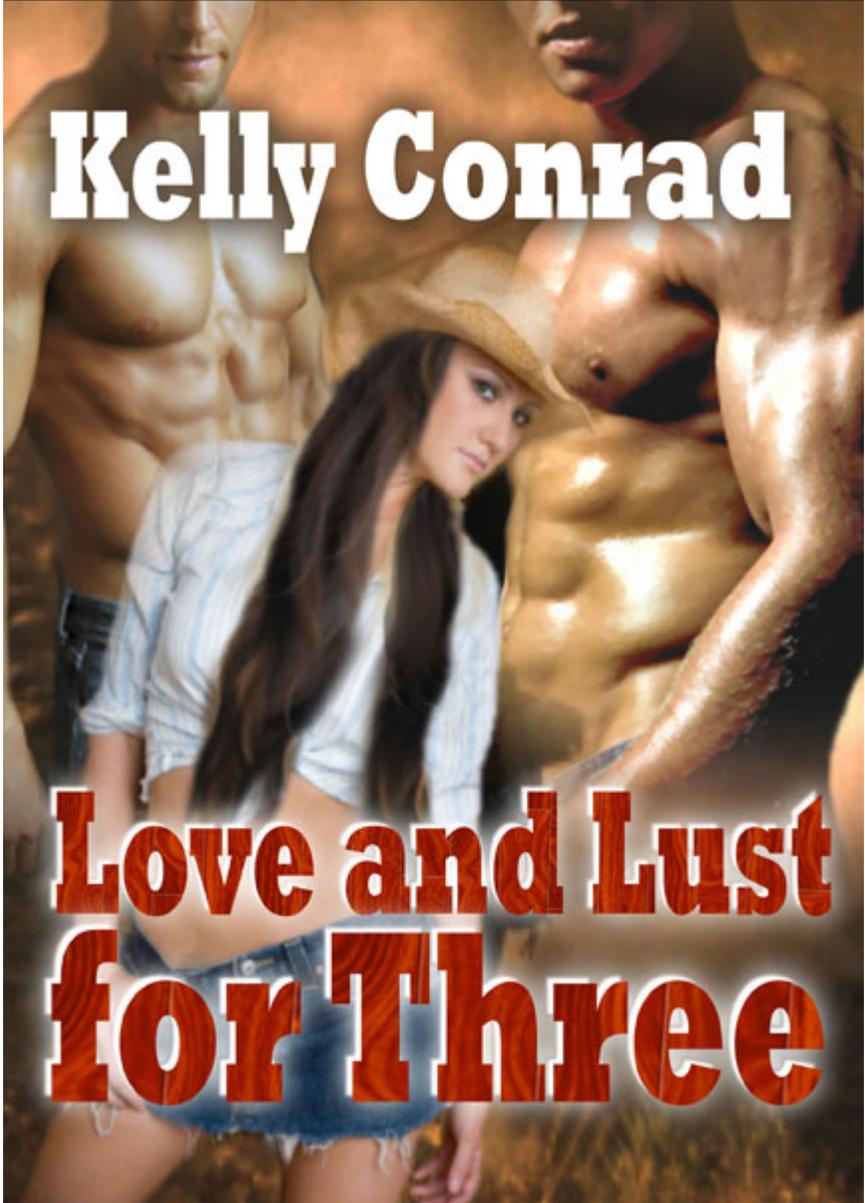


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Ménage Amour



Kelly Conrad

**Love and Lust
for Three**

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LOVE AND LUST FOR THREE

KELLY CONRAD

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Chapter One

1879 – Dry Gulch, Tennessee

An insane kind of terror filled her throat, choking her. Dead, icy fingers slowly crept up her spine while her frightened gaze carefully shifted around the room.

They're here again.

The shadows. Black—no faces.

"Go away," she pleaded as they stretched and wove about, reaching for her, calling to her, their hiss low and sinister. Strange hands reached out and stroked her, their siren-like voices urging her to follow them deep into the shadowy darkness of the Black Woods.

Jessabelle...Jessabelle...the time is near...come with us now and fulfill your destiny.

Pools of darkness began to gather into one big mass and hover over her, their hiss threatening, urgent. She couldn't breathe! She felt trapped, caught in a web of darkness. The darkness surrounded her, covered her, smothered her!

When she could stand no more, she jumped up and ran to the window. "Leave me alone!" she screamed over and over into the dark trees and winding paths.

And then suddenly there was nothing but silence.

She looked around, listened for a moment, but the shadowy shapes had left as quickly as they came. Now the only sounds she heard were the sounds of the night outside her window.

It's the wind, she finally told herself. The wind kicks up, the trees lean, shadows move. That's all it is. Ain't nothin' out there but a bunch o' black trees and them God awful squawkin' birds. It's silly nonsense, all of it.

She crept back to bed and spent the rest of the night trying to convince herself, but she knew. She knew something out there wanted her, and she knew it would get her—someday.

* * * *

"Hey, Jezebel!"

Jessabelle turned and saw several of her so-called friends standing together in a group with their gossiping tongues hanging out a mile.

"What do you want, Honey?"

"Say, I hear you and Juba been keepin' steady company."

"Hey, ain't only Juba," Lucy Mae chimed in. "I hear Jezebel's got herself two men. I swear, every time Reb Jackson sees Jezebel he looks like somebody done hit him in the head with a fryin' pan." With a whiney voice, she continued. "Ain't hardly fair. Her with two, and us with—"

"Shut up, Lucy Mae," Honey shouted. "I'm givin' you fair warnin' now, Jezebel, I intend to get him for myself."

"Juba wouldn't wipe his feet on the likes of you, Honey Wells."

The girl's taunting smile dropped. "Why you dirty little tramp!" she said as she walked toward Jessabelle with blood in her eyes. "Take that back...Jezebel!"

"My name ain't Jezebel!"

"Yeah? Well, I heard tell you been givin' Juba more than just your company. I hear tell you been layin' down for him. Could it be you

been layin' down for both them boys?" She looked around at the others. "What do you say, girls? Two men in her bed. That sho' sounds like a Jezebel to me."

With a smirking smile, Jessabelle said, "Yeah? Well you just choke on it, Honey, 'cause two's better than none, which is what you got."

"Get her, Honey," Lucy Mae said with vicious pleasure. "Wipe all that prettiness right off her face."

"Anybody can tell by lookin' at you, Jezebel, that you're nothin' but a dirty little whore."

"Yeah? Well, I heard tell you stuff your bras."

"Why you bitch, that's a lie, and you know it. Not everyone around here is built like a cow!"

"A cow?" Jessabelle replied while advancing on Honey. "I'd rather be built like a cow than a scarecrow!"

"I ain't no fuckin' scarecrow!" Honey yelled as she ran toward Jessabelle, her claw-like hands reaching for her hair.

The two went down on the ground and began rolling around in the dirt. The yelling girls made a circle around them, urging them on.

* * * *

The sound carried through the Black Woods to two young men who knelt at the edge of Crockett's Creek. "What the hell is that?" Reb said lifting his head.

"That sounds like Jessabelle," Juba answered. Quickly drying his hands on the tail of his shirt, he rose. "You wait here," he said, then hurried through the woods until he saw the two girls rolling on the ground, the dust so thick, he could hardly see them.

"What the hell is this?" he yelled, hurrying out of the shadow of the trees. When no one heard him, he leaned down and pulled the girls apart. "Jessabelle, what are you and Honey doin'?"

"She called me a cow!" Jessabelle yelled while Juba held her back.

"You are a cow! A big, fat—"

"Hold on, Honey. That ain't nice, ya know. Callin' someone a cow."

"So what? She called me..."

He waited, and then said, "She called you what?"

With a red face, Honey said, "Don't matter. It ain't true, none of it."

"I called her a flat-chested scarecrow, and I was right!"

"So that's what this is all about, is it? Name callin'?"

"She started it," Honey said.

"You bitch!" Jessabelle screamed. "I didn't start nothin'! She started this whole thing by callin' me a Jezebel!"

"Did not!" Honey said stubbornly.

"You're a liar!" Jessabelle cried out as she lunged toward Honey causing Juba to break his hold on her. "Just wait until I get my hands on you, Honey Wells. You won't have a hair left on your head!"

Juba caught her, and held her back while he yelled out at the others. "Get outta here, all o' ya! Fine friends you are! You done gone and made Jessabelle cry."

Jessabelle jerked away from him. "I ain't cryin'!"

"If them ain't tears, what are they?" he said as he took the tail end of his shirt and dried her eyes. "Jessabelle, baby, they ain't no need to cry. I know why they're actin' like that. They're jealous, that's all. Just look at them and look at you." One finger lifted her chin while his thumb brushed her full lips softly. "They're crones next to you. Don't you know that?" He led Jessabelle to a tree, lay down under it and put his head in her lap. Trying to take her mind off Honey and her friends, he lifted his eyes and looked at the shine in her dark, sleek hair, then combed his fingers through it. "I love the way you wear your hair. Parted in the middle like that makes it fall forward like a silky

waterfall, sorta. Drives me crazy the way you look at me through it. Looks sexy, real mysterious like. You know who you remind me of?"

She shook her head, still wiping at her tears.

"That Salome gal from a long time ago." He plucked a weed nearby, then clenched it between his teeth. "I read she was what they called a temptress. That was back then o'course. Today she'd be called a scarlet lady." He angled his gaze up toward Jessabelle. "Learned it in Sunday school."

"Been a long time since you went to Sunday school, Juba."

"Yeah, but I remember her." His eyes became lazy as he gazed out in space, thinking. "Always did think she musta been some good lookin' gal." He glanced over at Jessabelle. "Don't you remember readin' about her? She was the one that danced naked."

"Naked? What in blazes are you talkin' about?"

"Well, you know, with nothin' on. If the truth be known, I'll bet she was the first one o' them strippin' gals. She had seven veils, see, and she pulled them off one at a time until—"

"Stop it, Juba. That ain't nothin' but hogwash."

"Jessabelle, it's in the book!"

"Juba, they wouldn't teach you somethin' nasty like that in Sunday school. 'Sides, what're we talkin' about her for? She ain't real no how. Jus' somethin' you dreamed up to make me jealous."

"She is so. Well, at least she used to be. Read it right there in one o' them story books they pass out in Sunday school." He angled a teasing look toward her and grinned. "Hey, maybe you'll dance for me sometime, huh? Get some fancy scarves and—"

"Oh, Juba, be quiet," She laughed. "I can't do that, it'd jus' get you all hot and bothered."

"Say, speakin' of dancin', what about the church social Pastor Greaves is havin' Saturday night? You goin'?"

"Yeah, I heard a little about it. Tryin' to raise money for hymn books, or somethin' like that, ain't they?"

"Yeah, posted signs all over town."

"Oh, cripes! He done invited town folk?"

"Only way he's gonna get any money. Hill folk ain't got it."

"But these hills ain't safe, Juba. Strangers comin' up this far in the hills is likely to get a backside full of buckshot."

Juba shrugged. "Ain't my problem." He slid his sexy eyes toward her, then grinned. "Gives me a chance to hold you. You know, real close."

"You know you can do that anytime, Juba."

"Not the way I want to, though," he whispered as he pulled her head down and kissed her.

"Yeah?" she said, her lips moving against his. "What'dya mean?"

"Don't act dumb, Jessabelle. You know what I mean. Maybe we oughta find a place in the woods. You know, dark and private."

"Maybe we oughta."

The two wondered off, and found a soft bed of grass near the creek. As they wilted down onto it, she caught her breath when he pulled her to him, his swollen cock hard against her.

"Oh, God, Juba," she moaned, feeling the familiar fire begin to race through her veins. "You ought not do that in broad daylight."

"Why don't we find us a haystack, Jessabelle. A place where it's real dark," he whispered, his breath wet and hot on her ear. "Can't you see that I'm near to bustin' with love for you?"

* * * *

About that time Reb walked up and saw Jessabelle cozing up with Juba. He couldn't seem to help the familiar warmth he felt every time he saw her. At first he tried to keep his feelings to himself, her bein' Juba's girl and all, but when she looked back at him with them lazy green eyes of hers, well, that's when he would lose all his senses. Although he'd been friends with Juba since he was a kid, he hadn't met Jessabelle until he moved up to Dry Gulch. The first time he saw her, she was sitting astride a wood fence dressed in tight denim shorts,

and a blouse that tied under her breasts. There wasn't a girl anywhere in Dry Gulch like Jessabelle. When everybody else used saddles, she rode her horse bareback like the Indians and ran around these hills barefoot. She never mentioned it, but he suspected her of being half Cherokee. Her black hair was long and straight, but she had blazing green eyes that gave away her white heritage. With all that tied up in one exotic package Reb couldn't keep his eyes off her. God, she was sexy.

He remembered sitting atop a bucking bronco, and instead of paying attention to what he was doing, he was staring at Jessabelle. Just about that time the horse bucked and threw him off. When he finally managed to get up he saw Jessabelle and Juba laughing at him. He knew he must have been a funny sight so he laughed right along with them.

