

The Heart of Texas

Back in the Saddle

It had been 3 years since Jeb was suddenly taken from her in a freak car accident. He'd been returning from out of state with two of their prize stallions when the trailer had seemingly veered out of control and flipped Jeb's truck, dragging the trailer over with it. She'd lost their best Quarter Horse, their first Arabian, and her husband in one fell swoop.

Bonnie Wyatt had done her level best to keep the ranch running, but with losing the one man who knew every square inch of this massive property, it hadn't been easy, and now things she didn't even know to watch out for were going wrong, money was getting tighter, and she couldn't afford to simply sell off their remaining stock, especially when she still had some decent breeders.

Her property manager had told her that someone had broken some of the outlying fences in the feeding paddocks and they were still taking stock of how many animals may be missing. With such a vast area of land, it could take a long while to gather up the whole herd and run an official count.

She prayed that she hadn't lost too many studs, they key if she wanted to keep the ranch. She owned it of course, she'd inherited the deed when Jeb had died, but it was no good to her if she couldn't afford to keep it running, and the idea of having to sell up and move away from the land she loved so dearly filled her with dread.

Bonnie was no wilting violet, and having been around horses her whole life, she knew how to raise them well, and was easily capable of managing their well-being just fine, but as she lay on the king size four post bed in the large and luxurious second story main bedroom of her house, she found herself holding back tears. Tears for her lost husband, tears for the horses and tears for herself, fighting to keep her life together, alone. She knew she was going to need help, that was obvious, but who could she really trust?

Tomorrow she would drive on over to Bill Wilkins farm and see what advice the aged rancher had for her. She was 39 years old, and felt foolish having to ask a man old enough to be her father for advice on such silly matters. "You're a grown woman and you still need a man around here!" She said out loud to herself. Her thoughts lingered on that thought, having a man around the place.

She had devoted so much time to the ranch that she hadn't spared a thought for her own needs for these last few years. She got up from the bed to change into some sleepwear, watching her reflection in the full length mirror across the room as she stripped off her work-a-day boots and out of her blue jeans and white button up shirt. She was heavier than when she was in her twenties, but that didn't bother her. Her hourglass figure had just become more pronounced, and if anything, she'd just become more voluptuous with time.

She led a good life, where she liked to cook and loved to eat, but work with the horses kept fit despite her size. She cast an appraising eye over her large but firm bust, the curve of her waist and the pert curve of her round butt and thick thighs. *Yeah... I still got it*, she told her reflection with a wink as she

slipped into a silk nightie and readied herself for bed. *I wouldn't mind if someone did get it though*, she ruminated as she relaxed into the thick soft covers of the feather bed. Her thoughts drifted to love lost and the hope that still lingered in her heart that it could be found again, before sleep found her.

The next morning, she woke with the sunrise, as she always did. She took a nice long, hot shower before choosing her favorite pair of slacks and a light blue cotton blouse that cinched at the waist and showed off her curves without looking too 'come get it'. Rust tanned leather boots and a straw colored Stetson that matched her slacks completed her outfit, with a little touch of cherry lip gloss and moisturizer being all she needed to look like a real country gal.

Her fresh skin held a touch of gold from the light tan she had from being outdoors, and she loved how she felt in this outfit. Comfortable. Confident. Ready.

She had a little bite to eat before grabbing the keys to her truck and heading out the door, along the path laid out through a crisp green lawn and out to the drive-way proper. As she was making her way to the garage, a single story barn really, her lead ranch hand Clayton, a 60 year old west Texan native that had been on the ranch since the beginning, was exiting the equipment barn adjacent to the garage, and made his way towards her with a hand up.

"Uh, g'mornin Mrs. Wyatt, mighty fine chance me runnin' into you just now, I wonder if I might have a word?" he said in his west Texas drawl.

"And a good morning to you Mr. Fields, of course, please how can I help you?"

"Well Ma'am, you can start by calling me Clayton, I ain't a mister of nothin' and I surely don't need to be gitin' no titles given to me by the lady of the ranch."

