

**Title:** In A Ball Of Red

**Author:** Paula Cas

**Fandom:** Leverage, Kane RPF, Supernatural RPF

**Characters:** Christian Kane/Steve Carlson; Eliot Spencer/Parker/Alec Hardison; Nathan Ford/Sophie Devereaux, Jim Bever, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Jensen Ackles, Original Characters

**Rating:** R

**Summary:** Historical AU; Christian and Eliot are twins, but their lives take two very different roads

**Author's Note:** An article pinged memories of indigenous traditions I've studied over the years. In many traditions, the West is the direction of the ancestors. Messages from the other side come from the West, the sun sets in the West (ball of red), etc. For the sake of the fic, made Parker and Hardison the same age.



As Christian Michael and Eliot Spencer Kane gave their first cries of life, their mother gave her last. Even with his vast array of white man and Cherokee medicine, Dr. Spencer Red Deer could not save his daughter's life.

Laura Red Deer Kane's will to live had died five months prior when her husband, US Marshal Michael Kane, had been murdered by cattle rustlers.

Now it would be left to her father to raise their sons.

~ • ~ • ~

Growing up in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the Kane twins walked between the white and Cherokee worlds. Their grandfather taught them healing from both worlds while relatives on the white side taught them to survive in the white world. Their Cherokee relatives taught them to be hunters, trackers, and warriors.

Christian and Eliot were twenty-three years-old when Spencer Red Deer was killed by a man attempting to steal drugs from his office. Though they still had extended family in the area, with their grandfather dead, the twins had no real reason to stay in Tahlequah. After settling Spencer's affairs and selling Red Deer's practice, they packed their belongings, and as the newest attractions in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, left Oklahoma.

When Bill Cody looked over the two nearly identical young men standing before him, he could practically feel the money in his hand they would attract. Though half-breed Cherokee, their rugged good looks, blue/grey eyes, that were positively startling against bronzed skin, and long dark hair were going to make them instant sensations.

Traveling back and forth across America, and then the rest of the world, Christian and Eliot received a different type of education. They found people who were eager to use the twins to be in two places at the same time to help them in their confidence games. Their own innate talents and strengths soon lead them to become excellent at retrieving items for bounty, which also taught them to be better thieves. Eliot became jaded about it, but it never ceased to amaze Christian that people would pay them for the retrieval of people and objects.

While the Wild West show was in New York City, one of the Astors paid him \$1,000 to track down a missing dog because they'd read that Indians were good at that sort of thing. Eliot gritted his teeth in a parody of a smile, found the dog and collected his money, all the while growling about ill-mannered whelps.

Christian laughed at his twin as he cleaned the wounds where the nasty tempered Pekinese had bitten him, but the money Eliot had made finding a rich man's dog, had the brothers reconsidering their employment prospects.

~ • ~ • ~

Taking full advantage of traveling across Europe with the Wild West Extravaganza, and the rich people that wanted to be seen with 'real' American Indians, the brothers continued relieving people of their money by taking retrieval jobs on the side.

In Spain, the twins purchased a caravan from a band of gypsies along with a team of horses for the wagon and a pair of good saddle horses for themselves. When the gypsies realized they couldn't palm off subpar animals on the brothers, they presented their best animals at a fair price.

Christian was packing their belongings in the caravan when he heard a horse stop outside. He moved around so he came upon the rider from the back.

"Help you?" He asked gruffly, pushing back his long dark hair.

From the horse's shiny black hooves to the shiny black Hessian boots worn by the rider, everything about the man screamed aristocracy.

"Could you direct me to Eliot Spencer?" The haughty voice asked.

Christian felt his heart lurch that his twin was denying their father ... Denying him. Before he could answer, Eliot rode up on his tall bay gelding.

"I'm Spencer."

If Eliot didn't wear his face, Christian never would have recognized him. Gone were the denim, broadcloth, and his waist-length braid. He was dressed much the same as the nobleman, his now shoulder length hair pulled into a tail with a black ribbon at the nape of his neck. His twin didn't even spare him a word as he rode off. It was with a heavy heart, Christian continued his packing.

He was preparing breakfast when Eliot returned looking only a little worse for wear.

"Good news, di-na-da-nv-tli." The tired voice was cheerful. "We have a job. Should be a milk run."

"Am I?" The elder twin asked.

"Are you what?" Eliot asked, confused. He thought Christian would be happy about taking an easy retrieval.

"Your brother?"

"Why would you ask me a stupid question like that?" He poured a cup of coffee from the pot on the fire.