That was the day he learned there was more to Jessabelle than just her good looks. She didn't act like one of them prissy, gossipin' females. She was friendly. She could scrap with the best of them, and didn't mind getting dirty. She fit in between him and Juba like a honey sandwich.

Knowing she was Juba's girl, he tried to stay away at first, but he couldn't, and slowly the two of them became the three of them. She seemed to be the center of their lives. Even when they were out droving or had to be on the trail for days at a time, Jessabelle was on both their minds. All their plans always included her.

Now, looking at the two of them together, he called out, "Hey Juba, did you forget about me?"

"Oh, hey, Reb. Sorry about that."

"It's okay, I don't guess I can blame you none. Jessabelle here smells a lot better than a bunch of dead fish that need cleanin'." He scooted over and sat down on the other side of her. "Hey, sweet pea, gonna give Juba here a little lovin'? How about lettin' old Reb join in?"

"I don't see that it's any of your business what I do with Juba."

"Come on, Jessabelle, ain't you through bein' mad at me yet? I been missin' you real bad. Juba ain't been tellin' you lies about me has he?"

"If he did I have a feelin' they wouldn't be lies," she teased with a giggle.

"All right," he said, lounging back against a tree, "just stay mad, but you'll be sorry when I ain't around no more."

"Why? Where you goin'?"

"I'm goin' to Texas, that's where," he said with excitement in his voice.

"Texas? What's in Texas?"

"Wide open spaces. I was there once, and I can't wait to get back."

"Hey, quit fillin' my woman's head with all that nonsense," Juba said. "You ain't goin' nowhere. Not 'til you get some money."

"I got money. Some anyway. Soon as I get enough, I'll be headin' out." He leaned over and whispered in Jessabelle's ear. "How would you like to wake up one day and find old Reb gone? Got anything that might make me wanna stick around?"

"What about it, Jessabelle?" Juba asked as he nuzzled her neck. "A threesome can be a lot of fun."

"I don't know," she said, her eyes closing in rapture while Juba nibbled on her. "Truth is, I been wantin' to, but I'm afraid someone'll see." She looked from one to the other. "If I do, you won't tell, will you?"

"It'll be our little secret. I promise." Juba said. "How about you, Reb, you plannin' on tellin' anyone?"

"Me? Hell, no. I ain't one to kiss and tell."

* * * *

She looked over at Reb, at his muscled hardness, at his cock that had already began staging a riot inside his jeans and remembered the

first time she'd seen him. He was breaking a horse and was covered with dust and sweat.

"Who is he?" she asked Juba.

"His name is Rebel Jackson. I been knowin' him a while. He used to be a ranch hand on old man Lester's place. When that job played out, he moved up here to Dry Gulch hopin' to find work."

"He's a helly lookin' cowboy, ain't he?"

"He is, huh? Now, listen here Jessabelle, you're my—"

Jessabelle just giggled and looked at Juba like she'd been teasing.

"Oh, I get it. Tryin' to get me jealous, huh?"

"Juba, don't you know by now that my heart belongs to you?"

"Well...I guess so. But don't let me catch you moonin' over him again, you hear?"

"Okay," she mumbled as she secretly cut her gaze back over at Reb's big, rugged shoulders and husky build.

She didn't know then Reb would manage to have himself included in their little threesome. She learned real quick he wasn't only good looking, he was smart and tricky as hell. From that day on she never could make a choice between them and hoped she'd never have to.

Now, as she felt herself being pushed backward into the grassy cradle by her two favorite bad boys, she melted beneath their touch.

"Oh, God," she whispered when she felt their warm breath on her face. One kissing her, and the other biting on her earlobe. Both of their hands began to stroke her, driving her crazy with desire. And then when Reb cupped her pussy and squeezed, she closed her eyes and felt the heat surge upward with the intimacy of his touch.

While Juba kissed her body in the most sensitive places, she felt the buds of her nipples swell to their fullest. Her flesh tingled as both Juba and Reb shared her breasts, causing a series of hot, scorching jolts to spear through her. Before she knew it, suddenly her clothes were gone, and Juba's tongue began to sear a scorching path down to her abdomen and onto her thighs. She gasped when she felt it moving

toward her pussy and pushing into her cunt. The lovely feel of Juba's tongue inside her made her moan with delight.

The hunger she felt urged her upward into a place she'd never been, when suddenly his tongue withdrew, and she felt her pussy being invaded by an enormous cock that took her breath away. A stinging pain shocked her, but then suddenly a glorious push and pull carried her upward on wave after wave of passion. She clutched Juba, languishing in the warmth of an electric thrill that caused her to almost leap off the ground. She felt him going deeper and deeper, her cunt being deliciously stretched. She emitted a soft whimper and writhed wildly as he continued to plunge in and out, hot and slick until suddenly she shattered, bathed in wave after wave of glorious warmth.

Almost without detection, Juba moved away and Reb took his place. His hands felt like two flames of fire as they stroked her. She could feel his cock growing bigger and bigger against her, her mumbling lips begging for more and more when suddenly he thrust his cock inside her. Her hips began a wild thrust, their bodies in synch while his cock plunged deeper and deeper. The two of them clutched each other, bound by that ultimate joy each were striving for. She gasped, her breath becoming shallow as he plunged in and out, while his hands lovingly squeezed her breasts, and his mouth suckled her nipples. His hips continued to push, and his breath felt hot on her face. She felt a moan pushing at her throat until it came spilling out of her mouth. And then suddenly she felt herself drifting on a wave of desire again reaching higher and higher for that place of ultimate satisfaction until she at last cried out and wilted beneath his touch.

Several minutes passed while she slowly came out of her glow. Realizing what had happened, she lunged upward. "Oh, God, Reb, what have we done...?"

"We didn't do nothin' wrong, hear? You know I love you, Jessabelle."

"What about Honey? She practically invited you and Juba into her bed."

"Are you kidding? Honey don't have nothin' we want." He turned to Juba. "Right, Juba?"

"Not a damn thing."

With Juba and Reb on each side of her showing her how much they cared she suddenly remembered something. "Oh, jeez, I gotta go. I promised to sit with the Lawson twins. Ms. Lawson's gonna die when she finds out what I been doin'!"

"Pretend you forgot. Me and Reb'll walk you home later. 'Sides I ain't had near enough. I'm still rarin' to go."

"I can't, Juba," she said, struggling to get away from him.

"Jessabelle, honey, that's cruel."

"Oh, hell, Juba, you don't need a woman, just go stick that thing in a knot hole. She finally managed to get on her feet and began to run.

"Jessabelle!" he yelled. "What about the social on Friday night?"

"I'll be there at eight. I'll be lookin' for you if you can keep that swolled up fucker of yours from draggin' the ground!"

"Real funny, Jessabelle."

She was still giggling as she hurried down the path toward the Lawson's place. She thought about Juba and Reb and how much she cared about them. Ever since Reb had moved to Dry Gulch, him and Juba had run together, shared everything. They were both high-riding hellions that broke horses and hired out as wranglers when they weren't training for the top prize in the local Rodeo. With them, it was more a competition with each other than the other cowboys. Reb had blond hair and blue eyes, but Juba's hair was dark and his skin swarthy. Since she met Juba first she seemed to be more his girl than Reb's, but she simply couldn't imagine herself without Reb. She liked things the way they were. Juba on one side, and Reb on the other. She hoped it would never be any other way.

Chapter Two

The night of the social had come, and Jessabelle stood in the dance line looking for Juba and Reb. She knew she looked better than she ever had. Even if she did say so herself, she had done a near miracle with flour sacks and made a dress fit for a queen. It had ruffles, ribbons, and even a bow that tied in the back. Since shoes were expensive and hard to come by, she usually went barefoot. But tonight when she took a bath, she'd really scrubbed her feet so they'd look pretty in the only store bought shoes she'd ever had. She'd only worn them on special occasions so they hardly had any scuffs on them at all.

"Hey, Jessabelle, what are you doin' standin' here all by yourself?"

She turned around and saw Reb looking good enough to eat in his skin-tight jeans and silvery-blue cowboy shirt. It had a shine to it when the lights hit it. "Oh, hi, Reb. I didn't see you come in."

"Wanna dance?"

"Sure."

When he pulled her to him, she felt a lovely warm, moist feeling of desire wash through her at the hardness of his body pressing against hers. She couldn't resist flirting, so she said, "You look mighty fetchin', Reb. Is that store-bought cologne you're wearin'?"

"Shore is. Smells good, don't it?"

"Good enough to—"

Suddenly she saw Juba.

He stood just inside the wide barn door, all dressed up in a red western shirt, cowboy hat, and skin-tight jeans. Standing there, he towered over all the other men. Big and husky and as handsome as

sin, he had arrogance written all over him, which was usual, but he did have manners enough to reach up and grab at his hat. He slapped it against his muscled thigh to get the dust out just before he threw it over on a table with all the others. The other men's hair looked all oiled up, but Juba hated the stuff, and his long curly hair hung down his nape, making him look wild and untamed. A little curl always fell down on his forehead. He worried with it constantly, but like him, it wouldn't behave.

When she saw him coming she didn't want him to think she was watching for him, so she looked away and tried to focus her attention on Reb. After a few seconds she felt Juba grab her from behind.

"Hey, baby," he whispered in her ear, his words moist and hot. "Your lovin' man's here."

When Jessabelle heard his conceited words, she felt a twinge of annoyance. "Juba, Reb and me are dancin'."

"So what?"

"Juba, I swear, you'll never change. You think you can just come in here and act any old way, and I'll fall in your arms. Well, it ain't gonna happen tonight."

"You sound like you're mad at me. What the hell did I do this time?"

"I ain't mad at you, Juba. I just wish you'd learn how to behave."

"Me? I don't know how to behave? What about you?"

"I don't know what you're talkin' about."

"The woods, remember?"

She turned and looked at him. "What about the woods?"

"Walkin' off an' leavin' me, that's what. With my pecker all swolled up like that. I couldn't come outta them woods for most a half hour."

A grin she tried to suppress barely lifted her lips. "Did you find a knothole?"

"This buck don't need no knothole." He roughly pulled her out of Reb's arms and whirled her into a dance. "Too many willin' women

runnin' around here for me to have to go find a goddamned knothole. And if you won't give it to me, one o' them will."

"What the hell are you doin'?" Reb said. "Jessabelle and I were—"

Juba pushed him away with one hand on his chest, and the other around Jessabelle's waist. "Just back off, bucko. She was my girl first. Got that?"

Jessabelle looked around and saw people staring at them. She realized Juba was causing a scene and said, "Juba, please! People are staring."

"Hey," he said looking down at her. "Don't tell me how to act."

"Oh, really?" she said, the huff back in her voice. "You're out of line, Juba. Reb and me—"

"Reb? You gonna throw that Texas lovin' son of a bitch in my face? Fine, go on back to your precious Reb, but you just keep one thing in mind, Jessabelle. I can't be tamed, see. If you won't say yes, I know plenty of 'em around here that will."

"Then go and find one, you bastard!"

The moment Jessabelle moved away from him everything seemed to stop. The whine of the country love song, scraping shoes on the large plank board, it had all stopped except a drone of murmuring voices.

Jessabelle's head turned quickly. She gasped when she saw the vision at the entrance. She glanced over at Juba and he looked as if he'd just been hit in the head with a hammer, or Cupid's arrow. She didn't know which. She didn't need to look down at the front of his pants to know what his reaction to this woman would be. Like a low, threatening rumble of thunder, the whispering voices began.

"Who is she?"

"Where did she come from?"

She looked out of place—like one of them movie actresses who got lost in the dusty, dirty hills of Dry Gulch. Her rose-colored dress clung to her body, clearly made of some kind of material Jessabelle knew couldn't have been bought at the general store. All silk and

slinky, it fell over her body like a second skin, and looked as if it came from San Francisco or New Orleans. Her hair fell in white-blond waves like a goddess, her eyes vivid blue. She looked more than beautiful, if such a thing were possible. All at once, the men who resembled statues before, now rushed toward her, leaving their dancing partners behind. In an instant, the girl stood surrounded by flattering, fawning males, but she paid no attention to them. Instead she walked past the crowd of men and straight to—Juba!

Jessabelle felt herself slowly being edged out of the brightly lit barn and now stood in a shadow just outside the entrance. She just stood there and watched them. Dancing close, they smiled and talked, and Jessabelle noticed the way she moved, the way Juba touched her, the way she *let* him touch her. She looked down at her flour sack dress and fingered a ribbon. She'd been so proud, but compared to that white-haired female, she looked like a trussed up turkey on Thanksgiving Day. The folk of Dry Gulch seemed to be taking to the stranger, and Jessabelle, who'd lived all her life in this town, felt like the outsider. She felt betrayed by everyone. It didn't seem right, but when she'd flowered into womanhood it seemed everything changed. The men looked her way more than once, but the women turned against her. She'd always thought that the folks in Dry Gulch would stand by her if need be, but now she felt herself gradually being pushed aside by those that had once been her friends.