"Of course not Mr. Fields, and I would gladly call you Clayton when you give yourself the respect you deserve and call me Bonnie."

"Ah, heh, well you know me Mrs. Wyatt I ain't got no right to be addressin' the lady of the house in such a familiar way y'see."

This was a game they'd played for years now, and Bonnie felt warm knowing that she was held in such high regard by this gentle and reliable man, as indeed she held him in high regard. Clayton had been more than an employee since she'd lost Jeb, helping her come to terms with the responsibilities of running a ranch and had been a source of much help and guidance for her, never taking the credit for the good work he helped her do, and always treating her like the ultimate authority on the farm.

She had immense respect for the man, and there was a kind of familial bond between them, despite the formal way they treated each other and Bonnie wondered why he'd never married or struck out on his own.

"Very well Mr. Field, well I'll concede to your request, as soon as you concede to mine," She said, finishing their familiar banter, "but what is it that's on your mind this morning?"

"Well Ma'am, I'm afraid I have some bad news regarding the fencing lines on the east of the range, y'see we might could have enough lumber an' fencing to patch 'em up but we don't have the manpower here on the ranch to mount a real expedition to check the whole perimeter and bring in the herd from the outlyin' areas right now. We can try bring 'em all in but if we get any trouble out there with the run and we lose some horses, they might just get out o' them fences and we don't have enough cowboys to let any of 'em go runnin' off t' drag in a colt or some what's wild."

"I see...that certainly is a slight conundrum. We can't mend the fences till we bring in the herd and we can't try bring in the herd with broken fences. Well what do you suggest Mr. Fields? Has this happened before?"

"Oh no Ma'am, this'd never happened before on account of Mr. Wyatt himself always mountin' a posse himself to keep a watch on the fence-" He stopped immediately as he saw Bonnie's face drop at the mention of her husband. "Oh Lawd I am so sorry Mrs. Wyatt, me an' my mouth just runnin' off afore I even had a chance to think, I didn't mean to cause you no trouble I-"

"Please Mr. Fields," Bonnie said raising a hand up to him, "You needn't chastize yourself; you did nothing wrong, nothing at all." She took a deep breath and sighed to calm the sudden sorrow she felt, "We both know Jeb passed and I'm not going to get used to it just yet. Please, I need to hear what Jeb used to do, because for better or worse, we're all that's left here and dancing around the fact that he's gone ain't gonna make it hurt less, or help us a single bit in keeping this ranch going. Please, continue."

"Right, well all I's sayin' is that Mr. Wyatt used to head up a small posse every couple months and make a round of the property, used to take 'em about a week or so but it was done regular enough that we didn't get no real breakages happ'nin and well, to be honest with ya Mrs. Wyatt, I feel right awful havin' overlooked it myself these past few years and I can't help feelin' responsible for puttin' ya in this mess."

"Mr. Fields...Clayton. This is not your fault by any means and I don't think of it as such. Now, we're in this together and I trust your advice, so you tell me what you need me to do to help you get this fixed and I'll see about doing it."

"Well it's as simple as needin' more men to help around here, and men that don't mind sleepin' tough and workin' tougher a spell."

"Then I'll find some men who can handle themselves and some hard work Mr. Fields, in fact I was headin' over to Bill Wilkins farm this mornin' to speak to him about our situation. It might make things easier for me if I know exactly what kinda help we're lookin' for. Thank you once again for your good advice at the right time."

Clayton Fields tipped his hat and gave her a self-deprecating smile, "s'nothin Ma'am, jus' doin' my job as best I can." and turning away from her with just a hint more uprightness in his posture, proud to be regarded so generously by the beautiful wife of the man he'd served nearly his whole life. Bonnie hopped up into her truck, and revved the engine before heading East down the long drive up to the ranch in a cloud of dust.

