't as pretty as he had imagined. The rather mysterious Mr. Justice, however, seems to have been quite more lucky."

Nine refused to be impressed with that rather roundabout compliment. "Rumors seem to spread quickly in this town."

"And it's best that you don't forget that." Mina looked casually around, but no one seemed to be paying them any attention. Especially since the sheriff and his deputy had arrived to break up the saloon fight. "I'm sure the word about our little conversation is already going around town. Anyways, it is interesting that our last names are the same. Did you recognize me because you thought we were relatives? I don't have any relatives, that I know of."

"We're relatives in a way, I think," said Nine. "You probably don't know me

because my line was discontinued almost as soon as it was created. I'm the only one left. But I did hear that Rendell had created another line a few years before, using another one of his dead relatives as a template. He called it the Philomena Rendell line, but I never heard what the line was for. Only that he had created only a select few for particularly rich clientel..."

At that, Mina gave her a crooked smile. "Well, you don't have to be shy about it. I was created to be a courtesan for the men in high society. There were three of us made. Each of us was slightly different, but we were all given the name Philomena Rendell. We were status symbols. If a man owned one of us, he was considered very wealthy and influential indeed."

"But why are you here instead of back there, having fancy dinners and attending fancy balls?"

"Perhaps I'll tell you another time," said Mina as she nodded towards the post office and took a step back towards the saloon. "It looks like your friends are coming back."

Nine didn't feel particularly talkative when she and the other women drove back to the ranch, but she was forced to talk anyway as the others were very curious as to what had happened outside while they were in the post office.

"It was the post master's assistant Gertie who saw everything outside. She got a good look at the fight which the sheriff and his deputy eventually had to break up. Did you know who they were?" asked Sally.

Nine shook her head. "I'm too new for this place. I didn't recognize any of the people there. And I sort of doubt I would recognize them if I were to see them again either. You can't really get a good look at anyone if they're too busy using fisticuffs."

"Well, at least no guns were involved," remarked Jane as she shook the reins and urged the horse onward down the road. The sun was getting high over head. It would be lunch time soon and Nine remembered that she had left some stew simmering on a pot on the stove for the noon time meal. But soon after that, she would already be preparing for dinner time. Justice had mentioned that his men were coming over for another meeting and that meant more preparations than just for two. "Gertie told us that there was literally a shootout last week."

Ellie shuddered. "God, men and their guns. It's one thing to use it to kill an

animal for dinner. But for a brawl? So senseless."

"Most men are idiots anyway," said Sally. "You might love them, but they're dumb, especially if they're left to their own devices."

The brunette nodded. "I would agree with that. So Nine, we saw that you were talking with one of the saloon girls when we were coming back out. What was that all about?"

"Well, she wanted to introduce herself to me," said Nine, cautiously. "She seemed nice enough, I think."

"Don't be tricked too much," Jane warned. "They're always looking for new saloon girls for their creepy, deviant patrons. The poor mail order brides, in general I think, are easy prey for them. Especially when it seems like that sort of life is preferable to marrying a man they've just met."

To that, Nine gave them a self-deprecating grin. "Oh, you won't have to worry about any of that with me. I have no intention of going that route." She didn't really have any intention of marrying Justice either, but she wasn't going to be telling them that.

When they arrived back at the ranch, they each pulled the cart up to each of the ranch hands' houses which were located at the opposite end of the property before heading back up to the main house where they dropped off Nine and her things. Jane volunteered to take the cart back to the foreman and finally, Nine was left alone again at the house.

She went in through the mud room, taking off her jacket, and then placed the packages that she had bought at a sideboard at the end of the kitchen. After that, she immediately went to the stove to check on the stew that she had left simmering. She also had dough out rising in a bowl in the counter so she took that out as well and portioned it out to bake in the oven. It wouldn't be long until the bread browned and the smells of the baking bread infiltrated the kitchen. But even before she could smell it, she was feeling hungry. Perhaps all the shopping earlier in the day had sharpened her appetite.

"It looks like you've gotten everything ready despite spending the entire day shopping," said a dark voice behind her.

She had been mixing some sauce and at the sudden sound, she whirled around

with a gasp. She then gave a relieved sigh when she discovered who exactly was there. "Oh, it's only you, Mr. Justice. Is it noon already?"

He was standing at the threshold of the mudroom with his hat in his hand. He looked as if he had been standing there for quite a while, observing her before he spoke up. That made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up although for some reason that she couldn't quite fathom, the thought didn't particularly scare her.

"It's half past noon," he corrected her. "I suppose time flies when you're really busy, doesn't it?"

"I suppose so." She quickly wiped her hands on a towel and started taking out the dishes and ladling out the stew. She motioned for him to take a seat at the kitchen table as she busied herself preparing for lunch. "I guess I was so engrossed in the food preparations that I didn't have a chance to look at the clock on that back counter."

"That's all right. You were shopping earlier with the other ranch hands' wives weren't you?"

"Yes, we went to downtown Cat's Eye to do a bit of shopping. It was interesting. Mrs. Dunning, Mrs. Green, and Mrs. Warner took me around the shops."

"Did you get anything interesting?"

Nine found herself feeling wary about the question. But she answered truthfully. "I bought some additional kitchen implements. A whisk, a spatula, and a larger pot, especially if you intend on entertaining your men as often as you've been doing. I also bought some fabric to make some clothes. Other than that, I'm not sure you could call any of that particularly interesting. Just useful."

He nodded. "That seems reasonable. Did you have a fun time in town? I know you're from the city so it's a big change coming all the way out here. Maybe Cat's Eye isn't as big, but I hope it has some semblance on what you would look for in a big city."

"The character of Cat's Eye is quite different from a big city," she corrected as she placed the last things on the table and sat down so they could begin eating lunch. Justice didn't seem inclined to say grace. But then either was Nine. It wasn't as if she saw any evidence of His divine intervention anywhere. She doubted any meal time prayers would go listened to anyway. "For one thing, it's not as crowded and not as busy. Most of the business takes place in stores out here. Whereas on the east coast, a lot of business also takes place outside because there are a lot of opportunistic vendors

hawking their wares."

"You must miss the east coast. I've never really been to any of the big cities there."

She shrugged at that. "I don't know if I would really say that I miss that place. But I will say that I've spent most of my life there. And it was the only thing that I've known before I came out to this place."

"The same could be said for me. I've grown up in the frontier in some form or another. I'm sure I would be quite out of place if I ever came out to the city. I'm not particularly sophisticated."

"Sophistication is overrated, I think."

"So did anything else interesting happen in the town? I heard some of the ranch hands say they heard rumors that some big fight happened out there between the mayor's son and one of the clerks for the dentist's office."

For some reason, that made her laugh, and she had to cover her mouth with her hand to prevent spitting her stew everywhere. At her mirth, Justice's rather somber expression turned into a reluctant smile as he stared at her.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"My, rumor does pass fast around these parts," she finally said as she forced her surprising laughter to die down. "One would think that such news would pass as fast as molasses around here because there aren't so many people, but I guess it's the opposite because not much happens around here anyway. Everything is news."

"It is, I have to admit. Some people even seem to know what you're doing before you're even doing it."

"Now that's spooky."

"It is. You wonder if someone's actually reading your mind. Or at least reading the future. Anyways, what did you find funny?"

"Well, it seems like you know more about the incident than I do, and I was there," she told him. "I did not know that the two men fighting were the mayor's son or the clerk at the dentist's office. And even if I knew who those two men were, I would not have been able to see their faces. The fighting seemed rather, er, vigorous."

His gaze sharpened. "Oh? I got the news of the men's identity from one of the ranch hands who got it from one of the other neighbors who had gone into town and had

talked to the sheriff. Or at least that's what I understand of how I got the news. So what exactly did happen there and why were you there in person? As far as I heard, it was in front of the saloon, right?"

"Well, I was waiting outside with the cart," she said. "The other wives were at the post office so they weren't there in person. But the cart, of course, is in the street. And I had a clear view of the front of the saloon which isn't so far away from the post office."

He nodded. "Yes, I see. I know the saloon isn't too far from the post office. I can see how if you're waiting outside you would have a relatively clear view of the fight."

"I've seen drunken fights on the street before," she hastened to tell him, "so I wasn't particularly shocked. Drunk men tend to do things that they wouldn't normally do while they were sober. But these two men tumbled out of the saloon doors and were really hitting each other. They weren't even shouting, really. Just hitting and kicking. I don't know what it was supposed to be about. But the saloon owner got someone to go get the sheriff and there were other bystanders around."

"I see."

Nine didn't think it was particularly relevant to tell him about her conversation with one of the prostitutes, but she also wanted to give the impression that she wasn't hiding anything from him either. Especially since she did not want to tell him at all about her own future plans. "I talked to one of the bystanders, but she wasn't particularly helpful in illuminating why they were fighting either."

"Her?"

"She told me that her name was Philomena Rendell. I...I think she's a relative of mine."

"And that surprises you? Troubles you?" He frowned. "But now that you mention it, I do recall a woman named Philomena Rendell. Everyone actually calls her Mina. With the exception of Sheriff Killany who for some reason insists on calling her Phil."

"You know her?" For some reason, her voice came out sharper than she had intended.

"I've only seen the woman once in passing when I was in town to go to the tailor's," he told her. At her tone, he had raised an eyebrow, no doubt thinking that she was getting jealous. When in reality, she couldn't really care if he had slept with her, she

thought. "And since we're talking about it, she does bear some resemblance to you. So you may be right that she's a relative of yours."

"Ah."

But he still seemed rather amused by her reaction. "I'm sure she has quite a few admirers, but she isn't like any of the other girls at the saloon, from what I hear. When she says she's an accountant, she's really an accountant."

"She certainly doesn't dress like an accountant."

He shrugged and then looked back down at his food. "She's not married so she doesn't have a husband to tell her what to wear."

"Are you telling me," she said lowly, "that one of a husband's task is to tell his wife what to wear?"

The spoon paused in mid-air. "I misspoke. Perhaps she doesn't have anyone to tell her that perhaps what she wears isn't particularly appropriate to her station, at least in the eyes of the rest of society."

She shook her head and gave a small laugh again, not really in humor but more as a release in tension. "Your answer, I think, tells me that someone has trained you, or at least that you had observed enough married couples, that you know when to concede the point. A true bachelor would continue to argue the point and dig himself a deeper hole."

"No one said I was stupid." But he gave her a self-deprecating grin. "But that doesn't mean that I won't be stupid in the future." He soon finished his stew and automatically put the bowl and utensils in the sink before heading back out. "I'll be out on the ranch for the rest of the afternoon. We're working on rounding up some of the cattle that have wandered up north towards the mountains. But I'll be back in the evening along with the men. You can expect that we will probably have another long discussion."

Chapter 6

Nine woke atrociously early as always, just before the sun even thought of peeking over the horizon. In the dimness, which was of no problem to her own vision, she got ready and went downstairs to prepare breakfast for the morning. Today was

Sunday. Which meant that they would be going to church.

This sort of thing seemed to be expected of everyone who lived out in the frontier. Perhaps it was because the environment was so harsh and unpredictable, the people who came out here to live had to cling to something, even if it was a god that never answered any of their prayers. Nine certainly couldn't see that there really was any god at all. This god, that supposedly performed so many miracles in the Good Book never deigned to show his metaphorical hand in the real world. And while naturally born men may have been created by his hand, she certainly wasn't.

But she went through all the motions. Probably because it was expected and frowned upon if one were to openly disdain it. She supposed if she lived by herself, she would have never bothered even to think about going. But all of this, she kept to herself. She knew it was useless to voice all of her cynicism aloud. If anyone heard her, they would probably send the preacher to make sure that she was properly converted. So she was content to be mistaken for one of the quiet yet anonymous faithful.

She wasn't quite sure what the others on the ranch really thought about the whole thing. The other women had talked about going to church since aside from the religious overtones, was also a social gathering where the ranch hands' wives could talk with each other as well as with other women in town to find out the latest news. And as for Justice himself, who knew what he would be doing. He never mentioned anything about it the previous night, but then again, he had been sequestered with his men for yet another of his meetings.

Nine was beginning to think that whatever they were talking about was really serious. And if it was, she definitely wanted to know what was going on.

Just as she was finished poaching the eggs, she heard footsteps heading toward the kitchen. She looked up to see that Justice had put on his Sunday best and had combed back his hair. So, he was going to church after all. She told him a good morning and set the kitchen table up for breakfast.

"I don't know how such things go in the city," he told her as they sat down to eat, "but church affairs here in Cat's Eye is probably not as formal. Everyone goes in to hear the sermon from the preacher and then goes home. On the first Sundays of the month, though, there are luncheons served in the church yard or at the town hall if it is too cold."

"Mrs. Miller told me about that since this Sunday is in fact the first of the month," she said. And to that, she gave a small neutral smile. "Mrs. Miller seemed insistent that I do my best about it as apparently the dishes served at the church luncheon is supposed to represent one's culinary skills. And as I'm adequate at the task and not any particular genius..."

"You will do fine," he interrupted. "I assume that since Mrs. Miller badgered you into making a dish for the Sunday luncheon. But since you're new to the area, literally since you just came earlier this week, no one expects you to bring anything. You still don't have to do anything, even to prove to Mrs. Miller that she can't badger you."

"Well, I don't really want the food to go to waste," she said. "So I suppose I'll bring it anyway. I'm sure Mrs. Miller will disapprove of it as she seems to be the perfectionist whenever it comes to anything that anyone else does, but you're right, I suppose I shouldn't let Mrs. Miller badger me."

"So, what did you make?" he asked.

"It's a casserole," she replied vaguely. "It has chicken and some of the vegetables from the garden. I will just be happy if most people do not find it unpalatable."

He gave her an inscrutable expression at that remark, but otherwise, didn't question her further. After breakfast and after the washing up, Nine went back to her room to put on the rest of her Sunday clothes and went out to see that Justice had taken out the cart from the barn. The drive to the town and church was uneventful. And while there were some people who slanted her curious looks as she and Justice took a pew somewhere in the front of the church, otherwise no one said anything. Her first inclination was to keep to herself, but she did a little looking around. There were the other ranch hands and their wives. Some of the ranch neighbors which she had glimpsed briefly before during the week. And of course unknown people who she assumed were townsfolk.

The church itself was quite rustic, not surprising as it was on the frontier. But in some ways, it was also remarkably ornate given the limited resources that one would think the people of Cat's Eye had. Perhaps it was because people here didn't have anything else where they could put their time in that they all put their time in decorating the church. The church pews were of a hard wood, no doubt to keep the parishoners from falling asleep. But there was a rather elaborate organ which was hooked up to the

pipes at the back of the hall. And there were elaborate statues and an alter covered in fine linen at the front of the church. The preacher, an older man with thinning gray hair, wore the customary black preacher uniform. He came to the pulpit to help lead the prayers and the hymns. And then the sermon.