Nobody was a stranger since everybody had been born and raised here. They married each other, had babies here, and died here. As long as she could remember Dry Gulch had always been a close-knit group that didn't need outsiders. They had midwives, doctors, home grown medicine. Even the food came out of the ground and from pig pens, chicken pens, and healthy cows for beef.

They picked berries in the woods and grapes from old Sadie Sutton's grape vines. They had wells for water, cow udders for milk, and herbs for tea. The women wore flour sack dresses, and the men sucked on home made tobacco leaves. These people knew each other

from the day they were born, and everyone helped each other. No outsider ever ventured up this far into the hills unless he wanted to be shot at. The hills might stink of stills and outhouses, but it didn't matter, it was her home—at least it used to be. Now it seemed that her home wasn't her home any longer.

Suddenly the music stopped.

Her green eyes narrowed when she watched them turn and walk to the food table, Juba so attentive she wanted to throw up. He carefully poured the girl a cup of cider then handed her a soda cracker topped with moldy cheese. Jessabelle saw what was happening, and knew if she didn't do something to bring Juba to his senses, she might lose him. She just couldn't let that happen. Finally, with hesitant movements, she walked back in.

When the light fell on her, she became self-conscious and hung back for a moment. With her nerves on edge, she looked around at several of the women and noticed them watching her. Not one of 'em came up to her and offered her their friendship or sympathy. When it looked like her man was being stolen from right under her nose by this—this—city bred bleached blonde, they just stood there and watched to see what she would do. Like her, they all knew that taking another woman's man went against the code of the hills. This gave her the right to go inside and scratch the woman's eyes out. But Jessabelle knew that's just what they wanted—to see her turn this dance into a down and dirty cat fight. She could see the looks in their eyes urging her on, enjoying her pain.

"Go fuck yourselves," she spat, getting a kick out of the startled looks on their faces. As they continued to stare she lifted her haughty chin and began a careful weave between the dancers until she faced Juba.

"Jessabelle, hello darlin'," Juba said as if nothing was wrong. "Honey, this is Delilah. Delilah Parkins. She has kin up in these hills." Talking to Delilah now, he said, "Jessabelle here's my—" he hesitated, then said, "—friend."

Jessabelle looked at him as if she couldn't believe it. "Your *friend*?" she repeated.

Quickly taking her by the arm and pulling her to one side, he said, "Yes, God damn it, *friend*. We ain't never talked about bein' any more than that."

"But...what about the woods?"

"You mean when you left me high and dry with nothin' but my hand for comfort?"

"So that's what this is all about? Revenge?"

"Call it what you want, Jessabelle, but I'm through."

"But we done it, Juba. It's just like we were betrothed!"

"Jessabelle, you done it with both me and Reb, but I don't see you tryin' to trap him into a betrothal."

"Trap? You think I'm tryin' to *trap* you? I don't know what I ever saw in you, Juba Kincaid. You're nothing but a arrogant jackass with a everlastin' hard-on." Jessabelle glanced over at the beauty who gazed at them curiously. "Go back to your city gal, Juba, and be careful she don't try and trap you. She looks like she has claws. I hear they grow long where she comes from."

"She ain't like that, Jessabelle. She's knows the score. She—"

"She what, Juba? Fucks on the first date?"

"So what if she does, Jessabelle. Look at her, for God's sake. She's a city woman. Not a hick like you."

"You know what you are?" she yelled, tears blinding her eyes. "You're a...a...ohhhh, I can't think of anything bad enough to call you, but you listen to me. You walk out on me tonight, and we're through! You hear that, you...you...back end of a mule?"

"I'll be outside. If you come to your senses, meet me out there. But I ain't gonna wait forever, Juba. I'll give you time to say goodbye, but if you don't make it in the next fifteen minutes, then don't bother because we're through."

Her eyes pooled with tears as she whirled around and stormed outside, the balmy night air blowing against her tear-stained face. She

hated the fact that she'd been the one to cause a scene this time, but as the dark night surrounded her, she felt her spine turn to steel. She knew she'd done right. After all a woman has to speak up now and again when she sees her man being taken away. Anyway, she'd had her say, and if Juba cared anything for her he'd be there. Now it was up to him.

Chapter Three

As Juba stood there watching Jessabelle walk out of his life, he looked down and saw Delilah's claw-like hands holding onto his arm, her grasp digging painfully into his flesh. For a moment he felt dizzy, disoriented, and didn't know why. Since the minute he'd arrived at the dance, words had been coming out of his mouth he didn't mean. Every word he said to Jessabelle pierced him like a knife in the middle of his stomach. What made him keep doing it? He didn't want to hurt Jessabelle, he loved her.

His fingers tingled with desire when he remembered how Jessabelle felt in his arms. He wanted to go after her and hold her against him, but instead his fists clenched in stubbornness. He couldn't follow after her like a God damned lapdog. So what if she was everything he wanted in a woman? It wasn't only her beauty, it was her innocence. She wasn't all put on like the other girls in town. She was honest, real, and he'd never find another one like her. He couldn't ignore the sinking feeling in his heart when he heard Jessabelle's last words ringing in his ears, mingling with the words of the sad country love song that floated down from the little country band and their homemade instruments.

I ain't gonna wait forever, Juba...wait forever...forever.

* * * *

Jessabelle stood outside and waited, but Juba never showed. Finally backing up into a shadow, she had to face the painful truth. Juba didn't care. With a heavy heart she hid behind a tree until she

saw him and his blue-eyed blonde finally come out hanging all over each other. She turned away quickly, the picture burning in her mind. The pain stabbed into her so deep it made her double over. She felt weak, so she leaned against the tree, clutching her stomach. Juba was gone. Taken by a pretty blonde that Jessabelle knew would open her legs for him tonight. She slid down the prickly bark of the tree and cried. She'd been stupid thinking a man like Juba could love a poor, tattered hill girl like her.

Now she'd lost him.

She wondered what made him say the things he did and act so strange. Even before Delilah walked in, he'd started acting weird, almost like a different person. She'd never again feel his strong arms around her or his hot breath in her ear. She loved to feel his hands on her. They moved like pure magic, and his big swolled up cock felt good rubbing up and down on her while his hands played with her breasts. Even now just thinking about it made her want him in spite of how mean he'd been to her.

Juba and all his sweet talk fooled her all right. She knew now he wanted only one thing from her, and the minute he got it, he surely showed his true colors. She couldn't believe she'd been fooled.

"Jessabelle! Jessabelle!" Reb called out.

"Reb!" she called back. "I'm over here."

He ran over, his breathing labored, and fear etching his face. "Did you see where Juba went?"

"I saw him and Delilah walkin' towards the woods. Why? What's wrong?"

"Something's got him, Jessabelle. You heard how he talked to me during the dance? Well, that was only part of it. You should have been there later when I tried to stop him. It's like she's got some kind of hold on him."

"Don't worry about him, Reb. He ain't under no spell, he just don't care anymore. I thought he did, but he don't, not really. He got what he wanted, and once that was over, he high-tailed it to the first pretty

face he saw. Maybe if I hadn't of made him choose, it'd be different." She looked to Reb for understanding. "You saw it, Reb. It had to be her or me." She hesitated, her head bowed in sorrow, her voice wet with sobs. "He chose her."

"But it wasn't Juba talkin', Jessabelle. She's got him under some kind of spell. I know it."

Jessabelle looked at Reb with a frown on her face. "You think so?"

"I'm dead sure. I ain't never seen Juba act like that. I gotta find him and help him. You wanna come?"

"I can't, Reb. If he's with her...well, I just don't feel like bein' humiliated twice in one night."

"Don't worry, Jessabelle, I'll go. I'll find him come hell or high water. I can't stand around and see your heart broken, 'Sides if he's in trouble he needs a friend right now. You go on home. Maybe I'll see you later."

* * * *

Juba could feel Delilah hanging heavily on his arm while they walked slowly by old Jeb Hawkins' place.

"Come on, Delilah, let's go in here. Old Jeb's at the dance. We can go and make a bed in his hay."

"Oh, no," she whispered, leading him the other way. "I like a primitive setting, Juba. It's dark, and kind of like being at one with the animals. Come on, let's go into the woods."

He allowed her to lead him toward the tall trees, her blonde hair collecting all the silver glitter the full moon had to offer, the soft silk of her dress molded to her curves.

She suddenly stopped at a place where the moonlight shone down on the leafy forest floor as bright as a spotlight. She moved quickly, making a strangled cry of desire as she pulled Juba down over her. Juba felt the chills of the primitive setting as he wilted down beside

her and went into her arms. Before he knew what was happening, she was anxiously pulling at his clothes.

Delilah's arms were soft, her perfume heavy with a seductive scent that clouded his mind. Finally, he covered her body with his own, feeling her soft curves molding into the contours of his own, her willing body writhing beneath him. He could feel her fingers as she buried them into the soft mane of his thick hair, her lips opening beneath his. The soft feel of her body and the heady fragrance of her perfume fanned the flames in his groin, causing them to leap upward. His lips became hard and searching. Blood pounded in his brain, the heat of desire making a burning path downward toward his growing cock. His fingers trembled with want, with the God awful need for release as he slipped his hand beneath her skirt and gasped when he found nothing, no panties, no undergarments at all.

A blatant invitation Juba couldn't ignore.

Just then Juba saw a darkness fall over him and looked up and saw Reb looking down at him. "What the hell are you doin' here? If you think you're gonna get some of her pussy, think again."

"That's not why I'm here, Juba," Reb said as he crouched down beside him and grabbed hold of him. "I think you need to get away from here as fast as you can. She's a witch, Juba. She's put a spell on you."

"What?" he said, jerking out of his hold. "Get the hell outta here, Reb."

"A witch?" Delilah said, and laughed. "Really, Juba, do I look like a witch?"

"Think back, Juba. She's been—"

Suddenly Juba reached out and grabbed the front of Reb's shirt and pulled him forward roughly. "I told you once to back off, and I'm tellin' you again. Go away and leave me alone. I know what I'm doin'."

When Juba burned back to Delilah, suddenly her appearance became skeletal, her eyes hot coals of fire. His eyes widened, and he

slowly moved backward, his hunger gone. He looked around at the tall trees that rose tall and mysterious into the black sky. "What the hell am I doin' here?" He jumped up, turned to Reb, and said, "What's going on? Where's Jessabelle?"

"You drove her away, you bastard."

Juba looked at Reb as if he didn't understand. "What do you mean?"

Reb looked over Juba's shoulder and gasped. "Oh, my God, look!"

Juba turned to see several shapeless creatures crawling toward her. They watched as one and then the other savagely bit the bare skin of her back and shoulders, locking her in a prison of their darkness. Delilah shifted her gaze and looked at Juba. "Juba," she whispered sensuously, "the world you see is one of lascivious darkness. Fuck me, fuck them all, and you'll be taught the mating rituals of the animals."

When Juba shook his head and stepped back again, she looked at Reb.

"What about you, Reb? Would you dare enter this world of wicked pleasure? If you will I'll teach you the mating dance of the primitive man before civilization ruined him. We'll go for days, every minute a new experience of divine ecstasy. Come to me. I need you both to satisfy me. Over and over, and over again!"

"My God, Reb, we need to get out of here. That woman's a wanton from hell!"

They turned and ran away, the savage cry of Delilah following them through the woods.

"Let's find Jessabelle," Juba said as they quickly retrieved their horses at the dance.

"She should be home by now," Reb yelled as he jumped astride his horse and rode with Juba down the path toward her farm, but she wasn't there.

"Where else could she be?"

They led their horses back along the same path until they reached Crockett's Creek and saw her sitting alone skipping stones into the water.

"Shhh," Juba said to Reb as he slid off his horse and crept up behind her. Suddenly, Juba grabbed her and said, "Hi, baby. What's goin' on? Where've you been?"

She jumped a mile, and said, "Oh, God, Juba, you scared the life out of me! What do you mean, where have *I* been? Where the hell have *you* been? Now that you're through fuckin' that citified blonde, you think I'm gonna come back to you? Well, think again!" She turned away from him, jumped up, and began to run.

Juba rushed up to her and caught her arm. "What the hell are you talkin' about?"

Jessabelle looked from him to Reb. "Is he serious?"

"Oh, yeah, he's serious. The thing is, he don't remember nothin' after Delilah walked in to the dance tonight."

She looked back at Juba. "Don't remember? What do you mean, you don't remember?"

"Just that, baby, I remember bein' at the dance with you, and sayin' a bunch of stupid things, but I don't remember anything until I woke up and found myself in the woods with Delilah—"

"I knew it! Juba Kincaid, Crockett Creek is *our* place. You took her to *our* place! It's bad enough you left me high and dry, but you took her to *our* place!" She turned and began walking fast. "Get out of my sight, Juba Kincaid!"

"Jessabelle, ain't you listenin' to me? I'm sayin' I must've been under some kind of spell or somethin'."