It was almost noon by the time she pulled into that Wilkins farm drive, under the giant horseshoe entrance with the large "Wilkins Livestock" emblazoned across it in massive white lettering. Bill Wilkins was no quiet countryside cattle man, he lived loudly and everything he did in business and his personal life reflected that. He was quick to laugh and cunning in business, but he was a man who made deals on a handshake.

A down-to-earth, larger-than-life figure, he had been a good neighbor and was the first to come over to the ranch to offer condolences when Jeb had died. He had been polite enough not to hit on Bonnie, and thankfully he had only made very light overtures towards taking over Wyatt Ranch.

When he had seen that Bonnie fully intended to run the ranch herself, he'd graciously offered his help where she'd need it, letting her know it was no small feat to run a ranch, especially on her own. He'd told her to come by any time she needed help. She hadn't taken him up on his offer for 3 years, between herself and Clayton, they'd managed to keep the ranch steady and had even managed to buy another prize Arabian stud to establish good breeding lines again.

But now the tight balance they'd managed to maintain was at risk from pure oversight and ignorance, and as much as it pained her to ask for help at all, she still felt proud to have made it so far without needing it. She drove past beautifully manicured fields of grass with lush groves and water features, with training paddocks and stables for racehorses. They had made some good sales to The Wilkins over the years; Bill loved a good racehorse and loved winning derbies even more, and he wasn't afraid to spend the money to do it.

She finally arrived at the end of the long front drive and took in the huge colonial style mansion, with its impeccable lawns and its huge fountain in the shape of three cows, reared on their hind legs and spraying water out of their udders. Bonnie found it loud and ostentatious, just like the man who'd ordered it made because it "gave him a good chuckle".

She pulled up to the front porch which was more like a Greek portico and parked her truck somewhere she thought it wasn't in the way. There were gardeners milling about and the place seemed lively even though it was just a normal day like any other. As she made her way up the stairs to the front entrance, she felt the coolness of the marble covered entrance sweep over her, a welcome relief from the heat of the day, and as she did, the front door swung wide open and a squeal preceded the bouncy blonde figure of Bill Wilkins' young wife. "BONNIEEE! How're y'all doin'!? It's been SO long! Y'know I have been just plain DYIN' to come over and see ya but Billy NEVER seems to have the time to "take a hike" on out to y'all's ranch, and he just *refuses* to take the 'copter over coz he says it scares the horses, can you believe that!?"

Autumn Wilkins was the quintessential southern Trophy wife, big jagged platinum blonde bangs framed a bright face that was mostly pouty lips and perfect teeth, broken only by dark lashes and bright blue eyes that saw the world through a lens of perfect outcomes and satisfied whims. She ran up to Bonnie in heeled white boots with a pair of daisy dukes and a red and white checkered crop top looking like something out of a calendar and threw her arms around her in genuine affection before pulling away and looking Bonnie sternly in the eye,

"How are you missy? How's things on the ranch? You copin' alright out there on yer own? You know Billy an' me are always just a phone call away and we would love to see more a'you, y'know it just doesn't sit well with me you bein' out there all on yer' lonesome, your Jeb was such a good man, he was like family to Billy y'know? But seriously, how are you?"

"Jeezus Autumn! Give the woman a second to breathe will ya!" Bill Wilkins came striding out the front door towards them, his arms wide. His full white suit with jeweled bolo tie and matching Ridge Top hat and boots, along with his jolly red face and white handle bar moustache made him look like a cartoon cowboy and would look silly on any other man, but fitted around his ample paunch and bright eyes, it looked as right as spurs on a cowboys boot.

He reached Bonnie and Autumn and took Bonnie into his arms briefly before pulling back and giving Autumn a side eye, "What my lovely lil' Georgia peach is tryin' to say...is Welcome to our home Mrs. Wyatt, and it is indeed a great pleasure to see you again. Please, do come in. Uh, Harvey", he said to the doorman who looked put out that his role had been utterly ignored, "wontcha please inform Mrs. Harlowe that we will take some refreshments with our guest, out on the terrace?" Harvey bobbed his head smartly and headed off into the depths of the house.