At first, Nine did not particularly pay any attention to the sermon. Most sermons were rather boring to her, talking about what was wrong or right or some obscure passage in the Bible. But this morning, the preacher seemed completely passionate about what he called "unnatural things made by man's hand". And while he didn't state it outright, it was quite clear that he didn't approve of genetically engineered humans.

This in itself wasn't surprising. She had heard all of this before in the cities out east. But it was quite another thing when the preacher was staring at her like she was the devil and preaching the very same thing. She found herself clutching the handles of her handbag, wishing that she could just storm out of the church right at that moment. It was only Justice's hand, which had come over to cover her wrists that prevented her from getting up and doing just that.

Somehow, she survived the rest of the service, although she had to stare at a blank spot just beyond the altar the entire time to make sure that she didn't spontaneously burst into anger. When it was over, she had to suffer waiting through a long line of people before shaking the odious preacher's hand as he gave her cold smile just for forms sake.

"I don't believe it," she said underneath her breath as they finally stepped away and headed toward the church yard where all the food had been set up for the church luncheon. "I thought men of God were compassionate towards all living beings."

"Theoretically, yes," said Justice, lowly so that their conversation wouldn't be overheard by any others around them. "But preachers are human, too. And they all have their mistaken prejudices. If it makes you feel any better, I don't think most of the people in the congregation believe that."

"If that's so, then why do they let that odious old man preach his bigotry?"

"He's been in the town for quite a long time. So people are reluctant to depose of him. However, you probably don't have to endure him for long."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because not that long ago, he has told the entire congregation that he was going

to be heading to the southwest territories to re-educate the "native heathens" as he called them. The church will be taken over by one of the deacons. Who, I assure you, are not as intolerant as him."

"Well, then, I feel sorry for the natives," she replied. "Because they will be the ones who will be forced to listen to his hateful ranting."

Fortunately for Nine, she wasn't forced to interact with the preacher at all during the luncheon. Instead, she was swept along with the other rancher's wives as they gossiped about all the news in the town. They, of course, demanded to know all the details of the fight in front of the saloon from her point of view, but other than that, they mostly gossiped about who was about to have a baby, who was courting whom, and other asundry pieces of personal news that made it seem like any other normal Sunday outing aside from the fact that it was being held at the church.

No one talked about the sermon, which Nine found to be both a relief and somewhat odd. Or perhaps no one really wanted to talk about it since the preacher was circulating among the guests, although he confined himself to mostly the older men.

Someone invited Nine to come to their quilting circle the next week and seeing that she didn't really have an excuse not to go, she accepted, thinking that going to that particular event would help her gain friends in the town in case anything untoward happened.

Although one never knew with such things. Some friends automatically turn on one if there was ever the hint of impropriety. And when such things did happen, one always found out who one's friends truly were.

What interested Nine the most, besides the various food dishes that were put out, were the interactions between the people themselves. When she had worked at a factory, everyone was literally the same and had certain ways of interacting with other people and the environment around them. It was hard not to think that they were all in fact programmed. Nine had little interaction with any naturally born humans, even outside of the factory walls, so how normal people behaved was always a great interest to her. Especially when she wanted to pass if she were to follow through on her future plans.

But in any event, it seemed as if the people in the town didn't mind much--or if they did, they didn't want to waste energy protesting it--that she wasn't like them.

Instead, they acted as if she was just like any other person.

At the luncheon, each couple sat beside each other on a long table set up underneath a row of shady maple trees that were already showing signs of turning gold for the autumn. For those people who weren't part of couples, they sat with their friends. Couples who had children also segregated themselves out, mostly because all of the parents wanted to keep an eye on the energetic children cavorting underneath the trees. Nine found herself seated with Justice and all of the other ranchers and their wives on one side of the table. People talked about work, mostly, and sometimes gossiped about the neighbors that weren't there.

This sort of interaction interested Nine a bit as she observed the small unconscious gestures that husbands and wives gave each other. The gestures, she thought, were telling on which couples were close and which probably married for more practical, monetary reasons. The same could be said for the other couples who lived in town who sat on the other side of the table. But while Nine would have liked to have stayed there, watching everyone, the luncheon soon came to an end and everyone helped tidy up the place before leaving to go back home.

As they rode the cart back home, Justice asked her while looking straight ahead at the horse pulling their vehicle, "So what do you think? I'm sure it is quite different from what they have back east. I know when Anderson took the woman who he had corresponded with to one of the church meetings, she had not been impressed. She told him that it was too rustic."

"Maybe it was rustic, but I don't think that in itself was a bad thing," she replied. "And I would have to say that I quite liked the luncheon afterwards. I enjoyed the conversation with the other ranchers' wives and I'm looking forward to the quilting circle I got invited to. But as I told you earlier, it was the rest of it that I did not particularly enjoy."

"I think everyone tolerates it because it's the expected thing to do." With the reins lying loose in his hands as the horse went on its way, he turned to look at her. "And it's one thing that brings the community together. In a place like this, all the way out in the frontier, community is everything. If something happens, all you have to depend on is your neighbors and the other people in the town. There isn't anyone else out here."

"I understand that. But if no one particularly likes his preaching..."

"He was hired as a preacher by some very influential folks in town," he said. "It would be very difficult to oust him without causing some sort of schism in the town leadership. Of course, if the preacher was both outrageous in his behavior and sermons, it wouldn't be long before he was replaced. But in reality, other than his sermons, he hasn't really done anything untoward to anyone. At least that I know of."

"And what do you think of the whole thing?" Nine asked baldly. "Are you just tolerating him because you want to stay as part of the town's community or do you really believe him?"

He gave her a cold, dark smile that suddenly made her feel a little chilly despite the sunny day. "I am only tolerating him, yes. But that's mostly because before he has done nothing to me. It is a different matter now because at the moment, I consider you my guest. And your reputation by extension, is also mine."

Nine wasn't sure how to reply to that. She wasn't his at all, and certainly not now. But he was right that she was a guest. However, she was pretty sure that he would not have taken that same view if she were any other kind of guest. "I suppose I should be flattered that you consider defending my reputation because I am currently your guest," she finally said. "However, I am fully capable of defending myself when the need arises." And to that, her mind wandered back to her handbag where she kept the gun. It was something that she told no one. And something that she allowed no one to look at. The element of surprise always gave an edge.

"You are a newcomer. And also naive, perhaps, about some of the things that happen around here. I'm sure there are other things around Cat's Eye that is similar to the preacher--perhaps odious to your sensibilities and others as well, but tolerated because for the moment that is all there is. You have to make do with what you have on the frontier."

"I see." She folded her hands in her lap, her hands also over her handbag as she looked away from him to watch the mountains in the distance. "And what do you think of the institution of the church in itself? If you had the choice and no one objected, would you be still attending?"

"Some would say that that is getting into dangerous territory," he replied. She felt that he was still watching her out of the corner of his eye. "They might even say that it is

blasphemous."

"So you think this entire topic is taboo?"

"I am willing to talk about anything as long as the other person in the conversation doesn't consider it taboo."

"So you don't think anything is taboo. That if I were to talk frankly with you, you wouldn't mind."

"Hm."

"You didn't answer my previous question."

"What is there to answer?" he shrugged. "As I mentioned, I tolerate the preacher. I would have a more easier tolerating him if he really preached the same sort of acceptance that is stated in the Holy Book. I go because it is expected of me. And if it were not, I probably wouldn't. The values that the church proports to teach could as easily be taught by one's parents, neighbor, and the rest of society. Religion only codifies those rules which they think are acceptable. They do not take into account other rules which may be as valid."

Nine blinked at the explanation, but for some reason, she didn't particularly think it was unusual of him to have such an opinion. It matched his disposition rather well. But she didn't answer in kind. At least not immediately. Instead, she said, "The institution in the cities is more impersonal. Probably because there are so many people living in the city and not enough clergy to personally attend to everyone. For factory workers, they didn't care too much about that. All of us attended services in a large cathedral built close to the work site just for that purpose. The sermons weren't particularly provocative, but none of them sat right with me either. Probably because I thought most advice was common sense. And any supposed divine intervention was probably coincidence."

"So you don't think there is a god."

"Well, if there was one, He certainly isn't taking much interest in anyone living on this earth right now."

"A preacher would say that the lord works in mysterious ways. One mustn't assume that there would be miracles all the time."

"And what do you think of that?"

The edge of his mouth curved upward. "I haven't seen or heard Him, if that's

what you're asking. And generally, I'm the sort of person who likes to experience things with my senses so that I know that it is actually real."

"That's a rather roundabout way of telling me that you have views similar to mine."

"Similar, but not exactly the same," he corrected. "But that doesn't mean that we can't get along."

"You say that, but this is just one thing about many. What do you think about politics? About children? About what to do when you're faced with an emergency? Or even the little things such as whether or not you prefer syrup or butter on your pancakes."

"I actually like chocolate on my pancakes," he replied. "But no woman has ever made them to my requested specifications. After all, they are the ones in charge of the kitchen, not I. And as experts in all things involving cooking, I am sure my preferences are moot."

Wide-eyed, she finally turned back to him. "Is that a not so subtle dig at what I should be cooking?"

"No," he said sharply. And then he said in a more gentler tone, "I was only trying to make a joke, Miss Rendell. Forget I said it."

"I don't think so." This time, she was scrutinizing him. Humor was something few and far between in her own life. And as a result, she found it rather hard to distinguish from everything else which she assumed was serious. "I believe that was the first joke I've really heard you tell. You have a strange sense of humor."

"That's probably why I don't make jokes all that often. No one understands them."

She put her chin in her hand. "Even so, I don't think the comment was all a joke. Do you really like chocolate on your pancakes?"

"It's true," he admitted. "My mother used to make chocolate pancakes for my brother and me when we were small. It was only later that I realized how expensive chocolate was, so I almost never requested the dish, except maybe on my birthday. Now, I just simply don't have the inclination to request it. The last cook and housekeeper thought the whole idea was rather mad."

"Chocolate is expensive," she agreed. "Can you even buy it out here in Cat's Eye?"

I saw several kinds of sweets being sold at the general store when I was in town yesterday with the others, but I don't recall seeing any chocolate for sale."

"It wouldn't surprise me if it was impossible to get any chocolate out here," he said. "It is also too bad that one can't grow the cocoa trees that are used to make the chocolate here. Those plants only tolerate tropical climates. And this is far from it."

Chapter 7

It was a Monday afternoon, right after Nine had finished the household chores for the day and was just waiting for dinner to cook in the oven. She had prepared a chicken and was slow roasting it with several vegetables stuffed inside. It was from a recipe that she had found in the cook book. Whether or not Justice would like it, she could only guess. She had decided that when he came home from dinner--without his men--she would outright ask him what his preferences were. If he treasured honesty and bluntness, then it was better to do it in a forthright manner.

But as she had a bit of free time on her hands and she didn't particularly want to start on the sewing project she had in mind until it was evening and after dinner, she went out of the house to look around. She already knew her way around the chicken coop and the vegetable plot after Jane Dunning and Ellie Green had showed her those places. She had even had a look around the barn earlier. This time, she decided to take a longer walk out further on the property.

See a couple of ranch hands on horses out on the north side of the property, Nine decided to head south, away from them. She didn't particularly want to bump into anyone on her wanderings, mostly because she wanted the time to herself and in an open environment where she could think about what she wanted to do.

Time was definitely running short. The ranch hands' wives had told her that they were preparing for the fall harvest and that they were going to start with the apple orchards in the far western part of the ranch on Wednesday. By the way they had explained the whole process to her, Nine was quite sure that it was a monumental task that would take long days and very little time truly alone. So she probably only had this day to wander out on the property to see what it looked like herself.

She crossed a line of aspens and came across a dip in the land that soon creased into a short rocky crack where a cold creek ran across the property. The creek itself was shallow and dotted with long flat boulders, so she found it easy to cross over to the other side. Other than the running water and the occasional bird, the landscape was surprisingly quiet. In the winter, she thought, when the creek froze over and the animals hibernating, it would be as silent as the dead.

From the other side of the creek, she found a faint path of trampled grass, probably from the hooves of all the cattle that had gone before. She followed the path, perhaps half expecting to come across a herd of cattle, but instead the path wound itself through a small outcropping of trees and out onto a hill that gave her a better view of the surrounding land.

Below the hill was a deep indentation of the land that resembled a bowl. It was probably several acres wide. But there was no living grass in the indentation. Instead, the ground had been scorched black. While there was no smoke or flames, Nine could still smell it. This was probably where the ranch hands had burned those mysterious things the previous week and that she and Ellie Green could see the smoke from all the way at their vegetable patch.

Nine made her way down the other side of the hill and gingerly picked her way along the blackened char to see if she could see anything recognizable. Or at least find something that had not been burned in the inferno that the ranch hands had created. At first, she could find nothing but charred wood and black lumps which fell apart into bits of dust when she attempted to pick them up. But at the center of the indentation, she finally found something.

It was bone white, reminding her of the unnatural things she saw on her first day coming to the ranch. It had a rather knobby, organic shape that made one think of knee caps and knuck bones. When she picked it up, it felt remarkably heavy in her palm, completely unexpected if it indeed was bone. Instead, the weight made her think of the iron horseshoe that she had once picked up in the barn out of curiosity. And while the object was bone white, it didn't have the porous texture of actual bone either. Instead, it seemed smooth, almost waxy by both eye and touch. She held it close to her nose, but smelled nothing except for the surrounding char.

"I see you've found our most recent burn place."

Nine looked up at the sound of the voice. It was Justice. He had come in from the other side of the indentation, indicating that he was working out even further south. Perhaps he had his men split up, Nine thought. Some of them were working in the north and some in the south. She supposed that her short foray into trying to get time alone for herself was turning out to be a bust. And with Justice here, he would probably just tell her to drop the object and go back home.

But his next words were something that she didn't expect at all. "You're not like the others, are you?"

"What do you mean by that?" Nine asked, as those words were the first ones that came to mind after the startling question.

"You're something totally unto yourself." Justice walked toward her so that they were finally standing directly face to face. He looked at her for a moment and then back down at her palm where she was cradling the bone white object. "The wives of the ranch hands easily accepted the explanations their husbands gave them on what was going on out here. Even though, I'm sure, that they are speculating among themselves what the real reason really is. But none of them had even thought to come out this way to really see for themselves."

"I don't know about that," she replied. "I didn't really come out here to dig into your secrets. I just wanted to see the rest of the land, that is all. I finished the chores for the afternoon and thought that maybe I could just take a stroll down this way to see the rest of your ranch as well as to have some time to myself."