Jessabelle began crying. "The way you talked to me, Juba."

"Oh, baby, I don't know anything about that. Can't you forgive me for bein' plumb out of my head? It ain't my fault, you know. That woman is some kind of harpy right out of hell. You shoulda seen what me and Reb saw just now. My God, she would scare Satan himself.

She was some kind of siren, Jessabelle. You know, the kind that leads young men astray."

"She didn't do nothin' to me," Reb said.

"Reb, you ain't helpin' me here."

Jessabelle looked up at Juba. "Do you promise that you went plumb out of your head, and you didn't mean all those cruel things you said?"

"I do, baby. I really do." He looked up at Reb. "Tell her, Reb. Tell her I didn't mean none of those things."

"He means it, Jessabelle. When we started looking for you, and couldn't find you, he almost worried himself sick."

"Is that right, Juba?"

"If I'm lyin', I'm dyin'," he said, looking at her with sad eyes.

"Well," she said, "I guess I can overlook it this time since you was out o' your head, but Juba, don't ever do that again. Next time I might not be so forgivin'!"

"I won't, sweetheart, I promise."

"Okay."

"Hey, Jessabelle, let's go on over to Jeb Hawkins' place and...you know."

"I can't, Juba. I think I'd better get home."

"C'mon, Jess, nobody's gonna leave that dance 'til near on midnight. Old Jeb's still havin' a high old time raisin' hell. Imagine all that hay goin' to waste."

Jessabelle laughed. "Juba Kincaid you're downright evil. All right, let's go."

Once there, Juba tried to move slowly, but he felt his need eating him up. With kisses on her neck and face, he slowly coerced her down on the hay. He couldn't wait to open her thighs and settle himself between them. Taking her hand, he guided her to his throbbing cock, wrapping her fingers around it. With a moan he rocked his hips brazenly, and his mouth made a burning path down to her nipples. Passion pounded through his blood, through his heart, chest and head.

She writhed wildly and arched her back as he moved his cock along the cleft of her pussy.

Her hips pushed upward in urgent need, rushing him into a moment of uncontrolled passion, bringing them both into the soaring heights of a need that had to be satisfied. He could feel her hot breath on his ear, soul-drenching drafts that took him to even higher levels of ecstasy. Juba could feel himself nearing the edge of a floodtide that finally pushed him over. When he heard her gasp in sweet ecstasy as she shattered, he came right behind.

"Keep goin'," Reb said, coming from out of the darkness. "She ain't through by a long shot." He gently pushed Juba aside and took his turn, pushing his cock deep into her cunt. "Stay close, you might have to do her again. Chances are I'll come before she's done."

Juba stepped back and watched while Reb fucked her with red hot passion. He rode her like a bucking bronco, pulling whimpers and moans from her until she finally screamed with delight.

Just watching had made Juba hard again, and while Reb fucked her, he joined them and began stroking her from head to toe. He sucked on her breasts, making her writhe and moan. By the time Reb finished, Juba took his place and gave her one last ride. This time when she shattered, it felt like the sky opened up and rained stars on that old hay barn.

Chapter Four

The dreams were back!

The black shadows wove around her, coming close, shapeless hands reaching out to touch her, but this time when the voices spoke to her, she listened.

It's time, Jessabelle. Come with us and we'll lead you to your new home.

Slowly, as if in a dream, Jessabelle rose from her bed and began to walk. Every step brought her nearer and nearer to the Black Woods. The grass that dripped with moisture felt cold to her feet, but it didn't matter. The cold night, the icy moon, and the frigid stars that shone down on her path seemed to welcome her.

The trees swayed mysteriously, their branches reaching out to her as she walked down a path that led to the stream.

And then she saw it.

The moon's light sparkled in the water, reminding her of beautiful jewels. She wanted to play among the light, languish in the cool water, and drink until she quenched her thirst.

She stood at the edge, the water lapping at her toes. Its very touch sent her reeling into a utopia she never knew existed. Wanting more of this feeling, she began to walk into it, feeling the water lap against her ankles, and then her calves. Suddenly, it reached her hips where she leaned over and began to play in it. Just then, she looked down and saw her nightgown and frowned. The water had made it uncomfortable and heavy. She slowly removed it and stood in the moon's glow totally naked.

Drink, Jessabelle.

She looked down at the water, and suddenly she felt thirsty again. It looked cold and clear and wonderfully refreshing, so she leaned down and buried her face in it and drank. As soon as the water settled in her belly, she heard a strange kind of murmuring in the treetops. She slowly lifted her eyelids and looked through her black sooty lashes toward a little shack that had a smoke stack sticking out of it.

Old Natty Kerr's place.

Jessabelle could see a wisp of smoke curling up out of the crumbling stack of bricks. She'd heard a lot of things about Natty. Some said witches don't really die, they just change form and come back as something else. That's why when she heard the story about Natty rising up out of a lotus pond as a beautiful young witch, she was inclined to believe it. But that was many years ago and Natty wasn't beautiful anymore. It seemed the evil she practiced had deformed her, making her ugly. Today she had wild dark hair that reminded her of Medusa and her crown of snakes. Her piercing eyes shot sparks, and behind Natty's smile was pure evil.

Her beady little black eyes gleamed, giving the impression of crows eyes. Natty had been the subject of a lot of Jessabelle's dreams, her horrifying, disembodied head rushing to her from deep inside the Black Woods, and then disappearing just before her claw-like hands could reach out and grab her. The stories of old Natty spread all over the gulch, especially at Halloween. They said she cavorted with demons, and at times she took the form of a crow and flew over Dry Gulch casting her spells on those who treated her bad.

Jessabelle didn't know if any of it was true or not, but for some reason tonight she felt compelled to go and see Natty. As she stepped from the stream, she started uphill while hearing the call of a night bird in the distance, the sound lonely and mournful. It reminded her of a message of doom. Still, she couldn't stop and arrived at the shack. While she stood at the door, she hesitantly knocked.

"Come in," came a dry, crackling voice.

Jessabelle pushed on the old wooden door that scraped along the plank floor. The inside looked dark and shadowy, with only a wood fire to lend light. She smelled something funny. Incense, maybe. A woody, exotic smell that seemed to come from the fireplace.

Her gaze was drawn to the crackling flames. For a wild, crazy moment they took on the appearance of the whores of hell, their flame-like bodies undulating to a carnal rhythm heard only in the vast chambers of the underworld. Next to the window she saw a small bed covered with tattered blankets and quilts. Along the mantle above the stone fireplace were bottles and jars and tiny cauldrons for mixing. A ratty old broom stood in a corner and a large round throw rug with thick, coarse strings coming unraveled from it stretched across the floor. The shadows on the wall undulated mysteriously, and Jessabelle gasped at the monstrous shadow of the old hump-backed woman that the fire light etched along the wall. Her gaze lowered then, seeing the old woman, small and frail, sitting by the fire dressed in black.

"Don't be frightened, gal," the old voice said. "Come in and have some Tibetan Tea. Makes a body sleep well, they say."

"You Natty Kerr?" Jessabelle asked, her voice trembling.

The old woman only nodded, her old, washed out eyes like spears of ice as she gazed at Jessabelle.

"What am I doin' here? I remember bein' in my bed, and then suddenly..."

The old woman looked up at Jessabelle, and shifted her gaze down her body. "That must be why you're standing there stark naked."

Jessabelle looked down at her nakedness and tried to hide herself. "Oh, my God, I—"

"Don't worry. Ain't nobody here but me," she said as she reached over and grabbed a blanket and threw it at her.

"I must have...I mean, I...the stream. I seem to remember taking off my gown."

"You're here for a love potion, ain't you? A nice strong elixir that'll bind Juba and Reb to you for all time?"

"I might have, but I never told anyone."

"Didn't have to. Besides, that's your reason, ain't theirs. They brought you here because it's time."

"It's time? What does that mean?"

"It's time for you to fulfill your destiny. You been knowin' all your life it'd come to this, and don't tell me you didn't."

"I been knowin' what?"

"That someday you'd rise above the gossips in this town to something bigger and better." The old woman slowly rose from her rocking chair, and reached for something on top of the mantle. "Juba's a little wild, ain't he? It takes a lot to satisfy a man like him. You almost lost him once, and now you're afraid of losin' him again. You need a little insurance. That right?"

"Juba said something at the dance the other night that I been afraid of for a long time. In so many words he said I ain't experienced enough for him."

"That's all over now, Jessabelle. Once this spell takes hold, you can give him the lovin' he's been yearnin' for and satisfy the gods at the same time." Natty's wrinkled smile revealed her snagged teeth. "And when you do, he'll be yours forever."

"I don't want no spell put on him. If I have him, I want his pure love, not some mumbo jumbo stuff that you conjure up in that...that...whatever that thing is there."

The old woman sat quiet for a moment, and then said softly, "You mean like the spell I put on him the night of the dance?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Delilah."

"Delilah? You mean that gal...that Delilah..." The truth suddenly dawned on Jessabelle. "No, it can't be. Not you...surely."

The old witch's eyes beaded up, glittering like the black eyes of a crow. "I went to the dance that night to destroy the love between you

and Juba. I put a hex on the moonlight so that when it shone down on Juba, his personality would change. It did. He started actin' like an ass as soon as he got there. Juba's hunger made him an easy target, but Reb didn't take to it, and that's where I made my mistake. Reb's a lot stronger than I gave him credit for, and when he found Juba, he blocked the moonlight."

"The moonlight that you hexed," Jessabelle said, trying to keep up with what Natty was saying.

"When Reb stood between Juba and the moonlight he shielded Juba from the hex, giving him just enough time to come to his senses."

"So your plan to destroy Juba's love for me didn't work."

"Not the way I planned," the old witch said. "But I had managed to break the connection temporarily. I knew if I could drive a wedge between you, even for a moment it would be enough."

"But what about Reb? Wasn't his love strong enough to keep the night creatures out?"

"Yes, but I pushed him aside like you would an annoying little gnat flying around your face. I didn't consider him a threat, but I was wrong. Reb proved to be the undoing of this hex. He's a lot smarter than I figured. Since this wasn't happening to him it was easy for him to see what Juba couldn't." Suddenly Natty lifted her hand and reached toward Jessabelle.

When Jessabelle saw her gnarled old hand coming toward her, she recoiled at first, and then forced herself to endure her touch.

The old woman's twisted fingers trembled with age as she stroked Jessabelle's shiny black hair. "Your hair feels smooth. Reminds me of the shiny coat of a panther." Her gaze narrowed on Jessabelle, seeing fear in her eyes. "No need to be afeared of me, child. What I got planned for you might be hard, but it's a sight better'n jumpin' off Possum Ridge."

Jessabelle felt chills dance down her spine. "How did you know?" she whispered.

Natty smiled. "Natty knows everything," she hissed.

"It was the night of the dance," Jessabelle said softly. "When I thought I'd lost Juba I went down to the creek, and was skippin' rocks. I...I thought about it then. It was silly...just somethin' that got in my head. I never would o' done it."

"Don't be too sure," Natty said while she went about mixing something up in her small cauldron. "Won't be the first time a woman's done herself in for a man." She looked at Jessabelle curiously. "This Juba Kincaid got all the girls pantin' after him, has he?"

"But he's mine!" Jessabelle cried out.

"Shhhh!" the old woman said, then poured the mixture in a cup and lifted it toward her. "Here, drink this, it'll settle your nerves. You been gnawin' at the bit since you got here."

Jessabelle took the cup and looked down into it. "What is it?"

"Jus' what I said. It'll calm your nerves."

"I ain't drinkin' no potion unless I know what it is."

"If you drink that not only will it help you fulfill your destiny, but you'll never have to worry about Juba and Reb again. They'll be yours."

"How can this...?"

"You want to make Juba and Reb happy, don't you?"

"Sure, but..."

"This elixir will free you from the strict chains that bind you to a moral code that no one cares about but you. You'll be free to love Juba and Reb without feelin' guilty or carin' what anyone in this town says about the three of you. You'll be free, Jessabelle, free to love Juba and Reb fully, and completely,"

"You ain't lyin' to me, are you?"

The old woman's dark, glittering eyes held hers. "Do what I tell you, girl, and by this time tomorrow you'll have feelin's runnin' around in you that you can't possibly deny."

Jessabelle hesitantly lifted the tiny cup and drank the contents. It burned her tongue as it slid down her throat, but blossomed mellow and warm the minute it hit her belly. The heat seemed to spread from her stomach to her limbs in only seconds, making her lids lower into a sultry, soft-eyed look.

"Your days will be your own," the old witch crooned in an ominous voice that sounded scratchy and dry. "But when night falls, the mist will wrap around three writhing bodies like a sultry blanket on the leafy floor. But remember this. When the witching hour comes, you must leave. Go deep into the woods, and don't come out until daybreak."

Jessabelle lifted her hands and rubbed her forehead as if she had a headache. "Wha...what are you saying? I do..."