Bill ushered Bonnie inside as Autumn lead the way into a marble floored reception hall with wide carpeted stairways curving up both sides up to a mezzanine level.

"I don't want to be an imposition—" Bonnie started to say before Autumn interrupted

"Oh no darlin' you are no imposition at all, it's a treat to have you here!"

"I didn't mean to interrupt anything; I should have called first." she said looking at them both dressed up as if they were about to head out somewhere.

"Not at all Bonnie, please I've been meaning to check up on how you're doing anyway and you comin' by is never an imposition of any sort. Please, join us for a little lunch, we just got in a little while ago from seeing a good friend of mine upstate." Bill replied as they made their way up the stairs.

"Well, of course I'd be more than happy to sit a while with you both and catch up." said Bonnie, relaxing a little.

"Well that's just fine then!" Bill said as Harvey re-appeared at the top of the stairs and lead the way ahead to a massive shaded balcony that looked out over a long outdoor pool on the lower level

surrounded by more manicured gardens stretching away, and off to the side a helicopter pad with the helicopter Bonnie now realized they had "just got in" on sitting there.

Beyond all of that, stretched a wide panorama of Texan country side, golden fields stretching to distant mountain ranges below puffy white clouds, drifting through perfect blue skies.

"What an incredible view!" exclaimed Bonnie as she sat down. Bill sat down at the head of the table,

"Yes siree, there is nothing quite so beautiful and peaceful as a Texas summer day, except of course enjoying it with two beautiful ladies at my side of course!" Autumn smiled sweetly and preened, happy to be adored. Bonnie smiled indulgently at the older man, he hadn't changed a single bit since she'd known him, constantly flipping between being a gracious gentleman and an incorrigible flirt.

A server arrived with a tray of tall cold drinks, already glistening with condensation. "Ah! Texas Sweet Tea! Excellent!" enthused Bill. Bonnie took a sip from the tall glass and gasped, in surprise.

"Ha! You like that?" guffawed Bill, "It's perfect for a hot day like this! It's the tequila that gives it some oomph! Autumn taught it to Harvey, What'dya think?"

"It's...delicious!" said Bonnie taking another sip.

"Oooh I'm so glad you like it!" squealed Autumn, "it's my party drink! I told Harvey to make 'em with extra love to celebrate you bein' here" she said with a stage wink to Bonnie, "and to celebrate your deal baby!" she said to Bill, raising her glass towards him. Bonnie raised her eyebrows to him,

"Oh? Congratulations Bill! What deal are we celebrating?" She asked.

"Oh nothin much, nothin much, I just finally got my hands on a nice lil' agave farm upstate."

"Wow, Bill, I'm impressed! I had no idea you were into that sort of thing."

"Ah, heh, well it's less my passion than this lil' beauties'." He said, reaching out and touching Autumn's arm affectionately.

"And I love you for it my sweet Billy!" cooed Autumn as she got up and leant over to plant a big kiss on him. Bonnie got a good view of what she would look like with a giant white handlebar moustache, and thought she could probably get away with it with her body and those breasts in that top. She stifled a giggle and had another big sip of tea. This really was good tea! Or at least, it was good tequila.

"We are gonna make THE best tequila in the whole wide state of Texas, just you wait 'n' see!" said Autumn, sitting back down, "I got the whole thing planned out an' everythan', Wilkins Tequila is gonna be sold at every rodeo and derby from here to Kentucky!" she went on. Bill smiled indulgently at her and gave a subtle raise of his eyebrow to Bonnie.

"You know me, I can't say no to my lil' Georgia peach!" he said to her.

"Of course he can't when I've got a whole business plan and marketin' and jus' everythin you could need to make it big!" Autumn added. *You can't fail when you've got money to burn* thought Bonnie to herself, with a small twinge of jealousy for the woman who sat across from her, inventing drinks and going to buy land in her helicopter on a whim. Outwardly she smiled at them both, and took another gulp of her tea.