"Perhaps that is true. But you stopped in this place, nonetheless, and deliberately picked up that."

"You know what it is?"

"It is part of the equipment that the mining company down south uses. I don't know why the company is trying to encroach on my land. It belongs to me. I have the papers and the law to back me up. But the mining barons seem to think that the world revolves around them and that they could do whatever they want."

"This is part of some machine?" Nine picked up the object with her other hand by her thumb and forefinger and held it up to the light. Still very strange and unnatural. But her gut feeling was that the thing was also organic in some way. "What sort of machine?"

"Something involved in mining." He shrugged. "I don't know the specifics as I'm a rancher, not a miner. But whatever it is, it isn't mine and it doesn't belong on my land."

"Have you tried to give it back to the mining company?"

"Oh, we're past that stage now," Justice said darkly. "Whenever we find something, we destroy it, to send a message. I'm sure once the mining company realizes that they're losing more money in trying to infiltrate their probes into other people's land than in putting more effort into mining what they already have, they will finally stop."

"What about the sheriff? You seem to know him."

"And what can the sheriff do against a big mining company?" said Justice. "No, if they're going to be stopped, it would have to be through a means which they most thoroughly understand. And that's through resources and money."

"But it also seems rather wasteful of your time as well."

"It is. And that's why my men and I have been having so many meetings of late. We've been trying to figure out what the most efficient and cost effective way of dealing with this, too. The problem is, the mining company is huge. And in putting up any sort of fight, it would most definitely bankrupt us ranchers far sooner than it would bankrupt them."

Nine began tossing the strange object up and down in her hand, feeling a bit morbid and fascinated at the same time. "That indeed is a problem. I've only been a factory worker so I'm afraid I don't have any useful suggestions on the matter, even if you cared about my opinion."

"Who said that I didn't care about your opinion?"

She scoffed. "Why would you? You and your men have not decided to share your thoughts about what is happening on your land with me. I'm just a guest. A newcomer. A stranger."

"Well, I'm asking you now," he said. "Even if you haven't been living on a ranch your whole life, I'm sure you have some kind of idea."

"You're just humoring me," she replied. "Probably in an attempt to get on my good side."

"Every man wants to be on his wife's good side. She's the one doing the cooking."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm not your wife yet."

"Soon," he promised. There was a hint of a smile on his face. "So tell me."

She still felt doubtful that he would really be listening to her suggestions, but she told him anyway. "You're right. You do have to hit the mining company where it will hurt the most. But I don't think you can really try to hit their profits directly. That would be too monumental of a task. Instead, what you could try to do is to make it too expensive for them to really consider mining in the area."

"And how do you propose how we would try to do that?"

"Everything, it seems, runs on rumor and gossip. You could put in a word here or there so that any delivery that must be made to the mining camp would suddenly be more expensive. Maybe the workers suddenly hear that their wages are not enough to cover what the management wants them to do so they demand a higher wage and strike if it is not met. And, of course, continue destroying whatever it is that they're trying to send to your property. I have a suspicion that these things," and she held out the strange bone white object in her hand as a demonstration, "Don't really come cheap, even though it seems that the mining company is treating them that way."

"I suppose there's no harm in using rumor and gossip as most people around here don't really care for the mining company at all," he said thoughtfully. "Although Cat's Eye started as a mining town, it certainly isn't very much part of the town now as the industry has changed to ranching. It wouldn't be too hard to start those rumors up."

Nine tucked the strange white object into her apron pocket and followed Justice up the incline to the opposite side of the indentation of ground. On the other side, she saw mostly rolling flat grassland, dotted occasionally with trees. Out in the distance, she saw a line of cattle being driven toward one side by a couple of ranch hands on horses. She stood beside Justice watching this going on, not quite touching him.

He adjusted his hat so that the brim shaded his eyes from the oncoming afternoon sunlight. "It looks like the boys have things well in hand, even though I went here to investigate a bit of movement over here."

"A bit of movement?"

"You," he clarified. "I didn't expect you to come out all the way over here."

"I just wanted to walk a bit."

"Then would you care if I joined you?"

Nine had wanted to walk alone so that she could muse on her thoughts herself, but she didn't know how she could phrase that without offending him. So she merely shrugged and said, "Suit yourself. I wasn't walking in any particular direction, so I didn't come to this place on purpose."

"Probably consciously you didn't," he said. "But you were probably curious as to why there were things happening on the other parts of the ranch land." He motioned with a hand in the direction opposite to where the ranch hands were herding the cattle. "If you want to see the rest of the land on the ranch, this is probably as good a way as any."

"You know the land better than I do, so please lead the way, Mr. Justice."

The edge of his mouth curved. "As we're the only ones out here at the moment and I doubt anyone else could overhear, you can call me Caleb if you wish."

She deliberately ignored his suggestion. "I'm sure you know all the landmarks on your ranch, Mr. Justice. Which ones are out there?"

"You'll see. It's not far from here."

She walked with him through the land, past a line of trees which hid a sudden outcrop of hills. Past that particular precarious path on which Nine ended up scrambling past on more than one occasion, the hills dipped down to reveal another part of the creek which she had seen when she had first ventured out to the rest of the ranch land. But instead of the flat, almost placid nature of the creek that she had seen at first, this part of the creek was more active and edgy. The hills formed a crevasse where the creek flowed thinly and quickly, burbling along and forming small rapids which ran white and foamy. The overlooking trees leaned down into this gully as if they too were looking down on the creek. And their low branches seemed to be fingers reaching out, almost touching the water.

"It's strangely eerie here," she murmured, mostly to herself. "It's darker here too, probably because the trees are blocking out some of the sunlight. I would not have imagined that something like this would be hidden on your property."

"It is a little place that sometimes I go to when I need a place to myself," he replied. "I suppose I have the house to myself, too, but this is different. I'm not caught unawares if someone else comes."

"This is your private place." She looked back at him but his expression was still

obscured by the shadow from his hat. "Why have you taken me here?"

"I wanted to show you something. Perhaps you would find it interesting." He gestured again, towards one end of the creek. They made their way across some moss covered rocks and soon they were at another part of the hidden ravine, in a place where the view to the path where they had traveled was completely obscured by a couple of boulders.

Justice made his way to where a tall tree had sunk its roots onto the hilly ground above, but because of the general erosion caused by the weather, some of the ground had given way, leaving some of the roots hanging in the air. Below those roots was a dark rocky opening into the hill that looked a bit ominous. Justice took out a lighter and flicked it open. He went inside the hill. As Nine was more curious than trepedatious, she followed him inside.

The tiny bit of light cast by his lighter illuminated a small dry rocky cave room that was tall enough for even Justice to stand upright in, although if he had raised his arms, his fingers would have brushed the ceiling. The cave room showed signs of occupation. There was a large iron box at one end with an unlit lantern sitting on top of it. A wooden shelf had been hammered into one of the walls and there were a variety of objects on it, mostly tools from what Nine could guess.

"You've been here before, too," said Nine.

"It's some place to go to, to get away," he replied. "And I suppose I also somewhat planned it as an emergency shelter, too. Especially if I got caught out here in the middle of the blizzard and couldn't make it back to the house for some reason."

"But no one knows about this except you. And me now, I suppose." She walked around the cave and noticed that there was no back wall to the cave. Instead, there was a narrow tunnel leading further into the hill. "Have you explored this whole thing?"

"I've been in there a couple times," he said, nodding his head to the tunnel. "It is more of the same even though I haven't explored the entire thing. It is quite big. I'm somewhat surprised that no animal has found this place yet either, but I guess that's lucky, too. There are a large number of caves, riddling this area. More of them are up towards the mountains. Sometimes, you can find some interesting rock or ore. But this one is mostly dry and uninteresting. It's better used for shelter."

"If there are more of these around here, then it's no wonder that the mining

company wants your land," she said.

"That's why my men and I have been trying to keep them away from this land as well as we are able." He stepped out of the small cave and Nine quickly followed before she was swallowed up by the Stygian darkness. He flicked his lighter off once he stepped outside. "But it's getting harder and harder. There's only a limited number of us. And the mining company has more resources that they could use in order to get what they want."

"Then it's all the more imperative to make sure that there is no incentive to getting what they want." They stepped past the boulders that hid the opening of the cave from view and out onto the shoreline of the fast running creek. Nine froze momentarily when she spotted a deer drinking at the creek. But they had been making too much noise tramping about in the woods. The deer immediately looked up and spotting them, scrambled away.

"There's a herd that lives in this area," he said. "They compete with the cattle for grazing so the men and I sometimes go out to thin the herd. And provide extra meat for dinner."

"Wouldn't the herd move away once they realize that there are also hunters in the area?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Deer are usually dumb beasts. They come to the same place time and time again even if they've seen their brethren slaughtered at the place. They either don't remember or cannot recall the significance. Which is just as well. I don't think we can subsist on beef all the time."

"And with the creek running through your property, you sometimes fish too, don't you?"

"Not here. The water is too swift for the fish to congregate here. But there is more slow moving water to the west of here which runs into a lake. Sometimes I go there to fish. But I do most of that during the summer when we let the cattle loose and don't spend so much time rounding them up. The other men who work for me are free to do that as well. There are plenty of fish to go around in the streams here."

"It sounds like a land of plenty."

"When you know where to look," he clarified. "The first settlers to Cat's Eye didn't know anything about the land. They would have starved, especially since the train

line had not been built out here yet, if the natives hadn't befriended some of them and given them tips on how to survive on the land. And then when the miners moved on and the ranchers moved in, as well as the railroads, most people haven't needed the knowledge of that any more."

"But you still know it."

"One never knows what may happen. It's not that we live in town and can go to the general store whenever we want. And even if we did, you don't know if the train will always come. So far, no one's ever invented fool proof scheduling. And there will always be disasters."

"You sound like a pessimist."

"I'm a realist." He moved out past the rocky outcropping of the stones that lined the rapidly flowing creek and climbed up the hill back to the path that they walked on. He reached down to help her up the incline.

She was doing well until she reached the very edge. The toe of her right foot caught on something on the ground, a pebble or a root, and she fell forward before she could catch herself. But Justice was lightning quick and he grasped both of her arms as she tumbled into his chest. He smelled slightly sweaty, probably from the work that he had done during the day. But there was also an underlying scent to him. A deep musk that tempted her to step even closer to him and breathe deeply. But she refrained from the urge and instead looked up at him.

From her new vantage point, she could see his bright green eyes glimmering at her from underneath the brim of his hat. He wasn't smiling, but the expression on his face sent a not entirely unpleasant shiver.

He kissed her then. This time it wasn't unexpected. Part of her wanted it, too. She felt her heartbeat quicken when his lips pressed against hers. And this time, she opened her mouth to him. Her hands grasped the front of his shirt when he angled his head to get better access and to deepen the kiss. He pulled her closer to him so that they were front to front and she could feel his hard body against her.

She was concentrating so hard on the kiss that she hardly realized that he had moved, pulling her back with him until he had somehow turned her around and pressed her against a tree. The bark felt rough against her back, but at the moment she didn't care. She gave a soft moan against his mouth when one of his hands released her arm to

caress her through the bodice of her dress. She was shocked with herself for wanting him there. It wasn't something that a proper lady should have wanted in a courtship. Or what she thought of as courtship. Perhaps this meant she was more like Mina Rendell than she would have initially guessed.

The sound of a loud caw was the only thing that finally broke them apart. When Justice finally took a step away, she saw a large black bird wing upward through the tree tops. She let out a relieved breath, not because the kiss stopped, but because the interruption did not herald the arrival of someone who would have been surprised to find them in an embrace.

Justice seemed to have the same thought because a wry smile edged his mouth upwards. "I suppose that's a sign that we should be heading back."

"Yes. It's probably best to do so. The others would probably be wondering where we are."

Chapter 8

Nine paused for a bit to catch her breath from pruning all of the vines that were growing in the vegetable garden. It seemed that as harvest time was coming closer, all of the plants had decided to offer all of their bounty at the same time. There were tomatoes and gourds and zucchinis and squashes, not to mention everything else. And while the bounty would be very welcome during the winter when there wasn't going to be any other fresh food available, at the moment, it was very hard work. Nine had already lugged in four bushels of gourds back to the house. They would be stored in a cool dry place, to be taken out as needed. But as for the softer foods like the tomatoes and zucchinis, they would have to be pickled or canned before storing. And that was more work.

Well, at least it kept her busy, Nine briefly reflected. And kept her mind off other, more startling things. And her growing inner conflict with what she wanted to do and what she needed to do.

Briefly, she shaded her eyes to look at the mountains in the distance. It had been cool the previous evening. And it had also rained, making the land smell musty and

rich. The clouds were still hanging a bit low and the wispy white condensation still lingered near the base of the mountains creating the illusion that the mountain tops were floating off by themselves in empty space. The sky itself was a pale blue gray, the same color as the dress that she was working on during the evenings.

Normally, when she had worked at the factory, she and the other workers were expected to finish at least a thousand dresses in a day. And everything was in an assembly line fashion. And while Nine knew how to make a dress from start to finish, she, along with everyone else, had a specific task. So she would either be just working on sewing on buttons or darning the hem or cutting out the sleeves. This sort of repetitive task was extremely boring, but even so, her fingers remembered the motions so her mind was able to drift elsewhere, to daydream and plan.

One would have thought that after working as a factory drone, she would have never wanted to sew another dress again. But she had discovered that it was the repetitiveness that wore on her. Now, making an entire dress by herself, from start to finish, was another matter. She had discovered that she liked to put her effort into the details. And the dress that she was currently working on was probably the most creative that she had ever been. Which was saying quite a lot for someone of her kind.

After another breath, she bent down to cut more zucchini from the vine with the kitchen knife that she had borrowed from the knife block in the kitchen. There was going to be more of this in a couple days, she thought. It was Justice himself who had set the date for the entire Justice ranch to go out to the orchards to pick the apples, cherries and pears that were growing there for the entire summer. Apparently, Justice had discovered that work got done a lot quicker if everyone helped out at the same time in previous years. And with so many hands helping, they could also sort out the fruits for eating and canning from the ones that could be used a little later to make cider and wine. The cider, some of the women made on the ranch. The fruit that would be used for wine would be carted off to a nearby distillery that operated a couple miles north of Cat's Eye.

There was a sudden cry from off in the distance that made Nine almost drop the knife and zucchini in her hand. The cry was eerie, like that of a person being choked off. But at the same time, she had the awareness that it wasn't a person crying. Her hearing was better than that of most people with the fact that she could easily pick out distinct

frequencies if she so chose to put her mind to it. And from her observations, she knew that normal humans could not make any of the frequencies that this cry was making.