"All this." Christian motioned to the fine clothes and the cut hair.

"An illusion. A part to play. Underneath I'm the same." Eliot insisted.

Christian looked up from under his lashes.

“You didn’t just change your clothes.”

Eliot sighed. He knew he should have talked to Christian, but he’d needed to move fast to get this job. The payoff would allow them to get away from Cody’s circus and finally be their own men. It would allow them to take time to relax and enjoy what they’d earned.

The brothers had just gained their twenty-fourth year, but both were worn to the bone. Their retrieval jobs, performing, usually, seven days a week, with the addition of Christian doctoring everything on two or four legs were taking their toll.

Eliot always saw himself as the dark half to Christian’s light. Both men had their daddy’s hard head and harder fists along with their mother’s quick mind and compassionate nature. Eliot protected his tender heart with cold anger and a surly attitude, while Christian continued to allow his to be scarred and battered as he strived to see the best in people.

So, he made a decision he knew would hurt his brother, and add another scar to his heart, but it would also protect Christian from the reputation they garnered from their retrievals. In his mind dropping Kane from his name wasn’t denying his twin but protecting him. He was counting on the fact that Christian would forgive him anything no matter how much it had hurt.

*\*Better to ask forgiveness than permission.\** He thought.

~ • ~ • ~

Eliot was right. Christian forgave him. He became the public face of their retrieval business while Christian faded into the background. Their clients never really saw him ... They treated him as though he were Eliot’s servant. Often Eliot would check to make sure his brother hadn’t faded away when he wasn’t looking, but he was always there to back him up, help him escape, or doctoring the consequences of his actions.

They had traveled to Russia for a job, then decided to stay when their ruggedly handsome looks and the appearance of being wealthy drew them into the world of the aristocracy. They spent the following year adding a considerable amount of money to their funds, but always at the expense of the nobility. They were very wealthy men at the young age of twenty-five, but it was also the first time Eliot’s actions almost cost him more than they could afford.

At the country estates of neighboring Barons ... Who also happened to be cousins, there was a continual good-natured bit of one-upmanship involving a family bible. The book was of no particular value, but the contest livened conversation during their weekend parties. The elder of the Barons hired Eliot to retrieve the Bible from his younger cousin.

Eliot insinuated himself into the crowd of bored nobles that moved from house party to house party during the summer. Eliot collected information from the members of the nobility while Christian gathered gossip from among the servants.

Christian discovered from the Baroness' maid that the bible was kept in a casket with some of the Baroness' most valuable pieces of jewelry. Subtle flirting with the young maid, sweet words in his rumbling purr, and a few trinkets that made her feel important soon had Christian the exact location of the casket.

Using the same subtle flirting, sweet words in his rumbling purr, small trinkets presented as gifts to his hostess was just as successful, and soon garnered Eliot the Baroness' attention.

Eliot slid silently from between the Baroness' finely woven sheets. Grabbing his clothes off the nearby chair, he watched the figure on the bed for signs of waking. He quickly located the proper casket and tucked the bible into a pouch that rode at the small of his back. Not wanting to be seen leaving the Baroness' private chambers, he quietly opened the balcony doors and using the drain pipe made his way to the ground where Christian waited with their horses.

It was during the early morning hours that they arrived at the elder Baron's manor house. They slid quietly in through the servants' entrance where they badly startled the kitchen servants. Christian soothed the Cook and her helpers as he would a skittish horse until the woman was feeding them and complaining about the quirks of the rich.

It wasn't long before the elder cousin met them in the library to exchange the bible for their fee. Deciding it was wise to not be in the line of fire between the two families, Eliot and Christian made their way to the closest inn. After procuring a room and settling the horses they sprawled together on the bed for some much needed sleep.

It was early afternoon when voices in the hall woke Christian. He kept still waiting to see what mischief was afoot. He heard the voice of a man and woman at their door right before it was eased open. Sunlight through the curtains fell across the face of the Baroness that had enjoyed Eliot's charms the night before. She handed the innkeeper a small pouch of coins as she moved into the room, the quiet rustle of silk marking her passage. Christian continued to watch her through the screen of his lashes as she gazed upon Eliot, who had burrowed against his side trusting his elder twin to keep him safe.

Muscles tightened as Christian prepared himself to move as the sun flashed off a derringer's silver plating. Right as she fired, he rolled pulling Eliot under him. He felt the fire drill through his skin and muscle as the bullet hit him in the back, but he didn't stop moving. There was still one shot in the small pistol. Strong fingers wrapped around the delicate wrist, his thumb putting pressure on the nerves in her hand causing numb fingers to drop the weapon.