"But let's talk about you." said Bill, turning to face her, "what brings you to us Bonnie? Is everything alright with the ranch? Are you doin' ok?"

Bonnie sighed. Autumn stood and refilled both of their glasses with tea, Bonnie smiled in thanks, "The truth is Bill, we were doin' pretty good up until a few days ago. Clayton informed me that we've had some serious breaches in some of our perimeter fences, and we may have lost some of the herd."

"Oh well, that sounds serious," Bill replied, leaning in to listen to her, "do you know what kinda numbers you're talkin' about?"

"Well that's just it, we need to round up the herd into the inner paddocks, so we need men to go out and cover the whole property but that's around-"

"A hundred and fifty thousand acres."

"Exactly, of course you know that Bill. Well the fact is we don't have enough men to go and round up the herd and fix the fences, and Clayton tells me we're likely to lose more of the herd if we don't get those fences fixed first so the rest of the men can round up the herd."

"Clays right. I think, and excuse me for bringin' up a sore subject Bonnie, but Jeb used to ride out with some good boys and check on the fences twice a year. You got someone who can do that now?"

"Clay'd be the one who knows the work best, and he's past the age for carryin' it off leadin' some men out there, and besides him, I wouldn't know who to trust with this Bill."

"What about Chet?" said Autumn. Bill looked over at her, and she realized she'd jumped the gun, but stuck with it. "He's a good cowboy Billy." she pressed on.

"I know it darlin', and you took the words out of my mouth." he said giving her a look.

"Isn't Chet your boy Bill? I haven't seen him in...must be goin' on 6 years. Is he old enough to handle somethin' like this?" asked Bonnie.

"He's one of the best damn cowboys I've ever seen, truth be told. He's old enough aplenty, and don't you worry about whether or not he'll do it either, my boys got to work for their share. They don't get

nothin' dished out just coz their daddy worked his hide raw buildin' this farm up from dirt." He sat up and took a sip of tea and smacked his lips, "Yeah I think this might be just the kinda thing that needs doin' by that boy." He looked at Bonnie directly, "He's a bit of a wild one is m'boy Chet-"

"A wild one!?" Autumn interrupted, "Ha! If he's a wild one, I'm a-"

"Autumn please!" Bill said without raising his voice, and she quieted, "Chet is a spirited boy Bonnie, but he's no hell raiser. He's just a boy with fire inside him," he turned to Autumn, "that takes after his pappy." he looked at Bonnie again, "But he's got grit and hard work in him, and I think some time off the farm would do him good. A chance to let his spurs fly a bit, and a chance to show me he can take responsibility seriously. When you're breakin' in a great horse, you don't tie him down and whip 'im till he he's too broken to fight back, coz all you'll get is a wasted champion with no fight in him at all. You got to give him boundaries, but you got to let him run his fire out, that's how you get a horse that can be rode but still has the fire to win races."

He sat back and nodded to himself. Bonnie sat back and sipped her drink, thinking about the lanky 13 year old she remembered. He seemed like just your typical surly teenager when she'd seen him last. She could hardly imagine him as his father spoke of him. But she'd asked for help, and Bill had offered it willingly. She couldn't very well refuse, especially since he was offering her his own son!

"I appreciate the offer Bill, and I'm very grateful you'd send your own son to help me out."

"You'd be helping me out too Bonnie. I've needed to give Chet somethin' he can't palm off to other men on my farm because he thinks his time would be better spent riding the plains and goin' where the wind takes 'im. He's a wanderer and he knows these country sides, so I trust him out there, and I can send some men out with him to help ferry supplies out to the perimeter."

"That's fine Bill, I think we can handle that."

"No Bonnie I insist. Chet needs to be seen working by the men that he might one day have workin' for him on this farm. It's important that men respect the man they work for, not because of his money, but because of his character."

"Well...thank you Bill, I appreciate your kindness."