Perhaps it was an animal, she thought. Like a mountain lion or wolf or possibly elk as all three were known to live in these parts. But even so, the cry sounded nothing like what she would have imagined that the sounds that the animals could make.

"Oh my God."

Nine dumped the zucchini into the basket that was already getting quite full and took it up with her as she stood up. She tucked the knife into the sash of her apron as she saw a figure approach. It was Ellie Green. She was wearing a typical work dress and apron like all of the other rancher hands' wives, but what struck her was that it appeared that Ellie had been running all the way from the employee houses on the far side of the ranch. Sweat trickled down her brow and locks of hair had come undone from her bun, but only to plaster against her temple as she tried to brush them back.

"Ellie, what's wrong?" Nine asked.

Ellie shook her head, trying to get her breath back as she put her hands on her knees. When she finally straightened back up, her eyes looked a bit wild. "It's in the back field. Behind the houses. It's horrible. Like something straight out of a nightmare. And we don't know what to do. Sally took the strongest old horse and is already riding out to see if she could find the men, but I ran here too since you were closer. But I'm not even sure what you could do."

"Ellie, calm down. What are you talking about? And what do you want me to do?"

"There's a creature out there in the back field. And it has one of the children. I have no idea what it's doing. Jane and some of the others is trying to hold it off, but I don't know..."

"A creature?"

"I don't know what it is, Miss Rendell. It looks like some mad scientist had gotten a hold of some canine genetic material and had done something awful with it."

This time, it was Nine who said the epithet, but it was much stronger than Ellie's "oh my God". She dropped the basket of zucchini. That could wait. And from what Justice had told her that morning, he and his men were investigating the far side of the ranch which would take several hours of the morning to get to. He had warned her of

that, telling her that she should not be surprised when he and the men got back a little later than usual. And if Sally was riding out, trying to find them in the usual places, she would not get back in time with reinforcements to save the child.

It was also now that Nine wished that she was carrying her Colt, but at the moment, it was buried at the bottom of her clothes trunk back in the house. But, she remembered, she did have a knife.

"Let's go," she told Ellie. "I don't think the menfolk can make it on time."

The woman nodded and quickly turned to run back from where she came from. Nine followed. The ranch hands' houses were further north than the main house where Justice lived, but they were all clustered like a small hamlet of their own next to a grove of trees which sheltered their front yards. But it was the back yard that was of importance. As they neared the area, Nine heard the inhuman noises get louder and louder. It was like the cry that she had heard earlier, but louder, and at all frequencies. With her sensitive hearing, Nine had the urge to cover her ears, but she had a feeling that deadening her senses would be disastrous.

They rounded the corner of one of the houses and there it was.

A couple of the houses shared a long clearing as their backyard. Normally it seemed like an ideal place to play and do things as the land was flat and grassy, cleared of any bracken or trees. But not today. Most of the women were clustered with the rest of the children at the back of the house that was the furthest from the backyard. The children were either crying or staring at the seen wide-eyed even though some of the older women admonished them to not look or go inside. The women themselves were pale, panic-eyed, but they somehow kept themselves together. Probably for the sake of the children.

Jane Dunning and one of the other ranch hands' wives were circling the creature in the backyard, brandishing large forked branches in an effort to scare the creature away. But Nine could immediately tell that the two women were also terrified, even as they chose to do this proactive defense.

And the creature itself, was almost indescribable. It was certainly not natural. It was completely black all over. And while it had the shape of what one might say a dog, it certainly wasn't that sort of friendly animal. It was so hideous that even the pet dogs that normally frolicked in this place were nowhere to be found. The creature stood on

four legs like a dog, but it was as tall as a man. And its tail was long and serpentine. It had curled its tail against a young girl child who looked unconscious, probably fainted from terror. The creature was snarling at the two women, its maw opened wide revealing wicked sharp black teeth.

Nine took all of this in. And almost without thinking, she took the kitchen knife from the sash of her apron and threw it with all her might at the one place where she thought she might kill it with one stroke. The knife flew like a flash of silver over the heads of Jane and the other ranch hand's wife and sank immediately in the creature's forehead, right between the eyes. The knife went in to the hilt and the creature seized up, raising its head for one last scream, causing everying in the vacinity to cover their ears.

Then the creature shuddered and slumped down into the ground in death.

"Oh my God," Ellie whispered again. "What is that thing? It's like something from out of some horrible fairy tale."

Jane and the other ranch hand's wife had shakily backed away from the maw of the creature and were quickly heading towards the tail where the child's mother was already at. The three women pulled the unconscious child from the monster corpse. The child's mother was sobbing as she laid her child out on the ground to check on her vital signs.

Ellie shook her head and then began staring at Nine, wide-eyed. "But now that the danger's over, how on earth did you do that? It was like you were some sort of assassin or something. I thought you said you were a factory worker."

Nine cautiously shrugged. "I was born with very good reflexes and hand-eye coordination. That was sort of a requirement for factory workers. If you couldn't make that stitch right all the time, you were out of a job."

"That's some reflex and hand-eye coordination." That remark came from one of the other women. She introduced herself as Calla Montgomery. "You're Miss Rendell, aren't you? You're staying with Mr. Justice."

"Yes, on both counts," Nine replied.

Calla was also a blonde, like Jane, but she had a slightly more sultry look than the other woman. It was probably from the slightly exotic slant of her eyes. The woman gave her a knowing grin. "With skills like that, no wonder you're a match with Mr.

Justice. Mr. Justice has been known to have quite some extraordinary abilities himself."

To that, Nine felt her eyebrows climb up towards her hairline. Ellie gave an embarrassed cough as they noticed that Beatrice Miller had come up to their little group after supervising the other women into ushering the children back into the houses while they tried to deal with the dead carcass. Mrs. Miller had the usual pinched look about her face as she glanced at the dead creature, but her face only softened, almost imperceptibly when she turned back to address Nine.

"I see you're very handy with the knife, Miss Rendell."

"I try to be," Nine said coolly. She was half expecting the older woman to tell her that it was quite inconvenient of her to kill the creature there in their back yards.

"Perhaps you will be a satisfactory rancher's wife after all." Then Mrs. Miller nodded to the rest of the women and went back to see if she could boss around the other women and children some more.

Calla let out a breath when the older woman walked away. "I think you've impressed her. Which isn't an easy thing to do."

"I did?" Nine was a bit confused as it didn't really strike her that way, but what did she know about a normal person's reaction? Besides, she had not been looking to impress anyone. She did what she had to do because a child, let alone the rest of the ranch hands' families, were in danger.

Ellie nodded. "You may discover that everyone here thinks you're a hero now."

The mother of the rescued child had later given Nine a teary and heartfelt thank you after her daughter finally woke up from her faint. Jane and the other women also vociferously praised her afterwards which made her feel quite embarrassed and uncomfortable. She had spent most of her days anonymous and the same as everyone else, relatively speaking, in the factory system. So it was quite strange to her that everyone else singled her out because of her supposed skills and bravery instead of shunning her because it was obvious that she wasn't one of them.

It was Ellie who inadvertently explained everyone's reaction to her. While the women debated on what to do with the creature's carcass, she had said, "You know, with that heroic save, all of the women here are basically in awe and indebted to you. Because you did something for them, in an entirely dramatic way, even if you didn't intend to do it. I don't think any of the other rancher's wives in the neighboring ranches

could hold a candle to you now, especially if you decide to stay."

"This is going to get out to the rest of the town, isn't it?" Nine had replied warily. "It seems that rumors spread quite fast here, despite the lack of density of population."

"Rumors do spread fast," Ellie agreed. "And you might find that with this event, you may immediately make new friends. Or possibly enemies who easily become jealous of newcomers." But Ellie didn't seem particularly concerned with that particular possibility. Instead, she walked over to the other group of women. Nine reluctantly followed. "So, what do you think we should do with this thing? You were the one who made the kill."

Nine sighed. "I don't know. What do you and the others think will be the best course of action?"

"Do you think we could eat it?" asked one of the wives. A rather plump woman with rosy cheeks. "That's a lot of meat. It could last for quite a while."

"But we don't know what that thing is," argued another woman. "It could be anything. You don't know what that thing has been eating in its diet. And you don't know if its flesh is poisonous either. The thing is, we don't know what it is."

"I do know it's definitely not natural," said Jane. "There's just something that tells me that thing is just not put together right."

"A mad scientist's creation," Ellie agreed.

"Not necessarily a mad scientist's creation, I don't think," Nine murmured. At her comment, the other ladies looked at her. It slightly unnerved her that the other women were already looking up to her. She cleared her throat. "Well, at least I don't think so. Most genetic scientists I've heard of work for companies or very rich individuals. They make whatever their bosses tell them to. If they want a creature that only someone who has had a nightmare would dream up of, then they will make it, no questions asked. The genetic scientists who have the ability to make such creatures usually only do it for the money. The idealistic scientists almost never get any funding."

"Even so," said Jane. "That still doesn't really help us in what to do with it."

"If it is unnatural and thus engineered, and I think it is," said Nine, "we cannot assume that it is safe for human consumption. We need to dispose of it in some way."

"We could bury it," suggested one of the other ranch hands' wives.

"Too much work," said Ellie. "We'd have to dig a hole for that. And that thing is

enormous."

"Then we burn it," said Nine. "We burn it like what the menfolk have been doing for whatever it is that they have found trespassing onto the ranch lands."

At that remark, the other women fell silent and looked at each other. The woman who had spoken before Ellie finally ventured to say, "You don't suppose what the men have been burning has been this thing all along, do you?"

"It could very well be." Nine crossed her arms and looked back at the carcass. Even in death, the thing still seemed unnatural and ugly. Inelegant. As if whoever had designed it was only designing a prototype of something else. If they left it there too long, it would start to rot and smell. With her sensitive nose, she could already detect the decay.

"Good God," another one of the wives murmured. "If this is what our husbands have been out fighting, I think we're not giving them enough credit as they deserve."

"Although the hard heads should be ashamed of themselves for keep this from us," said Jane. "I'm sure they were thinking that they were protecting the 'little ladies', but in the process, they've put us in danger. Because we didn't know that this thing was on our land, none of us took any precautions at all. And now look what has happened. It has managed to creep up into our backyard and literally almost take our children from us."

To that speech, the other women murmured their agreement. It was certainly selfish and not smart of the men to keep such a big thing from their wives. While they did deserve their appreciation for dealing with these things before, their lack of disclosure was also something to consider very strongly. To that, Nine also agreed with the women. While there were those who thought that lack of information was a sort of protection, it was also a risk. Because without information, how can you protect yourself?

The women burned the carcass by dousing it with kerosene and lighting it on fire, right in the back yard. They had decided that it would be too large and heavy for them to carry, even if any of them could get up the nerve to actually touch it and pick it up. The thing burned easily. Far more easily than Nine would have imagined for something that would have been made of flesh and bone. And while the thing burned and they stood around it, some of the older children came out to watch in wide-eyed wonder.

Nine had wanted the knife destroyed along with the carcass, but she knew that as an irrational feeling. Out here on the frontier where supply was sometimes scarce and not particularly reliable, one had to conserve as many resources as possible. Losing a knife deliberately was seen as a waste. So with only little hesitation, she had taken the knife back once she was quite sure that the creature was dead and cleaned it as much as she could.

Some of the other women told her that they would stay and watch that the fire didn't catch on anything else. But she stayed until the fire burned into the bone. And while the bone was as bone white as anything else, it soon charred black like any other bone. Not like the white unnatural stuff that Nine had seen in the earlier bonfires set by the men. It was only when she saw that, that she agreed that she should go back to her duties.

The charring of the creature's bones did tell her one thing. While it may have been unnaturally created by some scientists in a lab, it was still an organic creature. Something that they probably had only tweaked a couple of genes to achieve that particular appearance and size. Otherwise, they did not tinker with the underlying biochemical makeup of the creature. Which also meant it could not have been what the men were burning. Those things were something completely different and if she could say so, even more unnatural.

But that didn't excuse the men from not telling their wives about what was going on. This was probably a separate threat altogether, maybe, but if they knew that something was going on, they would have been at least more aware and it wouldn't have gotten so far as to have a child being taken. So in Nine's mind, the men still deserved the dressing down for leaving their wives in the dark.

It felt strange to her coming back to the vegetable plot as if nothing had happened. The basket of zucchini that she had picked not long before was still sitting there among the vines. She took that inside to the kitchen and loaded them onto the counter before taking the now empty basket back outside for another load. With the distraction of the creature, she had lost a couple of hours which meant that she had even more work to do in the garden the next day. That is, if she didn't work harder now and try to get as much done as she could.

There was more stew simmering on the stove by the time evening fell. And a pork

pot pie baking in the oven. The smells were already filling up the kitchen by the time she finished sorting the vegetables she had picked into piles for storing, canning, or pickling. Her muscles ached and she felt her eyes drooping already, which was highly uncharacteristic of her. When she worked at the factory, she was able to work long into the night without much need for a rest. Because that was how she had been designed. But today, she was feeling very tired.

She figured it was because of the excitement earlier that afternoon. And the fact that she had pushed herself to work double time at harvesting everything from the garden. She wasn't used to killing a monster and working physical labor at the same time, something that she was definitely not trained to do, and now her body was telling her that she was at her limits. The only probably now was that she had to stay awake and wait for Justice to come home, even when she wanted to drop everything and just crawl into bed and sleep.

So she kept busy and continued to work, putting the squashes and gourds that would be fine in winter storage into the back of the pantry which had been built to be dark and cool, perfect for such storage. When she had put the last of those vegetables into storage and gone back to the stove to check on the stew, the sky had already darkened into a velvet black. The clouds from the morning and afternoon had thickened, obscuring the sky and the stars. It was still a bit damp and Nine thought that perhaps it would rain again that evening. It would douse the fire unless the ranch hands' wives kept it going.

The sound of footsteps in the mudroom alerted Nine to the fact that Justice was finally home. She had heard that when Sally had rode out to get the men, she had realized soon after that they had gone to the far side of the lands and that they would never have gotten back in time to save the child. Especially after she went to all the places she could think of and found no one. So she had come back, after the carcass was burned, but also relieved that Nine had somehow taken care of the problem herself.

Nine felt herself tense with his presence. At the moment, she didn't think she could face him, knowing what she had done, taking matters in her own hands. But what choice did she have? Her back was to him as she continued to stir the stew, but she only did that as much as it needed. She didn't stay stirring the stew in an obvious attempt to avoid him. She put the ladle down on a plate and then turned to get the tea towels to

open the oven door and get the pot pie out. But when she reached towards the towels, larger hands came over to cover hers.

She stared at Justice's hands for a moment, her head failing to register its significance. But when it did, for some reason, her whole body began to shake. It was the fear from earlier in the day, she realized. It was suddenly coming to her now, after all of it was gone. For some reason, she had been able to hold it all in until now.