Eliot quickly took in his bleeding brother and the weeping Baroness. He shot off the bed, grabbed Christian and lowered him to the bed as he'd started to collapse. He pulled off his brother's shirt to better see the wound. He cursed silently as there was no exit wound. He folded his shirt and pressed down hard to staunch the bleeding. Grabbing the still weeping woman, he pulled her over to the bed.

"Hold that and don't let up." He ordered searching for Christian's medical kit. "What were you thinking?" He growled as he laid out what he needed to remove the bullet.

“I wanted to surprise you. I wanted more time with you before you left.” Her chin still quivered, but she tried to act the coquette, batting eyelashes spiky with tears. “But I saw you lying with him ...” brown eyes flashed contempt, “In my place, and I knew I had to protect you.” She practically cooed. “He seduced you with his soft voice and eyes.”

“SEDUCED!” Eliot hissed. “He’s my twin brother, you half-wit!”

Her face paled and she started to swoon. Eliot slapped her.

“Keep your feet you miserable wench! You did this, now you’re going to help me, or your Baron will never live down the scandal of his wife being an adulteress.”

He shifted his brother on the bloody sheets, so the afternoon sunlight fell on the wound. A low moan was the only sound in the room as Eliot dug in the wound searching for the bullet. By the time he found and removed the small piece of lead, it took a dozen of his neat stitches to close the bullet hole. When he finished, both men were pale, shaking and sweating. Cleaning up the worst of the blood, Eliot looked at the now silent Baroness. He grabbed her reticule off the dresser and dumped the contents on the bed. She started to protest but shut her mouth with a snap when she met Eliot’s steely gaze.

“You made this mess, so you’re paying for cleaning it up.”

He counted out her money, pleased with the amount but wondered why she had so much. He arched an eyebrow in a silent question.

“I thought you might be persuaded to stay longer if I offered recompense.” She blushed hotly.

“Oh yeah. Well, now you’re paying me to leave.” He drawled as he shoved the money in his pocket. “Now hie your ass home to your husband.” Eliot dismissed her by the simple act of turning back towards Christian.

Eliot washed the blood off both of them the best he could, then called for the innkeeper. After putting the fear of retribution into the innkeeper, they soon had fresh linens, a hot meal, and the proprietor’s discretion bought with a few extra dollars and very thinly veiled threats from the retrieval specialist.

He slept lightly in case his brother woke through the night and needed him. Christian’s breath was warm against his skin as he pressed along his side. They roused early, both knowing it wasn’t safe for them to stay longer. Eliot changed Christian’s bandage, happy with the condition of the wound, but not that they had a long day of riding ahead of them.

After securing their bags to their saddles, Eliot helped Christian mount his horse. With a grunt of pain and a tense jaw, he settled in the saddle and urged his gelding toward Moscow.

It was full dark when they rode up to the hotel not far from the train station. Eliot got them a room and their bags settled before helping Christian down. Sliding an arm around the trim waist, he frowned when he found the back of Christian’s shirt was damp. Once in the room,

when he would have stripped his twin down, Christian brushed him off to go care for their horses. Eliot stopped at the desk and ordered two dinners brought to their room.

Coming into their room after turning the horses over to the stable hand, Eliot swore when he saw Christian sitting on the chair in front of the fire, stripped to his drawers trying to unwrap the blood-soaked bandage from around his middle.

“Damn it, Christian!” Eliot rushed to help him.

He didn’t like when his brother only picked at his dinner, but that was to be expected in his exhausted condition. He hoped the herbal medicines Christian had been taking would handle the strain his body had been under. Before they drifted to sleep, Christian finally spoke.

“I want to go home, El.”

“We will, Christian ... We will.” Eliot whispered against the beloved hair.

The next morning, Eliot left a slightly feverish Christian sleeping to find the nearest place to sell their horses and pick up a train schedule.

Christian’s plaintive request made the retrieval specialist realize how little his brother asked of Eliot, silently allowing him to drag him wherever his wanderlust carried them. Since their grandfather’s death, Eliot never felt the need to call one place home. His home followed him much like Ruth followed Naomi to Bethlehem.

Home. He wondered where Christian thought of as home. Did he mean Oklahoma or just going back to the States? Shaking off his introspective mood, he hurried up the stairs, anxious to see if Christian’s fever had gone down. He found a shaking Christian curled under a pile of blankets, sweat dampening his clothes and hair. He pulled back the covers and checked his bandages. The wound was fine, but the long ride yesterday on top of being shot had been too much for Christian’s body to handle. After giving the porter a list of things he needed, he stripped the feverish man and began the tedious process of bathing him with cool water to lower his temperature.