"Wake up, girl, and hear what I'm tellin' you! From this moment on Juba and Reb are yours. The minute either of them sees you, they'll want to stay by your side. They'll hate the time you're apart and constantly seek you out. But remember the witching hour. No matter what happens you must leave their arms and seek the darkness of the Black Woods." The old woman reached out and lifted her chin with one scrawny finger. "Do you understand?"

Jessabelle nodded, her words soft and breathy. "Witching hour. Black Woods..."

The old woman rose from her chair and shuffled over to look out a window. "Get up, Jessabelle. The night is dark, and the moon arcs high above the trees. It's almost time for you to roam the woods."

The words of the old witch seemed to pull Jessabelle out of her lethargy. "The woods," she repeated, suddenly aware. "Oh, God, I've got to get home." She threw the blanket off her and jumped up and ran for the door, then stopped. "You won't tell anyone that I've been here, will you?"

"Your secret is safe with me," the old woman said, pushing Jessabelle toward the door. "Now go!"

Jessabelle turned quickly, pulled on the frayed rope that opened the door and ran outside. She stood on the small porch for a moment as if she didn't know which way to turn, and looked toward the dark, forbidding woods. They'd always held a terror for her, but no more. Instead she felt drawn to them, as if they held within their confines a place of rest, protection. Suddenly she couldn't wait to feel the boundaries of the dark sanctuary close around her, smell the woodsy scent and drink from the cool, clear creek. It called to her, all of it, so her feet began moving. Too slow, she had to hurry. She picked up her feet.

Rush, rush, rush, she thought as her slow trek turned to a hasty jog.

But something happened as she rushed across the field. Slowly her speed increased until she realized she'd begun loping on all fours while feeling a tearing hunger and a thirst for blood!

Chapter Five

The shimmering rays of the fat moon peeked through the ragged clouds. Its silver radiance painted the rolling fields, but left the three writhing bodies that lay beneath the tree in shadow as their lips burned against each other. Jessabelle no longer felt guilty for submitting to the hunger she felt in Reb and Juba's arms. Now her soft arms drew them to her freely, her legs opened, and her teeth nipped playfully at one and then the other. A deep sense of pleasure filled her as she luxuriated in their arms, causing her to emit a girlish laughter deep and sensuous.

"Oh, God, Jessabelle, I feel like I'm havin' an erotic dream. I've never experienced anything like this before."

"Jessabelle," Reb whispered. "Juba's right. What's happened to you? I can't think about anything else. You're drivin' me crazy, for God's sake. I want you more and more each day."

Finally, Juba parted her legs and pushed himself against her, his hips rocking as he groaned passionately.

"Feel it, Jessabelle?" he whispered in her ear. "That's for you, baby. Oh, God, take the pleasure it offers. Take it, Jessabelle. Take it and ride it straight into heaven!"

The fire in Jessabelle flamed even higher at his suggestive words. She could feel his enormous cock pushing against her, growing even larger and so hard it felt almost painful as it pushed against her. She wanted him, God how she wanted to feel all of that inside her. Her eager hands quickly reached down and scratched at his jeans as she fumbled to unbutton them. Suddenly, they popped open and the

zipper gave. With frenzied movements, she reached down into his tight, confining jeans.

Juba moaned when her hands surrounded it. "I give it to you, Jessabelle. It's yours now. You can do anything you want with it. Fuck it, put it between your legs—" He moaned when he felt her hand rub it. "—oh, baby, suck it! Now, Jessabelle!"

The minute Jessabelle had it in her hands, she felt the last of her inhibitions dissolve. She could feel it pulsing in her hand, and suddenly became a wanton. All at once, she wanted to taste him, and licked her lips as she imagined him inside her mouth. The thought turned her desire into a fierce, undisciplined force she'd never known before. It roiled inside her, moving her as it twisted and turned. Being controlled by something she didn't understand, she quickly pushed him off her and mounted him while Reb, in his mad desire, thrust his cock into her from the back. Jessabelle felt a sudden sensation of delight, and pushed against him, enjoying his invasion.

Meanwhile, Juba lay there, his arms splayed out on the ground, his breathing heavy and labored. For the first time shy little Jessabelle took the lead, and he watched, dazed, as she leaned over him, her teeth ripping at his shirt, pulling at it roughly. Her lush mouth opened, biting his ear lobe erotically. He moaned when her flicking tongue teased him, then began kissing his face, neck, and his muscled chest. Her tongue licked along his fragrant skin, the male elixir he exuded tasting like the headiest wine. As if she were starving, she began nibbling on his nipples until she finally began a moist trail downward to his groin. Then she saw what she'd hungered for. It looked large and felt as hard as granite. She took it in her mouth, her tongue swirling around the tip, then she gently engulfed it, pulling hard. While she ate him, she gently reached one hand below to cradle and stroke his balls.

"Oh, God!" Juba groaned, all his inhibitions suddenly giving way to some deep, dark primal nature. He moved faster, rocking back and forth, keeping time to an ancient tune that floated forth from the

darkness of the Black Woods. The three of them heard it, and danced the same dance of evil, each languishing in the other's body.

All at once Juba grabbed her head, his fingers threading through her shiny black hair as he tried to push himself farther into her mouth. He tasted like the dark woods. Wild, wet, and untamed. His sex smell drifted into her nostrils, assaulted her taste buds, and sent her reeling into a hellish world where inhibitions didn't exist, and nothing mattered except gratifying the flesh. The three of them languished together in the middle of hell.

A hell that held heaven within its red hot glow.

Her impulses were animalistic. She wanted to bite, nibble, even traces of blood excited her. She wanted to cry out at the moon, stretch her body over Juba and Reb and devour and maul them wickedly. She wanted both to take her in every way. The common human way, and then her way, over her back, bucking into her with cocks as stiff and hard as red hot poker.

Lifting her gaze, she saw a crowd of shadowy silhouettes moving toward her from behind the trees. She recognized them as the horrific creatures from her dreams, but instead of being frightened of their presence, now she welcomed it. They were everywhere, more coming, others leaving, weaving, watching while Reb and Juba fucked her. She became wild, leading both Reb and Juba through some of the most outrageous sexual acts she knew. She rode both relentlessly, and then they rode her while these creatures moaned out their lusts as they watched. Their lusty groans echoed through the hills, wild like the night—two—no *many* creatures gathered under the moon that cast down a radiance that bathed them in its unholy glow.

Jessabelle, caught up in the magic of the night, didn't notice the path of the moon. She didn't see the arch it made in the sky until she began turning. Gradually her hairline lowered into a point, extending down her nose. Her ears came to a point, and her pupils elongated slowly. Her fevered sexual activity grew even wilder. The upper part of her body arched, her eyes traveling up to the moon, languishing in

its light. Slowly, drool fell from her lush mouth that quickly grew fangs. As she changed, she slowly stretched, her body gleaming in the moon's bright rays.

* * * *

Just then, her two lovers looked up at the brazen creature she had become, the shining creature that had brought them into this hot, sultry, lush heaven they'd never known before.

"My God, she's so beautiful," Reb whispered as if awestruck.

"Jessabelle has always had a kind of mysterious look about her, but if I've ever thought her mysterious before, she's ten times more so now."

They watched as her beautiful naked body swayed under the silver rays of the moon, her voluptuous hips riding each of them, her hair flinging out as she moved. She bounced up—down—bringing each one ever closer to the most maddening orgasm he'd ever known.

And then it happened.

Each one grunted, feeling the hot rush of his fluid explode. Their bodies bucked, their cocks pulsed and twitched until their satisfaction became complete. And then they heard Jessabelle shrieking out her satisfaction. Her raucous cry pierced the night, rushing over the hills and valleys into the dense, dark woods until at last it died away.

Just then they saw Jessabelle turn and take flight deeper into the woods. She jumped, ran, her hair flying, her sleek body a shining coat of darkness as she continued to change from human to animal.

* * * *

Her craving for blood was upon her! Skittering animals took refuge as she prowled through the brush. But her hunt wasn't for their blood. She wanted human blood!

And then she saw him.

Perfect. A stranger. Someone she didn't recognize. Someone who dared to come up into these hills without realizing the danger. A fire glowed, a tent sprawled close to the water. The food cooked, but she smelled nothing except the stranger's rushing blood. Her tongue leaped out of her mouth, licking the air. She paced, slowly at first, keeping him within her gaze. Then she crouched, watching him until he stepped away from the fire. Prowling along in the dark, she paced around the clearing until she came to a low hanging branch and silently jumped upward. She waited until he stood just below her, and then she let out a huge growl and leaped. He turned quickly, his arms reaching upward to shield himself. She knocked him to the ground as her strong jaws clamped on his arm. They wrestled, scattering the campsite until her long, sharp teeth finally buried themselves in his neck, making his blood spew.

His grip weakened, and he fell back, dead.

She ripped and tore at his flesh again and again. As the moon made its long, shimmering path along the velvety sky, chewing sounds and whimpering moans filled the night. By the time she crept away, the gaping wounds had an erratic pattern. The rips her claws had made dug deep, and the tears were edged with blood. Clothes were shredded, and bloodstained fragments strewn about the area.

Chapter Six

Jessabelle, in the form of a sleek, prowling panther, crept through the early morning fog as it shrouded the trees and curled eerily over the surface of the creek. Suddenly she broke through the shrubs thirsting for the cool water and crept up to the stream, leaned her head down, and lapped thirstily.

While quenching her thirst, she gradually shifted into human form, slowly becoming aware while half her face was still lowered into the stream. With hesitant movements, she lifted her face upward, and looked around curiously. Mud, leaves and blood clung to her body, so she waded into the deepest part of the creek. While splashing her body, she stretched upward toward the heavens, the cool water rushing down her while she washed herself.

"Jessabelle!" came a loud whisper.

She stopped her bath and looked around. "Juba, is that you? Is Reb with you?"

Both of them stepped out of the brush and walked to the creek's edge. "Jessabelle, how much longer you gonna stay in these woods? Nobody knows where you are, or what's happened to you, and you're drivin' your friends crazy with worry."

A pain hit Jessabelle in the stomach. "Ain't got no friends."

Reb spoke up. "Jessabelle, you know that ain't true. I realize you been hurt, but at least let your friends know you're all right. Hell, even Honey and all her snooty pals are talkin' about it. They're spreadin' the word that you're hidin' 'cause you're scared of her. She's walkin' around town like she owns it. Leave these woods once in a while just long enough to show these gossips you ain't bothered by what they

say. Nobody but me and Juba here knows where you been keepin' yourself, but they's all kinds of stories goin' around."

Jessabelle finally turned and waded out of the creek and walked up to them, still naked. She stepped between them. "So what? Let 'em talk."

Juba pulled her to him. "Jess, I'd like to take you to preachin' on Sunday."

"No," Jessabelle said quickly, then turned around and leaned against Reb's muscled chest. "Where do you want to take me, Reb?" She laughed low in her throat. "Why don't we skip preachin' and go somewhere dark, somewhere we can be all alone?"

"But they's having lunch in the church yard right after," Reb said.

"I never did like to eat near a cemetery," Jessabelle said solemnly, her eyes dark and distant.

"Hell, Jessabelle, they ain't using the tombstones as tables. 'Sides, it's on the other side. Can't even see the cemetery from there."

"Don't matter none. I'll know it's there."

"What's got you so all fired nervous about eatin' near a cemetery?" Juba asked.

"Because I'll be in it some day."

"So will I, but not anytime soon, I hope."

She lowered her eyes, pain clouding them. "Might be sooner'n anyone 'spects."

"Jessabelle, don't talk like that."

She turned and stared deep into the woods. "The way they scour these woods carryin' them lanterns and rifles." She turned toward them both, looking from one to the other. "They're lookin' for me, Juba, and one night they'll find me."

"What is it, Jessabelle?" Reb asked. "What's holdin' onto you so tight?"

"Can't tell you."

"Sure you can. I won't tell no one. Hell, maybe me and Juba can help."

"No one can help me, Reb. No one but..." Her voice trailed off as she lifted her gaze and looked toward the shack that crouched dark and evil beneath a copse of trees.

Juba's eyes followed hers. "Natty Kerr?" His eyes widened, then he ran toward her and whirled her around. "Jessabelle, you gotta stay away from that old witch. I hear tales about her that's near on..."

Suddenly his words faded, and Juba and Reb looked at each other, realizing the truth. Juba turned back to Jessabelle and stared at her remembering their last night together.

God, he thought he'd been dreamin'!

He remembered seein' Jessabelle as she hovered between woman and beast. She set him on fire. He became mesmerized as he watched her, so sleek and beautiful. She moved differently, looked out of her eyes differently. He even remembered the way she turned around and presented herself to him, her back end lifted and twitching. Oh, he took her all right. Plunged right down into that sweet, hot little bottom. And the feeling he got! God, every time he thrust into her, he felt the fires of hell all around him. He'd never forget it.