"Nonsense! Nothin' special about bein neighborly, and besides I ain't even laid a spread out for ya yet! You stay the night with us, we'll make a night of it! Besides, didn'tcha hear? We bought a damn tequila plantation! We got cause to celebrate!"

"Woo! Yeah baby! We're gonna be Texas tequila barons!" Autumn squealed with excitement.

"Well cheers to that!" shouted Bonnie as they all clinked their glasses and sat down again, intoxicated with the afternoon heat, the beautiful view and the hope of getting what they each wanted.

As evening fell and the cooler evening descended, the three revelers moved inside to the library to enjoy some evening drinks by a roaring fire. Bonnie was impressed with the stately home, and wondered who it was in the Wilkins family who had such fine taste, whether Bill secretly had a refined side, or whether Autumn's gaudy taste only went as far as her personal style.

That being said, she had gone off to change before dinner and was now dressed more demurely, though her evening dress displayed her body to great effect, though while Bonnie had felt a little overdressed earlier, she now felt a touch too casual. But, she had nothing to change into, and there was no way she was going to fit into anything Autumn owned, she was about 15 years and a good few pounds away from Autumn's size, even with those clearly augmented breasts. She'd probably never been that scrawny in her life!

Bonnie had nothing of the emaciated semi-teen look about her, she was a woman and she'd always looked like one. Well, she wasn't here to impress anyone, and she knew she looked damn good in this outfit regardless. The door opened and Harvey came into the library to announce that dinner was served.

"Well let's go then!" said Bill as they moved through the reception hall to another door, which Harvey swung wide from them to enter. The long table was set with fine silverware and pre-poured champagne flutes, and tall candelabra lit the room brightly, finishing off the look of an old formal manors dining room

It was stunning, and Bonnie wished she had a fancy evening dress to change into. As he moved to the head of the table, Bill asked, "Will you be joining us Harvey?" indicating a fourth place setting.

"Ah no Mr. Wilkins," Harvey replied, "Mr. Chet arrived back this afternoon and indicated that he'd be joining you for dinner."

"Ah! Well! That's just fine news, fine news indeed! Thank you Harvey." Bill replied, his words slurring together ever so slightly. "Please go and fetch him, oh and Harvey, bring up some of the Screaming Eagle Cabernet would ya?"

"Of course, Mr. Wilkins, right away." replied Harvey and moved quickly out of the room.

"Well Bonnie, looks like you'll get to meet my Chet this time after all. It certainly is turning into a serendipitous day indeed!" said Bill, a little tipsy.

"Great! I can't wait!" said Bonnie as she seated herself. She sipped her champagne, an exquisitely crisp Brut. She was about to comment on it when the door to the foyer opened, and in stepped a man that literally stole her breath from her throat and froze her in place. Dark, shoulder length hair framed bronze cheeks, touched with stubble and offset bright green eyes in a face that seemed almost coy, but for its bold features, which seemed to draw her eyes over them like a current in a fresh mountain stream.

He was tall, and broad shouldered, yet there was a slight drawing in of his posture, like the bright light and festive mood startled him. Then he looked at her, and Bonnie felt the sounds in her ears fall away like they'd been pulled into a black hole where all she could hear was the rushing of her own blood. He smiled, and all of the hesitance and brooding dark of him fell away instantly, and Bonnie found herself smiling back, and then he was moving, but moving away from her! Oh, he was walking to where the place was set for him, across from her.

She vaguely heard Bill saying "...my son Chet, Chet this is Bonnie Wyatt, you remember her?" and then he was standing across from her, and she stood, looking quickly away, realizing she was staring and still holding her champagne glass. Flustered, she put it down quickly and glanced at Autumn, who had a small smirk on her face, and one eyebrow ever so slightly cocked.

Bonnie looked away quickly and reached out her hand to shake Chet's.