Justice pulled her towards him and encircled his arms around her. She found herself hugging him and hiding her face in his shirt. There were no tears, but there were stuttering breaths as if she was suddenly chilled.

"The pot pie is going to be burned if I leave it in the oven too long," she managed to say when she finally caught another breath.

"Shh. I'll get that," he said. He directed her towards the kitchen table and gently nudged her into a seat. She sat, with her hands twisting in her lap as Justice first poured her a hot cup of coffee and then went to take out the pot pie himself to set on a warming mat. Then he poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down across from her. His eyes were enigmatic when he looked at her.

"I should go get dinner."

"Tell me what happened."

"You already know."

"I know second hand from what the others told me when I went to the ranch hands' houses to help them with other business. I saw the result of what happened smoldering in their back yards. But I want to know from you what happened."

"Normal people wouldn't ask that of me. The first news is what they would take as truth."

"Perhaps so. But perhaps it is also exaggerated."

Nine suddenly got up and whirled towards the cupboards to get all the silverware and the plates. This time, though, he didn't stop her. Probably because he knew that she need to be busy in order to talk about the strange event that had suddenly shaken her very staid existence. It unsettled her because deep inside, she knew that it wasn't the event itself that affected her but her feelings about the event that had her a bit disturbed. She didn't fear the creature. She feared that she had a lack of fear about it. It was just another piece of evidence that she wasn't normal at all. And that she probably

didn't deserve the epithet of "hero" as all the other women seemed to think that she deserved.

Justice didn't say anything as she set up the table, doled out the stew, or cut up the pot pie. But when she finally sat back down to eat dinner with him, he said, "Tell me what happened, Nine. You were there. Everyone agreed that you killed this creature."

Nine took one sip of coffee to help calm her nerves. But she didn't begin to eat. Neither did Justice. Because he was waiting for her answer. "It was large. As tall as a man. I once went to a circus that had visited the city. On the day I had gotten off work from the factory, I went to see the circus and they had many marvelous animals there. They had several elephants. Even a baby elephant. And that creature was probably a little larger than the baby elephant. And probably stronger. Have you ever seen an elephant, Caleb?"

"I've never had the pleasure of going to a circus," he replied, "but I've seen pictures. So I have an idea of what you're talking about."

"The creature was like a dog, but far more monstrous. It had a long prehensile tail that it had used to grab the child. I think it was hungry and not particularly happy. The child had probably seemed to be easy prey to the creature."

"What happened when you saw it?"

"I don't think I really thought anything through. I just took the kitchen knife and threw it. And it died. The child, fortunately, was safe."

"And what did you do next?"

"We decided that it wouldn't be safe to leave it around. So we burned it." She sighed and then looked back down at her food. "It was far more simple than it could have been."

"Some things just are," he replied. "You're considered by a hero by all of the ranch hands' wives. You've done a lot to ingrate yourself with them with that one act."

Nine sighed again. And it would be completely pointless when she inevitably left. But she didn't say that. It was something that she still wanted to keep to herself. There wasn't really anything left to say. Justice probably wanted to probe her feelings about the matter further. Or else he probably thought the whole event possibly scared her from possibly staying here any longer. And with that, she could probably use it as an excuse to leave right now. But the time wasn't right yet. She still had a lot to learn about

life on the frontier before she struck it out on her own. Or at least tried to.

"My men have a hard time believing it, of course," Justice continued. "But the evidence there burning on the grounds is hard to refute, too."

"Why do they have a hard time believing it?"

"Because you are a woman. And all you had was a knife," he said. "But I'm not surprised. Especially being what you are."

"A factory drone? Yes, we've been designed with a lot of things in mind. But probably not fighting monsters."

"No. You're one of a kind. You're extraordinary. A regular factory drone wouldn't have done that by instinct because their instinct wouldn't be to do that in the first place. Whoever you are, you aren't like them."

"I've always known I was abnormal," she said in a rather off-hand way. "It's a wonder I wasn't terminated earlier."

"I, for one, am glad that you didn't manage to alert any of the other's suspicions in order for that to happen," he said. And then he, too, began concentrating on his dinner.

It was after dinner that she had washed up while Justice had said in a mysterious manner that he was going to his study to work on some paperwork and that she shouldn't wait up for him for any reason. After finishing up in the kitchen, she went upstairs, back to her room. Usually at this time, she would stay awake for another hour or two, working on the dress that she was making, but because she was feeling so tired, she decided to forgo that and instead, washed up, donned her night clothes, and promptly went into a sleep with strange dreams, where she slayed dragons and rescued a prince that had eyes that were uncannily similar to that of her prospective husband.

Chapter 9

It had rained again the previous evening. But the morning was bright and cloudless as everyone, including the ranch hands and their families, other employees, and even Justice and Nine herself, rode carts off to the western edge of Justice's ranch property where the apple orchard was located. Many of the trees had been planted

there, even before Justice had bought the property, so there were quite a few old trees in the orchard. But he had been planting a few new trees each year, too, so that the orchard itself would always be revitalized.

With everyone else on the carts, there was also the essential apple picking equipment, baskets and bushels, ladders, step stools, and pliers. From what Nine learned from listening to Justice, the people who helped him pick the apples could have their share of the apples that they picked for their own use, however they wished. But all of the cider-quality apples would be set aside to be later made into cider and sold for profit for the Justice ranch. So everyone who were there to pick apples would immediately divide up the apples as they picked them. Justice described to her what sort of apples were made for eating and what sort for cider. He promised to show her once they were at the orchard.

The apple orchard itself was a grove situated at the foot of the nearest mountain. It was obvious that these trees were planted by human hands as they were all growing in neat rows that made it easy for all the apple pickers to divide themselves into teams and pick a section to start picking.

Nine ended up with a group of women starting at the southeast corner of the orchard. In the group included her growing friends, Jane, Sally, and Ellie and those women's children. The four of them divided up the work so that they could clear each tree more quickly, with Nine on the ladder since she was the least afraid of heights, Jane and Sally working on the lower branches, and Ellie doing the sorting. The women all kept half an eye on the children who were working on the smaller, younger trees nearby.

The familiar gossip about the families was somewhat comforting to Nine. Not that she really wanted to know the minutiae of everyone's lives, but the fact that these women thought to include her into their social circle somehow warmed something in her. And the fact that their voices had a certain cadence which lent itself well to the somewhat repetitive work. But it wasn't long when the conversation turned to more serious topics.

"I really hope there aren't any more of those creatures," said Ellie. "I'm frightened for my children already with everything else in the world. It won't be long before we can't even let them outside to even fetch a pail of water."

"I do, too," said Jane. "But I don't see how we can really know. I mean, I heard

that Tricia went to town the other day to get some extra sugar from the general store to help with the canning. And you know how gossipy Tricia is. She definitely asked around town, all right, but no one knows anything about genetically engineered monsters in Cat's Eye. The only possibility would be that they're from the mining company, but it seems rather unlikely. I mean, what would a mining company use a creature like that for? Their only purpose is to extract minerals from the earth. And they could use workers and machines for that."

Sally continued to pick apples, but she spoke from behind a branch, "But we don't know that. It's just speculation. For us, it would just make sense to use workers and machines. But who knows what the mining company is up to? They've been sending other things onto the property that the men have to clear out with fire."

"Unfortunately, my husband still won't tell me what that is," Jane said, making a face. "He says he won't say anything until Mr. Justice gives permission."

"Good lord, that's a hard-headed man," said Sally half in amusement and half in annoyance. "But then again, that also explains my own husband. They're all a close-mouthed bunch."

"What about you, Nine? Have you managed to pry the truth from Mr. Justice?" asked Ellie.

Nine momentarily paused in her task of picking the apples to look down at the other women. They looked back up at her expectantly. She knew that whatever she told them, it would soon spread to the other women on the ranch like wildfire. Not that she cared with this particular piece of news, but she wondered what Justice would think of it. Perhaps he was half expecting it himself. Oh well, she thought to herself. If Justice found out about how the gossip had spread from her, it was his own fault for deciding to tell her in the first place.

It had been dawn, while Nine was serving breakfast. When she had sat down to eat with him in the kitchen, he had paused after taking a sip of coffee and had said outright, "That thing you killed the other day was not the same as the things that have been otherwise creeping up onto the ranch property lines."

"Oh?"

"Anderson calls them 'wheelers'," he said, mentioning his foreman. "They are nothing like the creature that came to the ranch hands' houses. If you had seen them,

you would probably agree with me that they look more like living carts than any sort of animal. I'm not even sure if they're animals, to tell you the truth."

"Wheelers?"

"They have eyes which watch everything. That's why we think that they are sent here to spy on us. But fortunately, they are easy to destroy. They have no defensive capabilities to fight back. Which is probably one of the dangers of fighting something unknown. Whoever designed them probably didn't think that the observed would even notice them. That's the only thing I could think of why these things only perform one function."

Intrigued and with breakfast momentarily forgotten, Nine had asked, "So how big are these wheelers? They either must be very large or there must be very many of them if they take up the size of the bonfires that you and your men have been building."

"They are quite large. About the size of an actual cart. They usually travel in packs of three so you can see how that would build up."

"That's fascinating," she had admitted. "But after telling me that, there's one thing I don't get."

"And what is that?"

"Why would someone make something like that anyway? It doesn't make any sense. If they wanted someone to spy on your work, it would make more sense to hire someone to pretend to be one of your ranch hands. And if they're primarily used as an actual cart, that doesn't make any sense either. An inanimate cart would be less expensive to make and use. A lot of resources would have to be used to make the living cart. Unless there is another use for them that we don't know about."

"Perhaps what you say about having a use that we do not know about is true. But whatever it is, we don't know it. I would rather destroy those things than have more of them on my land."

"The destruction of all of those living carts must be costing the mining company must be costing them a pretty penny," Nine had mused. "I wonder what it is that's making them risk their investments?"

"It must be something big," he had said ominously.

"Yes," said Sally, breaking Nine out from her reverie. "What did Mr. Justice say? Or did he tell you too that it wasn't something that you were supposed to know?"

"He told me," she replied. When the other women suddenly stopped their work to crane closer, she sighed and continued, "I'm not sure how helpful it would be though. Whatever the men are encountering are not the same as the creature that came into your backyard. He told me that Mr. Anderson called them 'wheelers' because they resembled carts."

At that comment, the women looked at each other in confusion and then almost simultaneously, they burst into questions. Nine tried to answer them the best that she could, but in the end, she could only confess that she knew very little as she had never seen any of these wheelers that Justice had talked of. After a couple more minutes of excited chatter, the women finally settled back into the routine of picking apples.

Because whatever the men were dealing with, whether just an annoyance or an unknown threat, it still didn't change the fact that they didn't know if there were more of the same creatures out there.

Some of the women had stayed behind to cook the barbeque for the evening after everyone had finished the first day's harvest of the orchard. Some of them tended to the rotating roast pig or the slabs of beef that had been stuck on spits and cooked over open fires. Other women worked on the other sides of food like the salads and the bread. Some of them even took some of the apples that were just picked from the trees and baked them into pies.

All of this, the returning workers could smell as they carted off the apple harvest back to the houses. But after the hard day's harvest, everyone first went home to wash up before coming back out to celebrate the harvest. The whole feast was being celebrated in the back yard behind the ranch hands' houses, which Justice didn't mind since his own ranch house was not that far.

Nine found herself caught up in all of the festivities. It didn't seem like anyone really cared who or what she was at the moment. Everyone was just celebrating the bounty of what they had reaped during the day. She had gone back to the house first to wash up and to done a fresh dress before going out with Justice to the barbecue. While they were going out, Nine had mentioned that perhaps she should bring out a dish, but Justice had just shook his head, telling her that it was a celebration and that the food was already cooked by the others that had stayed behind to do precisely that. She had already put in the effort that day by helping with the orchard picking.

So Nine went with that, even though she did feel a little guilty that she wasn't bringing anything, and arrived in time to see that some of the ranch hands had brought out instruments to play at the festivities. The small band consisted of a banjo player, a harmonica player, and someone with a washboard and the music they were making gave Nine the impression that it was a very country and rustic tune. It was like a fast jig, she thought, that had a lot in common with the Irish music she sometimes heard drifting out of the pubs but was nothing like the classical music that was heard from record players or radios that had transmissions from fancy concert halls.

Everyone sat around a long table to feast on the pork and beef and the vegetable and fruit bounty that they had gathered in the past couple of days. It wasn't fancy food, but it was good food, and Nine found that she enjoyed all of it. She had never thought of herself much as someone who paid very much attention to food except as a means to fuel herself, but the food out here on the frontier was slowly changing her attitudes about it. With the harsh conditions of living and surviving out here--and nothing else of any other entertainments--almost everyone out here developed some kind of opinion about food or another. So being an adequate cook, or even better a good cook, was something essential here. And it gave Nine more of an insight as to why Justice's men were always lukewarm to her own cooking whenever they came over to his house for meetings.

And after the feast of meat and vegetables, the women brought out the apple pies fresh from the oven. The crust was flaky and soft, the apples cooked to a sweet perfection. Nine tried to ask for a recipe, but the ranch hands' wives just laughed and told her it was the usual recipe. When she finally asked Jane to clarify why the women gave her the remark, her friend just shook her head with a rueful smile.

"The apple pie recipe is a secret of the Justice ranch. Since you're not a permanent member here, or at least not yet, it would be imprudent of them to give you any of their recipes. Because who knows, maybe you would use it and make pies in competition."

"Competition?" Nine had asked confused.

"There is a bake sale and contest about a month from now," Jane explained.

"Their apple pie recipe is always a winner. They don't want to break their losing streak."

Nine could understand that. After all, how do any of them know that she would

actually stay until Justice actually decided to propose to her and she accepted? Of course, if she were truthful and told them all about her plans, they would never tell her anything at all.

And it was after everyone had gotten a slice of the famed apple pie that the band began striking up a more lively tune and some of the couples got up to dance. A country dance. Square dancing. There were certain moves, of course, that everyone knew. But everyone was coordinated by one of the older ranch hands who sat next to the band and called out the next formation for everyone. His voice, melding with the sound of the band, gave a certain strange cadence that Nine felt oddly mesmerizing. And it was while she was watching all of this with a certain fascination that someone, Nine didn't remember who, suddenly pulled her to her feet and she was sucked into the dancing. It seemed as if everyone was on their feet and she was passed from person to person as they all do-see-doe and danced all around.

The sky was getting dark and the fires from the barbecue pits were casting odd shadows along the ground when Nine suddenly found herself in Justice's arms. He seemed to realize at the same time that she did that they were now partners in the dance. But because of the momentum of the song and dance, Nine had the urge to continue, to dance with the next partner. Justice, however, wasn't having any of that. His eyes gleamed strangely in the firelight as he gave her an odd smile and pulled her out of the dancing circle.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"It's getting a little late," he said. "We should probably be getting back."