"You done been there," he whispered. "That's why..." Again visions of that night, of all the nights they'd been together flickered through his mind. She'd pulled him down with her into a carnal hell he'd never experienced, doing things to him that he'd never dreamed a woman could do. His face paled from remembering, and he looked down at her anxiously. "Then go back, Jessabelle. Maybe she can undo this thing."

"Go back? You jus' tol' her to stay away, Juba."

Juba turned to Reb. "Don't you see? She's gotta go back one more time. If that old witch put this spell on Jessabelle, she's the only one who can take it off." He looked back at Jessabelle. "Then once the spell is gone, stay away!"

Jessabelle lowered her head, a jumble of thoughts tumbling through her mind. "Well I...I guess I could try."

He took her hands in his and looked deeply into her eyes. "You do this, Jessabelle, and we'll go away from here."

The smile disappeared from her lips. "Go away?"

Juba looked at Reb for support. "Tell her, Reb."

"Jessabelle, he's right. We've been fools for puttin' it off this long. Hell, we shoulda been gone from this place a long time ago. We'll go down to Texas just like I planned. Now that this has happened, we can't wait any longer."

"Texas? But you know I can't..."

"You can after you see Natty," Juba said. "She'll make it all right, then we can go anywhere we want. Hell, if you don't like Texas, we'll go someplace else."

Jessabelle looked over at Reb. "You too, Reb? I love you both, I couldn't leave—"

"You just try and get rid of me," Reb said. "I ain't leavin' you, Jessabelle. You're my woman, too."

"Are you sure?" Jessabelle said as she looked at both of them. "I mean, we been doin' it, and you still wanna go away with me?"

"I love you, Jessabelle," Juba whispered as he drew her into his arms, his lips covering hers hungrily. His tongue stroked her velvety, pillow-soft lips and he moaned. "Oh, God, Jessabelle you set me on fire."

"Oh, Juba," she whispered, "I...I don't know if it'll work, but..." She turned and looked at Reb who took her in his arms. "Reb? What do you think?"

"I think we gotta hurry, Jessabelle. I can't wait for us to be together for always."

She looked around at the old witch's cabin, then whispered, "You go home now, both of you. When it's done, I'll come to you."

"You promise now?"

"Yes, I do. I promise."

"We'll be waitin'," Juba said as he and Reb turned to leave.

Jessabelle remembered the night she'd gone there for the first time. What would she say to the old woman? If she agreed to remove the spell, would she put a worse one on her? What if she needed money? If she didn't have money, would she have to pay some other way? She dreaded to think what the *other* way might include.

Now she reveled at night under the silver moon while her soft skin turned into the dark, glistening coat of a panther. She stalked the woods tearing out human hearts and fucking Juba and Reb until they begged for mercy.

What could be worse than this?

Maybe she would find out. Whatever the price she'd be tempted to pay it. She'd do anything to be with the two men she loved, to lay out under that moon with their flesh touching hers, their bad, sinful cocks buried deep inside her. Bein' with Juba and Reb would be worth any price, even her life.

Chapter Seven

That night she stood at the edge of the Black Woods and looked up at the big, ugly, fat moon engorged on the blood of her victims. As it hung silently in the sky, it seemed to beckon to her. That meant it was almost time for the spell to take hold, so she couldn't put it off any longer. The moonlight shimmered like quicksilver as she crept toward old Natty Kerr's place. The fire light from inside spilled out the windows onto the cold ground. It gave the old cabin a warm, inviting look, but Jessabelle knew what waited inside and trembled at the thought.

Her feet crept silently up to the porch and stepped up. The old wood creaked under her weight. She hesitated at first, then knocked lightly. The rasping, crackling voice of the old witch sounded from the other side.

"Come in, Jessabelle."

She pushed the door open to the same shadowy room and the same smells she'd encountered before. She'd just barely got all the way in when the old witch began speaking in a soft, raspy voice.

"I can't do it, Jessabelle. Takes a heap o' magic to turn a spell t'other way."

A chill crept up Jessabelle's back. "You can't do it, or you won't do it?"

The old woman turned and looked out the window. "Night after night I set here listenin' to the cries o' yo' victims, and I die a thousand deaths." She turned and looked back at Jessabelle. "The spell on you is a shifter spell, and it's centuries old. I ain't nothin' but an old bag o' bones the gods use to do their bidding until the day I die. I don't know

how or why, but somehow you serve their purpose, and they ain't about to let you out o' their clutches." She saw the look on Jessabelle's face and turned away. "Don't look at me like that, child. The fact is, you'll play out your part in this 'til they don't need you no more." Her old eyes turned black. "If you go against them, they'll kill you. Ain't nothin' I can do, I tell you. Ain't nothin'."

"You're lyin'. I can see it in your eyes. It ain't me you're afraid for, it's you. Ain't that right?"

"So what if it is? I may be old, but I don't want to die. That cold hand of death will close my eyes soon enough as it is. I don't want to help it along, not even for you, Jessabelle."

All at once Jessabelle jerked. She felt a swirling heat begin inside her and knew what it meant. The hairline of her dark hair gradually lowered. Her eyes and facial features took on a mysterious feline appearance, her pupils elongating. The stretching of her bones and intestines followed, the pain white hot, like the heat of a million forest fires. It began in her head, then crept through her limbs, her body changing as the heat burned a path downward. She struggled, moaning and groaning until the transformation became complete.

* * * *

The old woman watched while fear spread through her like the uncoiling of a venomous snake. With her eyes steady on Jessabelle, she moved slowly as she rose from her chair and backed up against a wall. When she saw her sleek body, her sharp claws and teeth, prowling toward her, she yelled, "Get back!" She lifted her cane and began hitting at the animal, but instead of retreating, its teeth caught the cane and crushed it within its strong jaws. With nowhere to hide, the woman crouched down trapped in a corner, watching while the animal silently padded toward her. All at once the old woman pointed at her and began jabbering something in a foreign tongue.

* * * *

When Jessabelle heard the strange words, dizziness descended over her. She stopped in her tracks, lowered her head and shook it. A fog clouded her brain for a minute, then suddenly she turned and with long, loping strides she leaped through an open window. She ran toward the Black Woods when suddenly she slowed and stopped. She turned and looked toward Possum's Ridge and the hilly countryside. Turning, she began running again, the moon shining down on her as she loped over hills and valleys. She passed stables, barns and farmhouses until she came to the edge of the little town. She stood tall and proud on Possum Ridge, silhouetted by the moon that hung in the sky.

"I can't do it, Jessabelle. Takes a heap o' magic to turn a spell t'other way."

The words pounded through her mind, along with the knowledge she would never be free to be with Juba and Reb. She looked down at the rocks below and knew if she were ever to be released from this evil, this would be the only way. She crept closer to the edge, the stiff breeze caressing her intimately, her paws unsettling rocks and dirt, tumbling them over the side. Just as she neared the edge to fling herself down onto the rocks below, her ears twitched. She heard voices echoing in the distance. Voices full of death, killing, hate, the words unclear, but the angry tone sent an icy chill down her back.

She didn't turn to leave, but stood there, staring intently at the dark scene that slowly came into view. It was a mob with torches, guns. Many people she recognized, and as soon as they saw her, they stopped in their tracks. Looking up, they formed a line, pointing their guns at her. Jessabelle didn't move. She didn't try to run. She knew she deserved death, and since the old witch wouldn't cure her of the spell, she had no other choice. She couldn't live with it any longer, she had to escape her torment. All at once she gasped when she saw Juba and Reb running toward the crowd.

"No!" they cried out in unison. "Don't shoot!"

Suddenly, fear she'd never known swept through her. Like a flame, it burned its way along her veins, setting her lungs on fire. She tilted her head and a loud, guttural sound came out of her feral mouth.

"Get out of the way, Juba!" she tried to say. "They'll kill you, Reb! Go!"

Suddenly she heard a shot and immediately felt a sharp, burning pain. Her face screwed up in a scowl just before she crumpled, falling, twisting, tumbling down the ridge.

* * * *

"Oh, my God!" cried Reb, his shock showing on his face.

"It can't be!" Juba yelled just before he crumpled to his knees and held his head in his hands. His shoulders shook with tears.

The mumbling crowd skirted around Juba and Reb, ignoring their pain, and marched up the hill to claim their prize. The ghost of the Black Woods lay dead, the menace stopped, the hills once more a safe place to live. As the crowd neared the crumpled body, each one gasped at what they saw—Jessabelle Tate, covered in blood!

All at once Juba came roaring through the crowd, pushing and shoving until he saw Jessabelle—his lovely, wonderful, beautiful Jessabelle. He fell on her and lay there for seconds that turned to minutes, feeling the deepest tearing pain he had ever known.

Right behind him was Reb who pushed him aside and wailed out his grief over her still body. He looked up when he heard the trampling sound of muddy boots. "You bastards, you know what you've done?"

"We didn't know, boys," one of the men said. "I coulda sworn..."

"Don't blame Ned. We all thought..."

Ignoring the crowd, Juba laid his trembling finger along her neck, feeling for a pulse. Oh, God, he could feel it! Life! He quickly leaned

over and picked her up and swung her around, elbowing his way through the crowd.

"What the hell are you doin', Juba?"

"She's alive," he called back to Reb, even though her limbs dangled limply as he walked toward the old witch's shack.

"What're ye gonna do, son? She's dead, needs to be buried!"

"My God, look at him," someone whispered. "See the look on his face? He's crazy with grief."

"Reckon where he's takin' 'er?"

"Don't know. Likely as not he'll take her and bury her hisself. Well, come on, people. Nothin' we can do here."

"What about the ghost? You think it's still out there?"

"Hell, I don't know," the man said, turning and looking at the woods that surrounded them. "When I aimed my rifle, I aimed it at a damned animal, not a innocent little gal."

"It's okay, Ned. No one's blamin' you."

"Feel bad, though."

"Hell, we saw the same thing you did. You think we would've let you shoot at a innocent little female? I don't know what you saw, but I saw a growlin' panther with glowin' green eyes."

"That's what bothers me, Seth."

"What's that?"

"Panthers don't have green eyes—"

The other man stopped dead in his tracks and looked with frightened eyes at the man speaking.

"—Jessabelle does."

Chapter Eight

The two boys ran, their panting breath coming fast and short as they made their way toward old Natty Kerr's place. When they arrived, Juba kicked the door in and stood there with Jessabelle's bloody body in his arms. "This is your fault, old woman, and if you don't do something to help her, I'll kill you with my bare hands."

"Them words don't scare me none, boy, so quit playin' at bein' so high and mighty." She indicated toward the couch. "Put her there, but hear this. Only thing I'll do is treat her wound. I ain't about to put myself in danger just on your say so. If she ain't dead now, she will be someday, and from a bullet just like the one she got tonight. Only it'll be in her heart or her lungs. Then's when she'll be free. Then, and only then."

* * * *

The two of them continued arguing while Jessabelle floated in a valley of mist. She could hear voices but could see no one. Wisps of fog danced before her, then wrapped themselves around her like shrouds. Her strength had gone. No longer did she feel an urge to kill, no longer a lust for blood. When the voices continued, she tried to open her eyes, but could see very little, only cloudy images that moved around. Finally she murmured, "Juba, Reb, is that you?"

Juba ran toward her and fell to his knees. "Jessabelle! It's me, sweetheart. It's Juba. Oh, baby, thank God you're okay."

Jessabelle tried to move, but scowled when a stab of pain pierced her shoulder.

"No, don't try to move, Jessabelle," Reb said with a concerned voice.

"Where am I?"

He turned and gave a quick glance at the old witch. "You're at Natty's place, Jessabelle."

"What..." she began, then moaned with pain, "what happened?"

"You've been shot, baby, but Natty's here. She's gonna take care o' you. You're gonna be all right, hear? You're gonna be fine."

* * * *

For days Natty treated Jessabelle's wounds with homemade remedies, and with Juba and Reb looking over her shoulder. They refused to let her give Jessabelle anything unless they knew what it was. Finally, she confronted them. "I'm tired o' you two lookin' at everythin' I give her. What in hell do you think I'm gonna do, poison her?"

"There's a reward on her head," Reb yelled. "You know that."

"They ain't no reward. As far as them people know, she's dead."

"They know, all right. They know Jessabelle's alive, and they know what she is."

"How do they know? Did you tell 'em? 'Cause you know I don't talk to no one."

"It got out," Juba spat. "You know how people are. Can't hide nothin' from 'em." He walked toward the window and looked out, then whirled around, restless. "She can't go back out there, Natty. They'll crucify her, string her up like a friggin' ham in a curin' house." His voice became soft, and he turned again toward the window and gazed out of it while he spoke. "I can't let her do it, I—"

"What do you have to do with it? She wants to die, she'll die."

Turning, he strode to the old witch and his eyes burned into hers. "I get sick to my stomach every time I think about her gettin' mixed

up with the likes o' you. Now she wants to die? Well, I ain't gonna let her. I love her, that's what I have to do with it. And she loves me."

Natty turned to Reb. "And what about you? You love her, too?"

"What if I do? It ain't none o' yo' business."