"It's very nice to see you again Mrs. Wyatt, of course I remember you! How could I forget the woman who sold us the finest Tennessee Walker I've ever had the privilege of riding? I called him Midnight Dancer, do you remember?" he said to her, still holding her hand, gently like reins, his deep and soft spoken tone seeming to be the only sound she heard.

"I..I uh of course, yes! Midnight Dancer. I remember him, he really was beautiful." she said and smiled again, "and as far as I remember he was a real handful."

"Well," he smiled too, "He's still beautiful, and he's still a handful!" he released her hand and it felt like a deep breath cut short. She sat down slowly.

"Uh...yes well!" Bill said also realizing he was standing and had just been watching the two greet each other. "Good to have you here boy, and I'm glad you decided to dress up for the occasion!"

Chet looked down at his clean shirt and fresh jeans, "Occasion?"

"Yes! Well, you might know a bit more if you were around a bit more, but Autumn and I purchased Monahan Agave today!"

Chet raised his glass, "Ah! I see—Well! Congratulations to you both." and he inclined his glass toward both of them before taking a sip.

"Congratulations especially to Autumn here," Bill continued, "who is workin' her ass off to build somethin' herself and is puttin' all her talents to good use for the family." and he inclined his head to her.

Chet sighed and looked at his father, the magnate, the tycoon, the baron. He turned to Autumn, "Really Autumn, congratulations sincerely. I'm sure you're gonna make one hell of a success of it. I wish you all the best." He gave her a smile and she smiled back, relieved that he wasn't rising to his father's bait, and clinked her glass to his,

"A' fuckin men to that!" she said, "now let's please have a PARTY!" and gulped the rest of her champagne. Chet laughed and looked at his father, and gave him a quick nod, to which Bill gave a tight smile and nod in return.

"So what brings you here, Mrs. Wyatt? You here to celebrate this all American Mexican endeavor?" Chet said as he turned to Bonnie.

"Just a happy coincidence actually! I came here to talk to your father about needing some help on our ranch. Oh, and please, call me Bonnie."

"Well Bonnie, I must say it is very good to see you again after all these years." he said as he held her eye, "Did you manage to get what you needed from my father?"

"You know Chet, I think I'm going to get exactly what I need from him." Bonnie startled herself with that comment, the champagne must have gone to her head. Or the whisky sours. Or the tequila.

"Well you have got to teach me that trick, because I have been trying to get that right for a very long time, and so far I am caught in my own loop—"

"Like hell," cut in Bill, "You and your brothers got everythin' a good man needs to make somethin' of himself, and you had it spooned to ya off a silver platter too!"

"You've provided everythin' we could need to be you, pop, only thing you held back is the freedom to choose."

"Freedom? Boy this whole country is free and you no less than any other man, but it behooves every good man to do somethin' worthwhile with that freedom! Freedom is earned in this country, and you got to earn yours."

Chet looked at Bonnie as if to say *you see what I got to deal with?*, and replied "I know pop, I got to earn my freedom before I'm free, I didn't mean to start nothin with y'all, just sayin' is all."

"Yeah well you can 'just say; your ass over to that there liquor cabinet and pour your pappy some good ol, bourbon whiskey, I can't drink this fizzy stuff, this here's for the ladies!" Chet obligingly stood up and walked over to a fine dark wood cabinet with a set of whiskey decanters sitting on a silver tray.

"Anyone else?" he asked as he picked up a decanter.

"I want some tequila!" piped Autumn.

"Bonnie?" he asked as he looked at her. Bonnie was already tipsy but would have said yes to anything that came out of those lips, and was given from those rough and capable hands.

"Sure I'll take bourbon."

"Alright, two bourbons and a tequila."

"Someone has to have a tequila with me y'all! whined Autumn.