As Nine wasn't like any other normal person, she didn't feel as fatigued as the other dancers who she noticed were also dropping out from the dance. Only the much younger people were still going at it. So in some sense, it wasn't odd of Justice to pull her out of the circle. "All right," she finally agreed. "I suppose we have an early day tomorrow, too, if we're all to finish harvesting everything from the orchards."

"Right."

They walked passed a group of people still sitting around the fire and talking. Justice tipped his hat towards them while Nine nodded to them. Justice said aloud that they were going to turn in for the night and the rest of the folk just nodded back to them and went back to their conversation. And with that, they escaped into the night to walk

back to Justice's ranch home.

Nine noticed that the moon was out tonight, too. It had remained clear from the day. The bright crescent rose out past the tops of the trees like a winking eye. As if it knew something that she didn't know. She rubbed her arms from the slight cold breeze that suddenly came up out of nowhere. Sensing that she was feeling chilly, Justice walked closer to her and ventured to put his arm around her waist, pulling her to his side.

"You seem to presume quite a bit," she said lowly, feeling that there were ears all around them.

He ducked his head so that his mouth was close to her ear. "If you don't like it, move away and I will let you go."

"It's a bit cold out here," she replied.

"But it's not far from the house. You won't freeze if you choose to go it alone."

If she were sensible, she would go it alone. But for some reason, she allowed him to keep his arm around her. It wasn't long until they reached the house. They were at the door to the mudroom when he suddenly stopped and pulled her even closer so that they were now pressed, front to front, making it quite clear what his intentions were. His green eyes gleamed silver in the light and she found herself suddenly breathless.

"The sensible man would let you go to your bed alone," he said lowly. "But I'm not feeling particularly sensible right now. You had better say no now and save your virtue or be compromised, utterly."

"That's a very bold and direct statement," she said.

"It is. I have no patience with sly innuendo. I say what I mean and mean what I say."

"Well then." She found herself pressing closer to him even though she knew it was a dangerous thing to do. "Perhaps we should see where this goes. I'm curious."

He tilted his head so that he could capture her lips with his. His mouth was hard, unyielding, completely conquering. As if awakening some latent instinct inside of her, she fought by deepening the kiss and twisting herself closer. And for a long moment, she forgot that it was chilly out. Because it seemed as if they were creating an inferno instead.

When they finally came apart, Nine thought that she could see their breaths

puffing white in the cold air.

"Inside," he said darkly. "I want you inside." He seemed to make quick work of the lock in the door and pushed inside, dragging her with him. She did not resist. She hardly registered the mundanities of locking the door back up or even going through the house and up the stairs. All that she registered was that they had been outside and now they were inside. In his bedroom.

Before, she had only been in his bedroom during the day, to clean and wash things as needed. And while she was very curious about everything about him and she had been tempted to snoop in his drawers and closet, she had managed to resist, telling herself that there was probably nothing interesting in those compartments anyway. Probably just more clothes.

But now she was in his bedroom in the evening. And he was there with her. She shivered at the implication. She had never been in a man's bedroom before, with a man. She briefly wondered if Miss Mina from the Cat's Eye saloon had ever been this nervous. After all, she had been designed as a courtesan. Whereas Nine was supposed to be just another factory drone. Practically sexless. But here she was with a man she wanted. A man who apparently wanted her back. Who wanted her more than just a mere "help-mate" as most men advertised for mail-order brides wanted.

They were standing next to the bed. He had backed her into one of the long wooden bannisters holding up the frame. But he wasn't looking at the bed at all. Instead he was completely focused on her. He had not even bothered to turn on the light, but the curtains were drawn out and the moonlight was shining into the bedroom, creating an eerie glow.

And his eyes were glowing, too. A naturally born human did not have the membrane at the back of their eye that make their eyes reflect light like that of a cat. For certain genmods who were designed to work in the very dark hours, their eyes reflected light because the geneticists had reinstated that particular anatomical feature for them. Nine knew that she was one of those because she had been assigned to work the late shifts in the factory. But to see Justice's eyes glow was a bit of a shock. Or perhaps it wasn't. She had always seen it glow, but had dismissed it as a trick of the light.

"What are you?" she asked, her voice, for some reason, coming out in a whisper. Perhaps this strange situation made her unconsciously think that whispers were called

for.

He cocked his head at her question. "What do you mean?"

She reached up to cup his face. It was the first time that she initiated contact with him first and not the other way around. "I think you know what I mean." She rubbed a finger at the flesh just underneath his eye. He didn't flinch at her touch. Instead, he continued to stare at her. And she felt him smile underneath her hand.

"I am not a genmod, if that's what you are asking," he said. "I wasn't made like you, manipulated completely at the genetic level."

"But you were made, not naturally born."

"I was naturally born. But I was also made, afterwards. My parents were gifted surgeons who also studied under some famous geneticists. So there were some genetic alterations. But there were also some surgical alterations."

"Surgical?"

"Something went wrong with their genetic manipulation. Something with my heart. So they fixed it with surgery when I was very young. So I suppose you could say that I'm not completely natural that way either."

"So you're genetically altered but you're not a genmod?"

"There's only one of me. My parents wanted to create perfect children who would do what they're told. Of course, that never worked out. They never took into account the human will which exists whether you're natural or not. Because we're all human."

"I've never thought of it that way, but I suppose you're right." Then it was her human will which made her leave the factory life. Her will. Not some predetermined biochemical balance that some scientist had formulated because his bosses had wanted him to.

"But enough of this serious talk. Right now, my will is saying that I want you. Badly." He kissed her then and for a while it was nothing but hot, dueling tongues.

She pressed her hands against his chest and moved them until her fingers found the buttons on his shirt. For a long moment, she toyed with those buttons while his mouth toyed with her, but soon, her impatience caused her to finally unfasten each of them, surely and methodically despite his kisses clouding her brain.

"Impatient, aren't we?" he murmured against her mouth.

"Curious," she replied.

He laughed and then almost without warning, he stepped away and slipped out of the shirt himself and tossed it in the general direction of a nearby chair. Her eyes widened and she took her fill of his bare chest. There was a fine dusting of hair over well developed pectorals. His torso and arms were well muscled, probably from all the work that he did on the ranch. She could resist reaching out to touch him.

But her hands never reached his chest. He grabbed her wrists and pulled her around so she was facing the bed. "Don't turn around," he warned her when she was about to do just that. She could feel his fingers work on her bodice. The dress quickly came off. When she stepped out of it, she saw him fold it carefully and put it on the chair before coming back to her. She was now wearing only her shift. She thought then that he would tell her to get in bed, but instead, he made quick work with the shift. Now completely bare, he came back to her, pressing his front against her back. His mouth came over the sensitive skin over her neck while his rough hands cupped her breasts.

The contact of bare skin against bare skin had her gasping and moaning, even before his fingers began stimulating her nipples. And when his fingers finally started tugging on those nubs, she writhed against him. The pleasure built inside of her, but there was an unnamable something that somehow she couldn't get to, and it was frustrating her.

As if sensing her frustration, he finally pushed her down onto the bed and rolled her over so that she was sprawled on her back. She had the urge to reach down and to cup herself, to hide herself from his gaze. But his intense gaze on her nudity gave her such a pleasureable shiver. He stood over the bed, taking in her form for a moment, before he slowly began undoing his pants.

She heard the belt buckle clank when the pants hit the floor. He had taken everything off, and now he was revealed in all of his bare glory.

Nine knew, of course, what a man looked like. She wasn't completely ignorant. But to have one bare and so close had her quivering and breathing as if she was running up a mountain. Reflexively, she sat up in the bed and reached out again to touch him, to see if his cock was as large and as hard as it appeared in the dark moonlight. But before she could do that, he gently pushed her shoulders back down to the bed so that he was now looming over her, like a dark erotic shadow.

He didn't seem annoyed by her impulsive behavior. Instead, he seemed a bit

amused. "Perhaps a a little later. Or even the next time," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" she said. "And it is not fair that I don't get to touch you when you're calling all the shots."

"Would you even know what to do if I let you in charge?" he countered. "I want to pleasure you for your first time. Otherwise, you might not find this endeavour quite as enjoyable." And to follow up on his comment, he trailed a hand down her front, sending up goosebumps everywhere on her skin. His hand finally reached the juncture between her thighs. "I want to pleasure you," he whispered. "And watch you while you're pleased."

His fingers had been gently petting her mound with those words, but afterwards, his fingers went even lower and penetrated. His thumb rubbed gently but firmly against her clitoris making her moan and twist. His free hand, however was ruthlessly rubbing her breast, keeping her from rolling completely over.

He bent his head so that his mouth was close to her ear. "You're wet," he whispered. "You're wet for me."

"Yes," she breathed.

"I'm going to get you ready for me. All of me. And you're going to yell my name when you come."

At his words, her body seemed to shatter from the insinuating movement of his fingers. She cried out his name as she arched upward, seeking something that was beyond her. He whispered darkly, harshly, and then climbed completely over her, pulling her legs completely apart so he could fit himself to her. With one hand, he guided himself into her. Pushed. And seated his cock completely inside her before she could register the twinge of pain that came with the loss of her virginity.

"Caleb..."

"You're mine," he whispered. "Mine." He moved slowly at first, so she could get used to him. But as the pleasure built in her again and she began to move her own hips in response to his movements, he thrust into her harder, faster. She gripped the sheets on the bed and cried out, not caring who heard her. In response, he shouted his own release.

When Nine felt her own sense of being come back to earth, she found herself spooned against him. She twisted around so she could look at him. He was still awake

after their strenuous activity so he was looking at her as well. A hand rested on her hip, gently brushing against her skin.

"Is your curiosity satisfied?" he asked.

For some reason, that made her softly giggle. She almost never giggled. "Not quite," she replied as she snaked a hand between them. And then lower. "Not quite."

Chapter 10

Nine certainly felt emotionally different compared to the previous day, but it seemed that she had masked enough of it so that no one else could really tell the difference. So that no one had remarked upon it. Which, she supposed, was fine enough. Especially since she didn't particularly want to talk about the previous night with anyone. Except, perhaps, Justice. Although with the thought of him, she felt herself blush quite hard. She automatically tilted her head down so that the brim of her bonnet could shield her face from the others. She definitely did not want any undue questions.

Jane was driving the cart they had borrowed from the foreman again and she, Nine, Sally, and Ellie were heading back out to their weekend trip to the town. The others were talking quite a bit about the previous night's dinner and reminiscing that it was the best yet. After shopping in town, they were to go back and help out the next cooking shift. The rest of the people on the ranch were picking the last of the apple crop.

"So, what do you think?" asked Sally, startling her out from her reverie. "Do you think we should stop by the fabric store again? I only need some thread to darn some socks, but I could as easily borrow some of it from Gladys."

"I would like to go to the fabric store again," Nine said seriously. "I think I need more fabric, let alone thread."

"You must be making an entire wardrobe with all of the fabric you're buying," joked Jane. "Cat's Eye isn't like the eastern cities. We're not very big on fashion. But we're big on practicality."

Nine was amused by the joke. "Maybe I am making an entire wardrobe. But it's not for me, not really."

"You're making clothes for Mr. Justice?" Jane asked.

She shook her head. "I will probably make him something later, when I have more time. But this is for that fall market you and the other ladies had mentioned before. I want to make several dresses that I could probably sell. And use as a demonstration of my skills, so that others might think to ask me to help tailor their clothes."

"There isn't a dedicated dressmaker's in town except for the tailor who specializes in men's clothes," said Sally. "So I'm sure you'll get some interested buyers and potential customers. But the fall market isn't that far from now so you don't really have that much time to make any dresses. Especially if you're only doing it in your free time during the evenings."

"I can do it," Nine said. "I've had some experience with dressmaking on a deadline."

Jane drove the cart all the way into town where they went to the grocery and general store to get more supplies for their own homes as well as supplies for the upcoming dinner that they were helping to prepare for the entire ranchstead. Since Jane and Ellie didn't need to go to the fabric store, Sally and Nine walked to the place themselves. Sally soon got the thread she needed and offered to stay with Nine to help her pick out any fabric if she needed. But seeing that Sally also needed to go to the post office to pick up some packages, Nine told her to go on ahead and that she would meet her and the others at their agreed upon place in front of the general store in about half an hour.

Mr. Chan from the fabric store was gracious enough to take down all the fabric that she needed and measured out all the bolts. This took quite a while, but Nine didn't mind as her eyes wandered along the shelves of fabric and mentally brainstormed on what other projects that she could do later. It was when her glance happened toward the window that she glimpsed a slash of bright blue satin. Frowning, she turned back to the fabric store owner who didn't appear to notice that there was anything wrong and paid for her purchases. When she went out of the fabric store, she found that her suspicions were correct.

The blue satin that she had glimpsed was part of a fancy dress worn by none other than the saloon girl and accountant that she had met before, Miss Philomena Rendell.

Also known as Miss Mina. The woman was standing just outside of the fabric store, with a package underneath her arm as she looked inside the window. Miss Mina noticed Nine coming out of the store. She nodded to her.

"Good day, Miss Rendell. How are you?"

"I am well," she replied cautiously. "And how are you?"

"Just peachy." Mina glanced into the store again and then back to Nine and her own packages. "So you know how to sew, hm?"

Nine shrugged. "I suppose so. I worked at a dressmaker's factory for a while. So I know the ins and outs of it, theoretically."

"A dressmaker's factory! How convenient for you, then."

"Yes."

"That looks like quite a bit of fabric there under your arm. Are you making an entire wardrobe?"

Nine shook her head. "I suppose you could say that, but it's not for me. I'm making some dresses to hopefully be sold at the fall market. I thought it would be something interesting to do in my spare time, as well as to make a little extra money."

"That is a particularly useful hobby," Mina nodded. "Unfortunately, I'm rather poor at the sewing skills myself. Not designed that way, you know."

"A lot of things take practice. You won't know how well you can become if you don't continue doing it."

"That's what a lot of people say," Mina said darkly. "But enough of that. I'm not particularly good at sewing. And to be honest, I'm not particularly interested in trying. I'm good with handling other people's money and I think I'll stick with that. But that has its downsides. A lot of the ladies in town don't want to deal with me because of the place I work at and the company I keep, so I have to do a lot of mail ordering. A lot of the girls at the saloon have to do that. But I suppose it wouldn't hurt to ask, did you make that dress you're wearing?"

Surprised at the question, Nine looked down at herself. She was wearing an ordinary work dress of a particularly drab color, especially since she didn't want it to matter if she was working and she accidentally got mud or dirt on it. "Yes. I made this myself. But I don't think this is a particularly stunning example of my work. This is just a day dress for work."