"You're playin' a dangerous game, you know. If you two shield her, they'll kill you to get to her."

"How do you—"

"Take the spell off, Natty," a weak voice interjected.

The two of them whirled around to find Jessabelle trying to sit up. Juba rushed to her. "Jessabelle! Don't darlin', you'll—"

She pushed him away. "Take the spell off, Natty." When the old witch hesitated to answer, Jessabelle looked at Juba, who had knelt by her side and took her hand. "She put a spell on you, Juba. Somehow she turned herself into Delilah and tried to lure you away from me."

Juba looked over at Natty. "Delilah? Old Natty there? That's plumb ridiculous, and I don't believe a word of it. Don't listen to her, Jessabelle. It's just another one of her tall tales."

"One of my tall tales, huh?"

"The tallest!" Juba said hotly.

Natty's voice pierced the darkness, low and hissing. "You wanted to take me into the barn but that wouldn't do, so I led you to a clearing in the Black Woods where the moon could shine down on us. You see, it was the rays of the moon that held the magic. When Reb came along and blocked you from it, that's when you came to your senses." She looked over at Reb. "I didn't think Reb would know that. It's a mistake I won't make again."

"Juba," Reb said, "that's why you went a little crazy that night. Remember? It was the night of the dance. The spell you were under made you treat Jessabelle bad that night and say some things you would never have said if you were in your right mind. I saw it right off."

"If this is true, why don't I remember it?"

"Juba, you don't remember it because you was plumb out o' yo' head," Jessabelle said. "Later, when we argued and you took off with Delilah I felt crushed, which created a void in our relationship, making me vulnerable to those in the Black Woods. It's like a door that's been left open, so the next time they came for me, my protection was gone, and I went with them." She looked at Natty. "Ain't that right, Natty?"

Before Natty could answer, Juba turned to the old witch, and said, "Tell me, old woman. Is Jessabelle right? Did you hex me and make it possible for them devils in the Black Woods to take Jessabelle? Is this all your doin'?"

"Sure, I hexed you, but they ain't no spell on you now, boy, not anymore." She looked down at Jessabelle. "The only spell left is the one I gave her in a sip of Tibetan Tea. Remember? It makes you sleep, I said." She looked back up at Juba. "Her sleep begins every night at midnight. You seen it. You know what she becomes."

"Yeah, I seen it," Juba said thoughtfully.

"It's a slow turn. She stays aware until she finds herself in another world, the world of the beast she's become. When it takes over she can't help the urges she feels."

"And you say you can't reverse this spell?"

Her black gaze narrowed on the three of them, their glittering evil full of the mystery of the hills. "I didn't say I couldn't, I said I won't!"

"Oh, so that's it, is it? You *won't* help her?"

"I can't do it, boy. Don't you understand that? If I perform the ritual that releases her from the spell, they'll come after me and do worse than kill me! They'll banish me to the wilderness where I'll eventually die!"

"You're dead anyway, Natty. You got no heart, and no feelin's for anyone but yourself. You're dead and on your way to hell!"

* * * *

A prickle of fear danced down Natty's spine. Being a witch, she knew when damning words were formed in an innocent mouth, they were deadly—and true.

"All right, Natty, if you won't release Jessabelle from the spell, is there anything else you can do?"

When Natty looked over at her crystal ball, the eyes of the others followed her gaze. "I can tell you what's comin' so that maybe you can prevent it, but nothing else." She moved slowly to the table in front of the fireplace, and sat down in front of her crystal ball. With a witch's fatal gaze, she stared down into it, her dry, dusty voice filling the old shack. "The spirits are restless," she whispered. "Death is comin'."

"Who, Natty? Is it Jessabelle?"

"The Fates don't tell me who, but listen to me, both of you. When Jessabelle goes into the woods tonight, don't follow her."

"But Natty—"

"Mark my words! The woods will be full of hunters. They know the ghost of the Black Woods is still alive, and they'll be comin' after her. If Jessabelle's the one, this time she'll be killed."

* * * *

Sadness hung heavy in Jessabelle's heart as the three of them left the witch's cottage and walked into the woods together.

"Don't come with me," she said when they reached the edge of the woods.

"Jessabelle you don't have to go into the woods. Come with us and we'll leave this place."

"For me it's not a choice, Juba. I'm ruled by the Fates, and I have to obey."

"Then we're going with you. If Natty was right, then we want to spend our last moments together."

"It could be dangerous. When the change becomes complete, I won't know you, so you have to be sure, Juba."

"I don't care, Jessabelle. My place is by your side."

She looked over at Reb. "How about you, Reb?"

"Nothin' in this world could keep me from bein' with you tonight."

She turned, and both Juba and Reb followed her deep into the thicket where both pleasure and fear ran riot within them as they spent their last moments making love. Jessabelle's moans of ecstasy rose so high they touched the treetops.

* * * *

Juba took her in his arms, and she thrashed beneath him, her fevered movements, her wild, animalistic gyrations, sending his desire spiraling into a place he'd never been. Their time together built to such intensity that he knew this night would either be his death or his salvation, but he couldn't stop.

And then he surrendered his soul to her.

Juba was mesmerized when at last all the veils were ripped aside, and for the first time he knew her completely for what she really was, but he didn't care, couldn't care. She removed her clothes and stood before him, her beautiful, silvered body at home in the dense woods. She reached up wild and free, a nymph, a sprite, a being that worshipped the moon, and she invited them both into her world. As she crept toward them, they became totally mesmerized by her beauty and knew then that they would be hers for eternity. Both laid down for her, their arms spread out in surrender, two willing sacrifices on a leafy altar.

She owned their souls.

They knew the end of their world as they both entered hers, a world where the swirling darkness surrounded them, and held their secrets to its leafy breast, a world where their love would flourish.

Both Juba and Reb abandoned themselves to sensations such as they'd never known, and never dared dream.

Jessabelle made a feast of their bodies with her lips and tongue while she buried their cocks deep into her cunt as it dripped and pulsed with desire. She fucked Juba for several minutes before she finally raised her ass for Reb. By this time their submission to her was complete. As they lay beneath her hungry mouth, they savored the feel of her nibbling teeth, and her sucking tongue over their bodies, never wanting it to end. The darkness embraced the three of them intimately as they continued loving each other over and over again, until a blast of hot, spewing liquid burst from their cocks. As the night wore on, both Juba and Reb wondered if they were in heaven or hell.

Suddenly they heard the hunters as they came thrashing through the brush, the mist kicking up around them. The lovers knew that to live forever is too strong a dream, so they took what few minutes were left to them in their final farewell, while hiding behind a fallen log.

Juba, in a frenzy to keep Jessabelle close to him began to lick her hungrily. First her nipples, then he traveled down her body until he reached the darkness between her legs.

Jessabelle, feeling the moon's rays, opened her mouth in passion, revealing her teeth that began to sharpen with each passing moment. She moaned and rocked as his tongue thrust inside her. With fire curling through her veins, she finally turned and lifted her bottom to Reb. He leaned over her and bit her neck until his cock, thick and rigid, was ready to enter. It pulsed hot and fierce as he reached down and took it in his hand, then pressed it against her.

She reveled in Reb's unruly desire, his wild and untamed hunger radiating through his pores. The pressure of his cock forced her open, then sank deep into her soft, velvety cunt. The feel of his wild, eager lovemaking made her shriek with primal delight. Their silvered bodies rocked into each other in a primal rhythm that took them from

the dark woods into a red-hot, sensual place where their love knew no bounds.

As the moon arced high in the sky, Jessabelle began to turn.

With Juba and Reb watching, she slowly became a creature of the night, her silvered body stretching and arching up to the moon. As desire raced through their veins, their love became both fevered and frantic. Their bodies gyrated wildly, and stretched in the silvered moonlight. Their grunts turned to groans, and their groans slowly turned to high, keening mating calls that carried among the black trees—the trees that cruelly smashed their dreams of love.

Chapter Nine

Natty sat on her rickety old porch and watched as the night passed. The moon shadows stretched long and dark across the ground in front of her cabin, and one lone owl hooted a lonely song in serenade with the cicadas nearby. High in the trees, she could hear the echoing sounds of Jessabelle and her two faithful lovers, and it pierced her heart, making the old woman's tears slide slowly down her cheeks. She'd never known such a love as these three had for each other. Instead, at a young age she'd been drawn, as Jessabelle had, into the evil of the Black Woods.

Suddenly she flinched when she heard a shot ring out, followed by the angry shouts of the hunters. A freezing fear clutched her spine. Had Jessabelle been killed? She looked up at the moon, and saw a hungry shimmer, but no blood. She knew this meant Jessabelle was still alive, but what about the next shot? And the one after that?

As she sat there she struggled. She wanted to help Jessabelle, but the price was just too high. There was no doubt in her mind that it would mean her own life, and she wasn't ready to die yet. Her eyes shifted to the woods every time she heard movement. A shot, a yell, a tormented cry. What was happening to those three?

In that moment Natty knew desperation as never before. She simply couldn't sit there while Jessabelle faced danger. Even though she fought against helping her, now that the danger was here, she couldn't let those three young people be killed. And they would, she knew it. They'd gladly give their lives for each other, and only she could stop it. Their love had to be saved—and there was only one way to do it.

She moved quickly, pulling her aged body up out of her chair and into her shack. She cautiously sat down at the table where her crystal ball stood, and gazed into it. While watching the glittering mist, her cracking voice emitted a soft incantation, and her boney hands rubbed over the ball until the images of Jessabelle, Juba and Reb came clear. She leaned down close, keeping them within her witch's gaze as she spoke...

*Strange music floats within this glade
Dark, soaring notes these three hearts made
Hidden within the curling mist
They lie together with love so blessed
Take them back to the time before
When innocence reigned and love was pure
In death is life, in life is death
All must follow this sacred dance.
Let this beginning have an ending
And this ending have a new beginning.*

As the incantation died on her lips, she waved her hands over the crystal ball, and said, "*It is done!*"

Suddenly Natty's front door banged open, and a wild wind roared throughout, sending bottles and furniture banging against the weak walls. The force of the wind threw her down, but Natty managed to hang on to a stationary object, and watched the clock over the fireplace. A feeling of sincere thanks made her eyes mist with tears when she finally saw the hands on the clock begin to spin counter-clockwise. Outside the nighttime clouds were scudding across the sky in the opposite direction while sunrise and sunset came and went from west to east in flashes of light and dark. From where she stood, her body being buffeted about, she managed to shout out an incantation that resembled a prayer...

*Oh, Dark Mistress of the Under-hells
Please protect me from enemy spells
Defend me with thy righteous light
Oh, divine Lady of the Night!*

She prayed the same prayer over and over with every passing moment until at last she was thrown to the floor and knocked out.

* * * *

By this time Jessabelle had experienced a full change and broke out of the leafy confines of the forest and began to lope over field and stream. Juba and Reb did their best to stay with her, but some time in the night they lost her. They looked everywhere. Finally, they went to Jessabelle's cabin where they found the panther hovering on the overhang above the door. They walked up to her slowly.

"Jessabelle, it's me and Reb."

* * * *

She didn't recognize them and made no response except a series of growls. Her animal senses felt danger lurking nearby, and she began to pace from one end of the overhang to the other while looking down at Juba and Reb. Long strings of saliva that glittered in the moonlight fell from between her sharp teeth, her predatory gaze sizing them up. When the smell of their blood finally overtook her, she suddenly sprang toward them, but while in mid-air, the three of them disappeared into an explosion of tiny lights.

Chapter Ten

The lights of the old barn sputtered while a lively dance was being pounded out on washboards, guitars and buckets. A lean raw-boned farmer stood on the platform, and with a twangy sounding voice he called the dance with a tapping foot and a jug of whiskey with XXX marked on it.

*"Circle eight, and get it straight,
And we'll all go east on a westbound freight.
Knock down Sal and pick up Kate,
And we'll all join hands and circle eight.
Now grab your partner with your left hand
Take her home with a right and left grand!"*

Jessabelle stood on the outside of the barn waiting for Juba, the sounds of the dance in the background. The minute she saw him ride up she yelled, "Juba! Over here!"

"Hey, Jessabelle, what are you doin' out here?" He turned around and looked into the night. "Reb here yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, come on and let's get inside and dance."

"Juba," she said, pulling on his arm. "Don't go in there."

Juba looked down at her. "Why? What's wrong? Is it Honey and her gossipin' ghouls? They been teasin' you again?"

"Teasin'?" Jessabelle said angrily. "They're not teasin', Juba. They mean every horrible word they say." She hesitated a moment. "Besides, it ain't them. I just got a funny feelin' that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"I had a dream, Juba. A real weird dream. I—"

"Hi there, you two."

"Hey, Reb," Juba said, "it's about time you got here. Come on, and let's get inside. I get the first dance with Jessabelle."

He took Jessabelle's hand, but she pulled back. "Juba, I'm tryin' to tell you somethin'!"

"Go ahead, honey, I'm listenin'."

"I said I had a dream."

"A dream? What kind of dream?"