"Sure," said Chet, "looks like I got to play catch up anyways." and he poured two tequilas from the liquor cabinet for himself and Autumn, and lined up 3 whiskies too. Chet placed the tequila in front of Autumn and they both slugged it back before shaking their heads and gasping at the strong liquor, then he went back and collected the whiskeys, placing one in front of his father, and one at his placing, before walking around to the other side of the table and leaning past Bonnie, he said with a smile,

"It's rude to stretch y'know." His body brushed hers (intentionally?) and his face passed within inches of hers. She breathed in his smell, a vague scent of horse rode on the smell of fresh lemongrass soap and underneath the soft smell of hay and the scent of his sun-kissed skin. It felt like breathing in raw desire, and it filled her chest with flutters and twinkling shivers that raced up her neck, down her arms and rushed to warm places within her, and she had to struggle not to close her eyes and get lost in it.

"Thank you." she barely got out as a whisper, finding her throat suddenly dry and her breath catching in the net of nervous energy hovering between her collar bones.

He walked back around to his own seat and sat down, picking up his glass, and saying "You are very welcome," before sipping the rich brown liquid.

Bonnie picked up her own glass and let the heady scent bring her back to the table, just as Harvey opened two side doors and a short row of smartly dressed servants came in carrying large silver trays covered with cloches and placed them on a large serving table at the side of the room. Harvey brought an ornate wine decanter to the table and poured for each person at the table before placing it on the serving table.

"May I serve Mr. Wilkins?"

"By all means Harvey, I am just about ready to eat this tablecloth I've worked up such an appetite!" Bill responded, and the servants went into action at once.

"Smoked Trout with confit fennel and a lemon caper anglaise, sir."

"Thank you Harvey, and wontcha bring us a Haynes Chardonnay with this?"

"Of course sir, it is already chilled, I shall serve it immediately."

"Good man, thank ya Harvey." Harvey bowed, and retreated from the room.

Bill tucked int right away, smacking his lips and seemingly enjoying the food with more a voracious hunger, than any deep appreciation for the chefs skills.

"I'm sorry I didn't know you would be here, Bonnie, "said Chet, leaning over his plate slightly, "or I would have dressed up."

"Oh please," replied Bonnie with a wry smile, "I didn't know I'd be here either, and I'm hardly dressed up."

"Well if this is you dressed down, I'd love to see the dressed up version. Perhaps we'll need to arrange something again. Soon." Emboldened by the whiskey and Chet's almost hypnotic gaze, Bonnie smiled over her glass at him,

"Well we may just get the chance sooner than you think..." she shot back at him.

"Oh?"

"Oh yeah, before you got here, your kind father was offerin' me the personal services of none other than the wily Mr. Chet Wilkins." Chet looked taken aback, his smile flickering as he glanced over at his father.

"Yes well, Mrs. Wyatt, ain't jess here for a social visit, y'see," Bill spoke around a bite of food, "She'll be needin' some help over at the ranch that'll need sleepin' rough some an' doin' some hard labor, so nat'rally my mind went straight to you. This is jess the thing you need to work up a bit o' grit in them bones o' yorn boy." Whatever Bill was expecting from Chet, seeing his face brighten and a big smile come over his face was not it, and he squinted his unfocussed eyes at the young man.

"Of course pa, I'd be more n' happy to lend Mrs. Wyatt any help she needs." He turned his smile to Bonnie, "You're more than welcome to make use of me however you need Mrs. Wyatt."

Bonnie felt a flush rush over her cheeks, and she unconsciously bit her lip as she softly replied, "Please...call me Bonnie."

"It would be my pleasure...Bonnie." The way her name sounded in his low twang made her breath flutter as it went past her flushed throat.

"WELL!", said Bill, happy at the unexpected ease with which that had gone, "That settles it then! I think that'll do just fine, just fine indeed. Ah! Here's Harvey with the Chardonnay! Harvey a round for everyone please, this is turnin' out to be a mighty fine day, yessir!" He raised his full glass in a toast, waiting for the others to follow suit, "To fine guests, fine women and a fine evenin' all 'round!" Everyone drank deeply of the chilled wine, some to cool their excitement of the day, and some to cool the ardor that had begun to rise up from deep within their body, like a flame drenched in gasoline.