"Can you make something like this?" Mina pointed to her own dress.

"I've made some dresses similar to that when I worked at the factory."

At that comment, Mina smiled slyly. "Oh? Then I have a proposition for you."

"A proposition?" Nine said warily.

"Yes. I'll be your first paying customer, sight unseen. I think it would be far more convenient to have a dress made here than to have it ordered from hundreds of miles away. You have your choice of what to make and I will pay you. Name your price."

Nine just stared at her for a moment, her mind stalled. This was quite out of the blue, strange, and a windfall. But Nine didn't want to be the person who passed up an easy opportunity, even if that opportunity was wrapped in a rather dubious package.

"All right," Nine said, after a little hesitation. "I will make a dress for you without you specifying what you want. It will cost a little more than a factory dress, though, because I have to factor in what I pay for in materials and my own labor."

"That is fine," said Mina. "Do you need my measurements?"

She shook her head. "I am an excellent judge of measurement. Probably designed into me, I'm afraid."

"Well, design or not, I say you should exploit it. So, what is your price?"

Nine thought for a moment and then named a price that she thought was a bit exhorbant, especially since she was basing the prices on what the personalized dressmakers back in the cities were charging. She half expected Mina to balk. But she didn't. Instead, she smiled.

"I'll take it," she said. "When do you expect it to be done?"

"Probably by the fall market," Nine said automatically, although part of her brain was dazed with the sudden sale. "I think all of the ladies at the ranch will be setting up one large booth so we could all sell our wares together. You can come by the booth and take a look at the dress then. You can pay me then if you like the dress. And if you don't like the dress, you don't have to pay for it. I'm sure I could try selling it to someone else if you don't want it."

"I will be by your booth, then," Mina replied.

Nine nodded again and as she stepped away, intending to head out to the general store where everyone else was waiting, Mina put a hand on her arm, stopping her.

This time, the woman's voice was low and more serious. "There are rumors going

around."

"There are always rumors going around," Nine replied. It seems like the social life of this whole place is simply fueled on rumors."

"It's not your ordinary rumor about who is cheating on who or who's gambling or anything like that," said Mina. "It's rumors about some kind of monster terrorizing the ranchsteads. So far, the rumors are rather vague. There's no particular name attached to them. But the rumors say that the monster was slain by a woman single-handedly."

"I wouldn't know anything about it," said Nine.

"Perhaps not," said Mina, finally releasing her grip on her. But her eyes were still drilled into her. "But there are others who would be very interested in knowing the truth behind those rumors. Especially those who know more about the monster than either of us."

"Oh?"

Mina's voice dropped lower to a whisper that even she had to strain to hear. "I just wanted to warn you. There are mining company men in town. And as I work in a place where alcohol looses a lot of tongues, I hear things. The mining company has its own research and development arm, specializing in creating things that will help them extract more minerals out of the earth. Sometimes it's just simple machines that are more efficient than the older ones that they've got. And sometimes it's more complicated. I hear that the head of the mining company is looking to diversify. To spread his arm over different enterprises. What those enterprises are, I have no idea, but I'm sure whatever it is, may have something to do with the monster."

"I see." And Nine did see. It would explain the creature's existence. But still, it wouldn't explain its purpose.

"And if they do have something to do with this monster that people are hearing about town, it is inevitable that the mining company men will probably go out to the ranches to investigate," Mina continued. "They will try to determine who killed it. And if possible, extract payment. Because I'm sure whatever monster it is, the creation if it was some sort of investment."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Nine. "However, I doubt the mining company men will even want to find their way onto ranch property. They would be trespassers. And I hear that pretty much all of the ranchers are hostile to the fact that the mining company

is here at all."

"The mining company has a long arm," Mina warned. "A very long arm. And while the sheriff is technically the law of this town and the land, he only has limited manpower, even if the entire town were to rise up and go with him."

"So what you're saying is that the mining company can just do what it likes without any threat or consequences."

Mina nodded. "You see, then."

"Yes. But I also think that if the mining company goes so far as to crush this entire town, it will certainly be noticed by people elsewhere. And something will then be done. But I suppose it would be too late for the rest of the people in this town, then."

"And that's the important point. The people in this town. They might not all get along. They might not all be nice. But we were all here first. Not the company."

"And why do you care about all of this?" Nine asked curiously. "If worse comes to worse, the mining company will just focus its attention on the ranches. Your livelihood isn't at stake."

"Perhaps not immediately at stake. But everything in Cat's Eye is interconnected. I learned that the first year I came here," she said enigmatically. "And I just wanted to let you know that you should also keep that thought in your mind."

With that, Mina finally bid her a farewell and headed back to the saloon down the street. This time, there were no fights spilling out into the street, but Nine figured it was just the luck of the day. Another drunken fight would inevitably break out sooner or later. But that was a rather minor thought as she pondered the significance of why Mina Rendell decided to warn her. All that she had been told wasn't anything that she hadn't already inferred by herself. But the fact that Mina went through the trouble of actually talking to her was remarkable.

Most genmods, while sticking together in general, were not known to be altruistic enough to give free advice, if they had any in the first place. And that made Mina rather remarkable, even if she did say that she was one of three original courtesan prototypes. Or perhaps even more remarkable considering the fact that she was even out here in the first place and not serving some wealthy patron back east.

Nine headed back to the front of the general store where Jane and Ellie were already waiting. Nine tossed her packages into the back of the cart and then hopped

into the bench in the back as Jane and Ellie were sitting on the front driver's bench. Both of the women were already looking at her wide-eyed.

"Is something the matter?" Nine asked.

"You talked to her again," said Ellie. "Miss Mina. What did she have to say this time?"

Seeing as Mina's warning wasn't something that she shouldn't tell the others, she said, "Well, she just mentioned that she had heard the rumors about the monster. Probably when one of the other ranch hands' wives came to town earlier and spread it. She basically said that we have to be careful because the mining company will want to know what happened to their 'investment'."

"Well, if it eases your mind somewhat," said Jane, "I don't think anyone has ever seen an actual human representative of the mining company other than the ones who come to town to make deposits at the bank or to spend their free time in the saloon. Otherwise, they don't patronize any of the local establishments to get any of their stuff. They have all of the equipment and food they need shipped out to their camp down south."

"They don't even get any food from the local farmers or ranchers?" Nine asked.

Ellie shook her head. "You would think so, considering it would be much more logical and cost effective to get things locally, but they don't. It's as if they want to alienate the townspeople as much as possible. They're only saved by the fact that they provide a lot of financial backing for the bank so that people can get loans easier if they need to. But other than that..."

"Cat's Eye might as well not have a mining company at all," Nine concluded.

"Well, it doesn't help their case that they're being particularly sneaky and mysterious about all of this."

After her comment, Sally arrived, back from the post office with an armful of letters for everyone back at the ranch. "Sorry, there isn't anything for you," she told Nine.

Nine only smiled ruefully. "I didn't expect anything. There's no one back east who would even bother to write back to me, let alone remember who I am."

As Jane urged the horse into a trot and the cart rumbled to a start again as they headed down main street, she said, "That sounds rather sad. You almost never talk

about your time out east. Was it that horrible?"

Nine was silent for a moment, trying to formulate her thoughts in such a way that she could convey her feelings without scaring or revolting the others. Finally, she said, "For a genmod who doesn't know any better, it was tolerable. But that is because genmods were designed to tolerate such conditions. A naturally born human being wouldn't be able to survive it. Well, maybe physically. But mentally? Perhaps not. Very few naturally born human beings ever penetrate the actual world of the factory genmods. And for those who do manage to get out of it for one reason or another, it is not something that I would want talk about. Mostly because it is something that's not particularly pleasant."

"Why wasn't it pleasant?" asked Sally.

"It's your mindset," Nine replied. "As I said, a genmod who doesn't know any better wouldn't find anything wrong with the situation. That's because they weren't designed to think outside of their own purpose. And that's what I find distasteful about it all. Because in the factory, it's drilled into you that you only have one purpose. And that nothing else matters."

"So you came out here as a mail-order bride, hoping that you would find new opportunity," concluded Ellie.

"New opportunity, yes."

"But frontier life is hard," said Jane. "Why didn't you just, I don't know, stayed in the city but did something else?"

"It might be easy to lose myself in the anonymity of a large city," Nine agreed. "But I don't think I would have liked the constant reminders of the factory. In the city, there are factories everywhere. And unless you belong to some of the upper classes, it is difficult to escape. I wanted to escape. Anywhere except the city."

"So you don't miss the city at all," said Sally. "That's a rather bleak view. I rather thought it was somewhat exciting. At least that's the impression I got from others who visited the cities back east."

"The thing is, they were visitors. They didn't have to live there day in and day out." That particular statement seemed rather depressing to Nine's ears, so she decided to change the subject. "So you were trying to decide earlier on what kind of dressing to prepare for the dinner tonight. Did you finally decide on something while I was at the

fabric store?"

Taking her cue, or perhaps aware that Nine didn't particularly like the subject of her past, the other ranch hands' wives began talking about food preparation as if that was what they were talking about the entire time.

The acorn and chestnut bread was something that Nine thought up all on her own when she was relegated to bread making for the big dinner after the final orchard harvest. As Nine was the new person there, and possibly a temporary one at that, she was in actuality just a junior person as the bosses were the older women who had been on the Justice ranch the longest. But if Nine became the mistress of the house, though, she would theoretically be in charge of everything.

The very thought of that made her head ache. Nine had never been in charge of anything. When she had worked at the factory, she had just been another drone, doing whatever the overseers wanted everyone else to do. And if she was in charge of all of this, well, she was sure to ruffle any feathers, especially if she sent out some order that everyone disapproved of. And in that instance, she wouldn't really be in charge at all. And in some ways, Nine reflected, that would be even worse. You had the appearance of being in charge but you weren't the one who was influencing the orders.

That was why Nine still desperately wanted to be on her own. So that she didn't have to answer to anyone.

But as Nine kneaded the dough and then sprinkled the chopped acorns and chestnuts in before adding the honey to sweeten it up, she tried to put that particular thought out of her head. She need not worry about any of it if she followed through on her own plans.

The bread itself was a modification of a recipe that she had remembered reading in the cook book that she had found in the guest room of Justice's house. The cook book's recipe had called for walnuts instead, but as all the walnuts were being used to stuff some chickens that were going to be roasted in the oven, Nine decided to make do with whatever was left. She wasn't sure whether the bread would turn out well or not, but at least the dough would be edible. Hopefully.

She focused on her task, like she did everything else, and barely paid any attention to the gossip around her even though in the back of her mind, she did register the words. One of the ranch hands' wives was pregnant again. And as the woman was

out of earshot as she was part of the group helping out at the orchard, the gossipers felt free to talk about her.

"Seriously, she and her husband are like rabbits. Before too long, the entire town will be overrun by their progeny."

"Would it be that bad? Their children might be mischievous, but they're good natured sorts. They're not spoiled brats, like some other children I could name."

"That's true. But it's rather ridiculous. Even if they do have the extra hands to help them around the house. It's just extra mouths to feed. They need to think about doing something so that they won't have so many kids."

"You mean not doing anything," smirked the second woman. "I think doing something is what is getting them in trouble in the first place."

Nine studiously continued to make the bread. She had heard of birth control, of course, but she had never thought that she would need it. She had never heard of a genmod getting pregnant. And even if they did, whatever happened to them was so secret that no one else ever seemed to know about it. She wasn't sure how she felt about children themselves, but even with that, she wasn't even sure she could have children even if she wanted to.

But still, she felt a twinge of something in the vicinity of her heart when she thought about a child having Justice's eyes. She didn't consider the probability that she could be carrying Justice's child right now. It wasn't that she didn't want such a child if it indeed existed, but she didn't really know what to do with it if she did have it. Such a child would carry the burden that his parents weren't truly naturally made even though he or she technically would be.

The afternoon passed and the bread and baking got done as well as the cooking and the roasting. The pickers from the orchard came back and there was a feast which everyone seemed to appreciate. Everyone at least sampled her bread and didn't come back spitting it out, so Nine considered her experiment a success. The musicians were playing their country music again and people were dancing. It seemed as if the harvest time was nothing but celebration, she reflected.

This time, though, she passed on the dancing and somehow ended up among a group of children who had insisted that she come play a card game with them. Nine didn't know any card games, but she easily picked up the rules and started playing with

the children by one of the bonfires. She could have easily won all the games, she later reflected, but she deliberately let the children win, probably because she didn't really see the point of beating the children. They wanted to win, so she let them.

"You're letting them win," said Justice when he finally found her near the bonfire after the children had left her to go to bed. "You could have easily beaten all of them, even though you've never played any card games."

"Tell me something that I don't already know," she replied wryly. "And that's because there was no incentive for me to win,"

"Well, in that case, play a card game with me," he said.

"A card game, huh? What sort of card game?" she asked.

He moved closer so that he could whisper in her ear. "Strip poker."

She glanced around, as if to see if there was anyone else around who could have overheard him. But everyone else seemed content with their own conversations around the campfires. In an equally low voice, she replied, "That sounds rather naughty, Caleb."

"Are you up for it, then?"

"Would anyone else notice if we left?"

He shook his head. "It's Sunday tomorrow and people will be getting up early to go to church. They wouldn't question us if we turned in now." And with that, he took her arm before she could say anything else. At the close proximity, she felt her breath speed up. They said good night to everyone. No one said anything that indicated that they thought anything inappropriate was going on, although a couple people nodded and said that turning in early was a good idea since church was early tomorrow.

They made it back to the ranch house while Justice explained the rules of the game to her. She paid close attention, knowing that if she didn't play to win, she wouldn't have the pleasure of watching him strip. Although if she really thought about it, it wouldn't be that bad if she lost either. The end result would probably be the same.

Justice said that it would probably be more comfortable if they played the card game up in his room. At his remark, Nine felt her eyebrows climb upward, but at her expression, he only gave her a lecherous grin.

Justice kept a pack of cards in a drawer filled with a number of miscellaneous items in a small workroom just off the guestroom on the first floor. When they settled in his bedroom, they both agreed to take their shoes off as they settled on top of Justice's

large four poster bed. While Justice dealt the cards, her eyes were not on his hands at all as he flipped the cards. Instead, she was unabashedly staring at the bulge between his legs, growing under her watchful eye.

"Am I distracting you?" he asked in a dark, amused voice.

"I'm going to play to win," she told him. "Distraction or no."

"Well, I hope you have good concentration, because I'm going to play to win, too. And I'm not going to go easy with you."

She gave him a cheeky grin. "Then go hard on me. I think I'd prefer it that way."