"I dreamed of spells, and hexes, and witches. Oh, Juba, it was so horrible!"

"Aw, honey, everyone has nightmares now and then." He turned to Reb who was unusually silent. "Right, Reb?"

The words Reb didn't say hung heavy between them.

"What's wrong?"

"It wasn't no nightmare, Juba, it really happened."

"What?"

"Hell, I can't explain it, but what Jessabelle is talkin' about really happened."

Juba's smile faded as he looked from one to the other. "A dream that's real? You're both nuts. C'mon now, and let's get inside."

"Juba, this is where it started. Right here at the dance."

"You mean tonight?"

"No—yes. It's hard to explain, Juba, but I have a feelin' if we go in we'll never come out."

Jessabelle pulled on Juba's arm. "He's right, Juba. Let's just leave."

Juba gave a nervous chuckle. "What's wrong with you two? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Don't you remember the reason for this dance, and who's puttin' it on? It's Pastor Greaves, our preacher for God's sake. Don't you remember? He needs hymn books for Sunday services. Now quit bein' so silly, and let's go in." He

tugged on Jessabelle's hand as he started for the barn door, but kept walking when Jessabelle yanked her hand out of his.

"Juba, don't!" Reb and Jessabelle called out.

Juba stopped in mid-stride and looked back. "All right, I'll prove it. Just watch me. I'll go in, and come out. That'll prove that there's nothin' wrong. Okay?" He turned then, and strode toward the big double doors of the barn. The moment the light from inside fell on him he stopped dead still and stared.

Instead of the people he knew, he saw what looked like a *Danse Macabre*. The ceiling was filled with swinging cobwebs, and skeletal people dancing. Suddenly the caller, a skeleton dressed in bib overalls, a red kerchief tie, and a big cowboy hat, began calling out the dance.

*Swing your partner 'round and 'round,
Kill old Reb and throw 'im in the ground.
Now dance a jig on the dead man's grave,
And meet your partner for a grand chain eight
Now hurry up Juba and do your stuff.
Meet your honey and kill that slut.
High foot up and left foot down,
And make that big foot jar the ground.*

He gasped when he heard the words of the song that sounded normal enough until you listened close, and found it mixed with commands to kill Reb and Jessabelle. The light on him felt hot, and he began getting dizzy. He knew an evil force was at work here, and tried to move, to turn away and run, but he seemed to be tied down with invisible cords.

"The light!" Jessabelle yelled. "He's caught in the light!"

Reb could see him struggling, and Jessabelle began to run toward Juba, but Reb grabbed her and held her back. "No, Jessabelle, don't go into the light. Stay here, I'll figure something out."

He paced, trying to think of something when he looked over at his horse and saw his rope hanging on the saddle. Like a shot he ran toward it, grabbed it, and began fashioning it into a lasso.

He finally lifted the circled rope and whirled it around his head a few times, and then gave it a good toss. When it slipped down over Juba's shoulders, he yelled, "Tie it around your waist, Juba. I'll pull you out like we do a steer when he's caught in mud!"

Juba's movements were limited, but with several tries, and lots of determination, he finally did it. "It's done!" he called out.

Reb looped his end of the rope around his strong arms, and pulled as hard as he could. When he managed to get a part of his body past the light, he threw the rope down and hurried over and pulled him the rest of the way out.

Juba scuttled up, breathing deep. "My God, that place is—"

"It's just like it was that night, only we didn't see it or hear it, we were blind to it. For some reason our eyes have been opened!"

"My God, you're right," Juba said. "I remember that night. I was so angry I was ready to blast you both to kingdom come."

"Well, thank God you've seen the light. I think we need to get the hell out of here!"

The three of them turned and jumped on their horses. About the time they were safe, they looked back and saw the night creatures swirling as they pursued them.

All at once a familiar cackling sound got their attention, and they looked up. There was Natty circling through the sky on her old broom Jessabelle had seen any number of times in her shack. Suddenly she swooped down and seemed to hover between the night creatures, and the three of them.

"Go! Now!" Natty called out.

Before they had a chance to get away, suddenly the night creatures began to swirl, forming themselves into a small tornado. The high wind pulled Natty into the middle of it, and she whirled

around and around until she was finally spat out the top and sent reeling into the black sky never to be heard from again.

"Oh, God, here they come!" Jessabelle shouted. "Where can we go to get rid of them?"

* * * *

Reb was hell on horseback as he rode toward the railroad station where he noticed a train was just starting to pull out. He saw an opportunity he couldn't let pass and yelled back at the others. "This way!"

When he got there he stood on his saddle and went into a trick ride he'd done at the rodeo a hundred times. He bounced on the back of his horse until the time was right and then jumped from his horse up on the bed of the open car. When he gained his balance, he caught hold of a steel bar, swung his body forward, and caught Jessabelle by the hand and heaved her up. By that time Juba was hanging off the flat bed, and Reb grabbed him by the seat of his pants and pulled him the rest of the way.

The car was square, it had hay on the floor, and reeked with the smell of cattle, but they were safe. They all lay quiet for a moment, their breathing heavy and labored. By now the train was going full speed, and as it rocked it seemed that their world rocked with it. The three of them lay on the hay huddling together until they all fell into what seemed like a drugged sleep.

* * * *

Later when Jessabelle woke up, she became scared when she remembered where they were. Her attention was immediately taken by the rushing scenery outside the open doors. She slowly scooted over to the wide opening, and saw bridges of iron lace as the train rumbled over them, and then a sudden host of trees. As the train

climbed higher, she saw a cloud of mountain mist, and the wet fog kissed her face with moisture. Next came a bleak, wasted place with a lake just below. The train strained at a curve, and her body swayed and moved with the leaning of the steel. It thundered through ravines and gulleys that were washed with the train's head lights, but she felt the slightest pelting of raindrops when the steel monster rushed into a rain storm.

Jessabelle heard Reb and Juba begin to move when the iron wheels shook and the pistons jerked. Sparks leapt from the wheels as steel met steel and went around and around. The two men suddenly lunged forward, a little disoriented.

Reb looked around. "We made it!" he shouted. "Juba, wake up! We're out of Dry Gulch, and on our way to—" His words suddenly stopped, and he looked at Juba with a question in his eyes. "On our way where?" he asked.

"We're on a southbound train," Juba said as he sat up. "I saw it on the side of the car when I jumped on."

"South, huh?" Reb said.

"Yeah, Texas."

"Texas?" Reb said, his eyes growing wide with excitement. "How do you know?"

"These are cattle cars."

"So what? There's cattle all over the west."

"Yeah, but I saw a Big T on the side with a map of Texas."

"Yee-haa!" Reb shouted as he looked at Jessabelle. "Looks like we're goin' to Texas. What do you think about that, Jessabelle?"

"Well...it's kinda sudden like. I mean we left everything we own back in Dry Gulch."

"I'm sure there's a train goin' back if you feel like gettin' on it," Reb teased.

"Don't tease me, Reb. Not now. I mean, who knows what we'll find way out here in no man's land. I mean, we've got nothing. No money, no horses, no clothes...nothing!"

Juba looked at Jessabelle. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. You escaped those things, and now you want to go back? What in hell is wrong with you, Jessabelle?"

"I don't know, Juba. I'm scared, that's all. Dry Gulch might not be the best place, but it's home."

"Look, Jessabelle, do you know what would have happened if you'd stayed there? The devil himself had you all picked out for his next bed partner. Look at Natty. Once a beautiful young woman that turned into a crone that fucked with demons."

"Juba, that's just one of them wild tales you hear. It ain't true."

"Oh, yeah? Figure it out. Natty had gotten old, wasn't any use to these so-called gods, and you, the best lookin' filly in town was singled out by them to take Natty's place. Oh, you would've had a grand future fuckin' demons, and devils, and flyin' around castin' spells on everyone in town. I imagine Honey, Lucy Mae, and all their gossipin' buddies would've been first on your list, right? Jessabelle, you can't tell me that you'd rather go back to that than take a chance on finding a future worth livin' in Texas. And even it ain't all we thought it'd be, it's better than what we left behind."

Jessabelle was silent, thinking about Juba's words. "Don't matter none. We done it, and it's over."

"I just wish you felt better about it."

"I'll try," Jessabelle answered as she crawled over to a mound of hay and hugged herself to sleep.

Deep into the night she woke up in the early hours of the morning, restless. Her doubts about them leaving Dry Gulch and everything familiar to them still plagued her mind. The southbound train had been a way of escape, but once they got on they had to go where it took them. It was as if fate had taken a hand in their flight and decided where they would spend the rest of their life. If only she had some kind of reassurance that this train was leading them to a better life.

Just then the train seemed to shake on the tracks, and she quickly scooted over to the large opening and looked out. The dark sky that before had been crowded with the silhouettes of ugly, twisted treetops, now suddenly gave way to a wide sky bigger and more widespread than any she'd ever seen. The size of it took her breath away, making her feel even more alone. Just then she heard movement, and noticed Reb and Juba crawling over to her.

"What're you lookin' at, Jessabelle?"

"How do we know what's out there in all that darkness, Juba? I can't seem to shake the feelin' that we did the wrong thing when we jumped on this train in the middle of the night."

"It was the only thing we could do, Jess." Just then a gust of hot prairie wind blew in. "Whoa," Juba said, laughing. "Feels like we made a wrong turn somewhere and wound up in Hell."

"Don't even joke about that, Juba. Who knows, we may be in hell."

* * * *

The two men looked at each other with meaningful glances, and with forced cheerfulness, Reb cocked his head, and said, "Hey, listen to this!"

"What is it, Reb?" Juba asked.

"The train wheels," Reb answered. "Can you hear it? It's chuggin' out a message."

Juba and Jessabelle sat quietly and listened for the rhythmic sound of the iron wheels as they turned and chugged.

"Hey, I hear it," Juba said. "What about you, Jessabelle. You hear it?"

"It's just train wheels goin' 'round and 'round," she said unhappily.

Just then Reb saw a sign. "Look!" he shouted, pointing.

Welcome to the great state of Texas.

"Do you know what this means?" he said. "It means that Texas is inviting us to stay."

"What do you think about that, Jessabelle?" Juba asked.

"So what? It's just a sign. They probably have them in every state you enter."

"But Jessabelle—"

"Hey, Juba, it's okay," Reb whispered. "Jessabelle has lived her whole life in Dry Gulch, and she's scared. She just needs to be alone for a while. She'll work it out."

* * * *

Later, after Juba and Reb had fallen back to sleep, Jessabelle nursed her fears alone. She leaned back against the wall of the train and listened as the noisy wheels churned out the same rhythmic message over and over again. She knew the sound was nothing more than a bumping, screeching, hissing train lingo that sounded foreign to her ears, but as she listened, the message was slowly translated to her heart, and she understood each and every word clearly.

...goodbye Tennessee, hello Texas...goodbye Tennessee, hello Texas...goodbye Tennessee, hello Texas...

"Goodbye Tennessee," she said wistfully as she turned and looked back, watching as the misty miles slowly fell away. "Goodbye to spells, hexes, horrifying images, the dark evil woods, witches...and family and friends." She then turned her head and looked toward an uncertain future, and added with fear and trembling, "Hello to the strange new land, new faces, new accents, new towns and strange ways, hel—" Her words slowly faded when a burst of morning sunlight suddenly broke upon the miles of prairie, the rocky hill formations, the creeks, the dusty trails, and a beauty beyond description. Hearing the stomping of a herd, she lowered her eyes and saw a group of wild stallions running through the wide open range, and gasped. When the light of the friendly sun began to spread its

beautiful dawn into the train's obscure shadows making them flee, her fears vanished. Now, as hope entered her heart, she looked out at the wide open spaces with awe, and finished her greeting to the bright new land with a big smile, and an excited Tennessee drawl. "Hello Texas!"

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, my name is Kelly Conrad, and I've always loved to write. I excelled in English class at school, and always thought I wanted to be a writer. It's very difficult to tell you just when I began writing. In looking back, I would have to say my writing career began as early as elementary school when I sat in Study Hall and thought up names for romance novels. Can you see it? A list of hot, sultry titles that my teacher snatched away from me and turned red as she read them? I was a bit undisciplined to say the least, and spent a lot of time in the principal's office.

Later I began writing stories for my friends to read. The first story was about a teacher who had an affair with a student. Oh, my! Even then my imagination was in overdrive! After that my life took off in several different directions until the day I decided I wanted to get back to my first love, writing. Since I'm from Texas, the most natural thing in the world for me is to write a western ménage with lots of heat. Depending on the story line I might add a touch of suspense to give it an extra kick.

I lived my life as a big-haired blond. I have blue eyes, and I like that tear-jerkin' country and western music, and I even sing a little. I love square dancing, and I speak with a Texas twang (Me and Dolly Parton). Although I'm new with Siren Publishing I hope to entertain you with some great books in the future.

By the way, I think Dolly comes from Tennessee. I'm telling you that so you won't get us mixed up. Yeah, right!



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