He gave a hoarse laugh at that. "Now you're trying to distract me. Get your cards and we'll play."

Nine picked up her cards and glanced at them. They weren't all that good, but all she needed was to best him in this round of lightning poker. On the first round, Nine lost. She huffed at that. She really wanted to win. But she told herself that she would do better while she took off one of her socks.

"That isn't quite fair, is it?" he asked.

"It's an article of clothing," she told him. "And you didn't say which article of clothing had to go."

"I suppose so. But that doesn't mean that we won't have different rules the next time we play this," he warned.

They played another round. Nine won. Justice took off a sock. The third round, Justice's other sock came off. And the fourth round, his shirt. As she grinned as he unbuttoned the garment and tossed it aside, revealing a muscled chest that she was itching to touch, he said, "Don't get too confident. I'm going to win this next one."

But Nine found that she had picked up the game incredibly well. And as it was obvious that he wasn't holding back on how he played, she didn't either. She had to say that they were quite evenly matched. Which, on an intellectual level, also quite stimulating. She played hard, but to her luck, she didn't win the next round. So off came her next sock.

"Your dress. I want it off next," he told her.

"No," she replied. "What will come off next will be your pants." And she was right.

When she won that game, his eyes seemed to glow even brighter than they were

before. "I think this set of games is over," he replied. "Because I don't have any other articles of clothing."

She swallowed as she gathered the cards and slapped them on the bedside table. "You're not wearing any underwear?"

"No. But then again, remember when I went back to the house a bit earlier to get something for one of the men to borrow?"

"Yes. What does that have to do with anything?"

"That was when I thought about challenging you to a game of strip poker. So took it off then."

"Oh God," she breathed. "You thought it through. And you were betting that I would win."

"Well, even if I won instead, the result would be the same."

"I suppose."

"Hm." He unbuckled his pants, pulled them off. Crooked his finger. "Come here. You won, so you deserve a reward."

She edged towards him, but she was wary. "What sort of reward?" For some reason, despite the previous evening, she still felt cautious and shy. But she couldn't keep her eyes from straying. Her fingers crept forward, touched him, encircled him. She could feel his velvet hardness, the jump of his pulse.

"Me, of course."

At that, she gave him a sly smile. "Of course." And then she gave into her impulse. She lowered her head and put her mouth on him. She heard his breath hitch and felt his hands go to her hair. He cupped the back of her head and gently guided her mouth to where he wanted her. And at the same time, he thrust slowly into her mouth. But before she thought she could get him off, he thrust her away.

"Your dress needs to come off."

She complied, feeling the need as keenly as he. But instead of the expected, she found herself tumbled on her back and then he was there, his mouth between her legs, repaying her the favor. She found herself gripping his hair, riding his mouth as he licked and nipped her, keening in pleasure when his lips found that nub of pleasure and sucked hard.

"Yes," she heard him say as she lay sprawled on her back, trying to catch her

breath. "Now." And then his cock was there shafting through her, bringing to more pleasure. She didn't think that she had enough energy for it, but she found herself moving again, racing with him towards completion.

Chapter 11

Nine awoke and was feeling a bit disoriented. She looked up and saw curtains on the bed post and the ceiling didn't look quite right. She rolled over and hit something. Or rather someone. Bright green eyes were looking back sleepily at her.

"More?" he whispered.

She put a hand on his shoulder and shoved, but he didn't budge. "I'm supposed to be getting up to make breakfast," she told him. "It's Sunday, remember? We're supposed to be going to church even though I don't want to. The pastor's an old git."

"Hm." He reached up to brush away her hair. "I think I could get used to this."

"Get used to what?"

"Having you in my bed."

It felt comfortable, right to her. But that very feeling of comfortableness scared her. She wasn't ready to be anyone's anything. And that very thought had her inching away. She pasted on an apologetic smile, and said, "I really need to go make breakfast."

"We can skip breakfast and stay in bed a little longer," he replied, his mouth curving up with wicked intent. "That won't throw off our schedule."

"You'll be sorry when your stomach growls in the middle of the sermon," she warned. She managed to slip out of bed, away from his searching hands and grabbed her dress to partially cover herself. "I'm going to get dressed and get breakfast ready. You'll just have to get up as well."

He sighed. "Are you always this standoffish when something scares you?"

"Scares me? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Nine. You're scared of this. Us. You know what you signed up for when you wrote that letter to me and eventually accepted the train ticket to come out here."

"But aren't we trying to figure out if we suit or not before we try to decide, well,

on that big thing?"

He narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think we don't suit? Last night, I recall, we seemed to suit quite well."

She felt her cheeks heat. "I know we suit in that fashion. But I hardly see you the rest of the day. How well would we tolerate each other when we're old? For the rest of our lives?"

"Some people don't even think of that question before they jump into it with their feet first."

She shook her head. "Give me some time, please." She had not anticipated that he would pressure her so soon. He must feel quite strongly that he wanted her for a wife. And that implication had other implications that made her suspect that he had deeper emotions that he had yet to share with her. And whatever those emotions were, she didn't know if she could deal with them at the moment.

She supposed she wasn't as cold-hearted as she wanted to be.

So she escaped from his bedroom, back into her own and quickly put her mind to the task of her morning ritual of washing up and dressing. Then she went back downstairs to start breakfast. She didn't want to think about the previous night or her feeling that she did want to stay in that bed, warm, happy, and well-loved.

Genmods weren't supposed to be loved by anyone. They were supposed to be things that worked at jobs that no naturally born human wanted to work for.

By the time breakfast was well underway, Justice came back down. His expression was now devoid of the easy going air that he had when the two of them were alone, upstairs. Now, it seemed rather bland, unreadable. Only his eyes were still bright when he tracked her movements across the kitchen.

They ate breakfast. And she supposed they had a conversation. It wasn't terribly stilted, but it did avoid all the conversational topics that she wanted to avoid. They mostly talked about the weather and what was still left to do on the farm before the winter set in. They did not talk about their possible future together. Perhaps he didn't want to talk about it either. Or perhaps he, in deference to her feelings about the subject, didn't bring it up. In either case, Nine felt a bit relieved and guilty for that. Most of the time, she tackled things head on. But this thing, she felt like avoiding.

After breakfast, he went out to the barn to hitch up the horse and they were both

off to Cat's Eye. When they arrived at the church, they greeted some of the other churchgoers. Nine was also relieved that no one seemed to view or treat her any differently than they did before. It seemed that she had managed to hide her previous night's debachery quite well.

The sermon went as expected. Expected in that the pastor was making not so veiled derisions at her kind. He talked at length how man now depended too much on the unnatural and that he should stop doing it and go back to his natural state. After the sermon was over, though, Justice had leaned over and whispered in her ear, "I don't think he really knew what he was saying. If we were all to go back being natural, so to speak, we wouldn't have all our modern conveniences, would we?"

Thankfully, it wasn't the first Sunday of the month this time so that they could drive straight back home after the service. Personally, Nine didn't want to stay there any longer than she had to. She felt uncomfortable going to a place which professed beliefs that she didn't believe in.

When they got back home, Nine already had lunch stewing away on the stove and they ate that before they changed back into their work clothes. Justice excused himself to go back out to the ranch to oversee a bit of the boundary on his property to the south, nearest to the mining company. He and his men had destroyed a number of strange mining creatures the previous day and they were going to burn all of them up this afternoon.

On Nine's part, she had been invited by the ranch hands' wives to help press the cider apples into cider. So as soon as she finished washing up in the kitchen, she went out towards the houses of the ranch hands and to the large back field where some of the women had already set out a number of barrels of cider apples and a large apple cider press which to Nine looked like a complicated contraption that wouldn't be out of place on a factory floor.

There was a large barrel at one end of the machine where everyone would dump the apples. And to these apples, there was a large iron press which went down. It was connected to a screw-like piston that was harnessed to several gears that ended at a large horizontal wheel which had large handle spokes, each of which could be pushed by one person. As the wheel turned, so did the gears and the screw-like piston. that lowered the large iron press which pressed relentlessly down on the apples to squeeze

all the juice out of them.

With that, the women split themselves into three teams. One to dump the apples into the machine. The second to operate the levers to squeeze the apples, and the third team to bottle out all the apple juice that came out. Nine wasn't sure where she should go, but someone directed her somewhere and she ended up being part of the team which dumped the apples into the machine.

She worked on this for quite a while, the repetitive work wearing on her. She wasn't quite sure what time it was when someone called for a break and someone brought out some fresh bread and cheese and they all got to drink the fresh apple juice that was just squeezed. The fresh food brought Nine into a simpler place, a simpler frame of mind. All she thought about was the work and not anything else complicated like how the paster at the church back in downtown Cat's Eye didn't like her kind or that Justice liked her too much, maybe.

She certainly knew what she thought about the former. But as for the latter, her feelings still skidded out of control, into some no man's land, a darkness where her heart lay.

But it was during this idyllic break when she wasn't thinking of anything in particular at all, except for the early fall sun in her face and the refreshing breeze, that she first heard the noise of hooves galloping like mad in the distance and coming closer and closer. The other women didn't react to this sudden noise, but then, Nine didn't expect them to. Her own hearing was better than quite a lot of people's and she was also sure that the rider was still far off. But from how she judged the distance, she thought the rider was coming from the south, where Justice said that he and his men went to take care of some business with the mining company spying invaders.

That set Nine's teeth on edge, the nervousness and the feeling that something was terribly wrong. She quickly finished her lunch and got up from sitting on the picnic blanket that some of the other women had spread out for their break. The others didn't comment on her sudden movement. They probably thought she was just standing up to stretch her legs. But no. She stepped forward and looked out to the horizon. She saw the rider.

A few minutes later, the sound of hooves became very distinct and loud enough for the rest of the women to hear. By this time, some of the other women had gotten up

too to see what was the matter, but no one else seemed particularly alarmed yet. But when the rider finally stopped and breathlessly tumbled off his mount, it was Nine who was the first to greet him. He was familiar. One of the unmarried ranch hands. Still young. Almost a boy, really. That was probably why he was sent. He was still young enough to travel hard and fast.

"What is it?" Nine asked, her eyes drilling into the young ranch hand.

He blanched at her expression. Which wasn't surprising either. Nine had strange eyes. Eyes that sometimes resembled those of a cat. Her pupils could turn into slits, depending on the light and depending on her mood.

"What is it?" she repeated. She barely restrained herself from reaching out and shaking the poor boy in order to get the answers out of him. She didn't believe in telepathy or telling the future or clairvoyance. But she did have a gut feeling that something was wrong. That Justice was in danger.

"They took him," the ranch hand stuttered. "They took him while we were burning those things. He was standing a little apart, supervising the burning and they just came out of nowhere. Large black carts filled with those awful minors and their strange appendages for mining. I don't even know why they were out in the light like that. But they came out of nowhere. From the ground, I think. And then they took him, back into the depths of the ground. Anderson and some of his assistants have tried to go after him, but those strange miners have sealed the tunnel back behind them."

"What on earth is he talking about?" demanded Jane as she shouldered her way through the crowd. "Are you rambling? Are you drunk? What is this about someone being taken?"

For some strange reason, Nine felt an odd calm descend upon her. "No. The poor lad is not drunk. He's rambling because he's afraid. He's scared. And doesn't know what to do."

"Well, that's obvious," said another woman in the crowd. "But what is the situation?"

Nine raised her voice so that everyone could hear her. "The mining company that holds the land down south of here has now made an irrevocable move. They've taken Mr. Justice. And from what I can gather, they took him boldly. The company sent some miners who dug a tunnel underneath the ground to this land. Came up from

underneath and kidnapped Mr. Justice. The others tried to go after him, right? But the miners blocked their path by sealing up the tunnel through which they've gone."

The young ranch hand nodded vigorously. "That's right, Miss Rendell. The foreman and the other men are definitely trying to dig their way down. They're probably still working on that. But the foreman also thinks that it may be too late once they bust through the tunnel. So he sent me here to tell all of you. And then I'm to go get the sheriff out from Cat's Eye."

"Then go get the sheriff," said Nine, decisively. "And we'll take care of things here."

At her firm tone, the young ranch hand immediately nodded and took off as he was told. The rest of the women looked at her nervously and scared. Especially now that the dreaded mining company had done something.

"What do we do now?" asked Jane.

"Gather up everyone and prepare yourselves here," she told her. "I don't know if the mining company will try something bold, here, too. The land up to the north of here is quite rocky and I know it would be difficult to dig an underground tunnel there. So you may want to camp out there until I get back."

"And where would you be going?"

"I'm going to get Mr. Justice back," Nine said. She went back to the ranch house to get her Colt .45. And something else which she had managed to bring with her out to the frontier. With both of these objects and some luck, she thought that perhaps she would be able to do something to retrieve the man she thought she may have been foolishly falling in love with.

Nine took one of the horses from the barn. An angry black stallion that she remembered Justice telling her that had a temper. He had warned her that the stallion, whose name was Night, seemed to be angry at anyone and everything. He was most happy alone although he did allow Justice to go near him. With such a useless horse, it was a wonder that Justice didn't sell him off a long time ago, but he still kept the beast around. For sentimental reasons, no doubt. But now, Nine had need of him as he was the only horse left in the barn after all the ranch hands had borrowed the others to go off towards the other end of the ranch property.

She had never gone near the horse before so she wasn't quite sure what to expect

from an angry animal. Night seemed to sense her approach and immediately poked his head out of his stall to inspect the newest person. Nine stopped in front of the horse. Night eyed her warily before stretching out his neck to give her a sniff. Seemingly satisfied, he accepted an apple that Nine offered to him.

Perhaps, she thought with slight amusement, the horse smelled Justice on her. And with his master's marking of her, he probably deemed her an appropriate person to be nice to.

"I need your help," Nine said, even though she felt a little foolish talking to a horse who couldn't talk back let alone understand her language. "Mr. Justice is in trouble. And I need you to take me to him quickly."

At the mention of Justice, Night pricked up his ears and whinnied. Remembering how the other ranch hands had saddled up their horses and mounted, Nine opened the stall and took up the tack. Night allowed her to put the saddle on him and to climb up on his back. With her gently nudging his sides, he trotted out of the barn and down south.

"Swiftly now," she told the horse, "We have no time to lose."

At her command, Night broke into a fast gallop. Nine had never ridden a horse this fast before, and not expecting the speed, she spontaneously gripped the reins and clung in determination as the black stallion raced across the ranch land. She ignored all the scenery that passed by her. Instead, her vision was focused on where she thought, perhaps was where all the other ranchmen were.

To her, time seemed to stretch and elongate. As if there was nothing else in the universe but her, the horse, and the seemingly endless stretch of land in front of her. But eventually, her eyes began to make out figures in the distance. The ranch hands.