Eliot couldn’t understand why Christian was so ill. He dosed him with the herbs and medicines his twin carried in his medical kit, hoping something would work. The bullet wound was healing quickly, but fever still ravaged his body.

Through Christian’s fevered mutterings, Eliot finally understood. His twin was what grandfather would have called heartsick. His spirit was exhausted. He had put the needs of his brother before his own until getting shot forced him to stop. Eliot talked to his twin in English ... In Cherokee ... Talked until he was hoarse, and when he thought he had lost Christian to the road into the west, he stretched out beside his brother and pulled him to his chest.

He must have dozed off because when he opened his eyes, the noonday sun shone through the window, and both men were drenched with sweat. Christian’s fever had broken while the brothers huddled together.

Eliot called to the porter to freshen their room while he carried his brother to the bathroom and bathed away the stench of illness from them both. Exhausted he climbed into bed and pulled Christian against him. As soon as they were able, they would be traveling first-class to America.

Opening his eyes seemed to take forever. That task finally accomplished, he let his eyes roam, taking in the comfortable furnishings and sunlit windows. Since the last thing he remembered was sitting on his horse, his back on fire from his bullet wound, being warm, comfortable and pain-free seemed a good thing. He felt the warmth of a body curled around him. He didn't need his eyes to know it was his twin.

Finally convincing his body he needed to move, he began easing himself upright. He felt the pull of his stitches so shifted his weight to the other side. He'd just swung his legs over the edge of the bed when Eliot's eyes snapped open.

"Christian!"

Mouth too dry to speak, he simply turned his head to acknowledge he heard. Christian nodded his gratitude when Eliot handed him a glass of water.

"How long?" He croaked.

"We've been here a week."

"When do we leave?" He sat the glass down and attempted to stand.

Feeling wobbly as a newborn foal, he held onto the bedpost while looking for his clothes. Eliot just stared incredulously at his brother as Christian moved toward their luggage.

"What are you doing?" Eliot barked.

Christian collapsed in a chair, panting after grabbing a pair of pants and a shirt.

"Getting dressed to find a privy." His hands trembled as he tried to pull on his pants.

Stalking over to his brother he yanked the pants out of his hand.

"This is a high-class hotel. They have indoor plumbing." Eliot sniffed haughtily.

Reaching a hand out Eliot helped steady Christian. "Lead on my good man." Christian grinned wearily leaning into Eliot for support.

Before Christian lay back down, Eliot pulled off the bandages. Seeing the newly healed skin, he grabbed the scissors and made short work of removing the stitches. Knowing the new scar would be tight he rubbed it with Petro-Carb salve to soften the scar tissue. Leaving his twin in healing sleep, Eliot went to arrange the first leg of their journey to America.

~ • ~ • ~

The train from Moscow to Budapest found Christian mostly sleeping and Eliot either reading in their compartment or in the club car increasing their fortune. He walked the length of the train after each stop looking for familiar faces or possible threats. Christian was finally back on his feet after a few days and often joined him on his walks through the train.

They were enjoying dinner in the crowded dining car when a dark-haired couple approached their table.

“Pardon me.” The twins looked up. “I was wondering if we might join you? It seems we’ve come at the busiest time.”

Getting the barest nod from Eliot, Christian stood.

“Of course.” He extended his hand. “Christian Kane.” He motioned toward Eliot. “My traveling companion, Eliot Spencer.”

The men shook hands.

“Nathan Ford.” He drew a dark-haired woman forward. “My sister, Sophie.”

“Ma’am.” Both men acknowledged as the couple sat.

Their conversation stayed on general topics with Sophie subtly flirting with the better dressed Eliot.

“I must say you and Eliot look a lot alike.” Nathan commented.

“So we’ve been told.” Christian stated flatly before changing the subject.

“I’ve just come out of mourning for my late husband.” Sophie sighed. “Nathan was kind enough to accompany me on a short trip to get out in the world again.” She leaned toward Eliot, showing a great deal of décolletage.

The twins were about to excuse themselves when Sophie laid her hand on Eliot’s sleeve.

“Perhaps you’d like to join me on the back platform for a breath of air?” She asked coyly.

Christian rolled his eyes behind Nathan’s back.

“I’d rather lay down with a pissed off rattler than walk with you, Miss Deveraux.” Eliot’s polite smile never faltered.

“I beg your pardon?” Sophie tried to remain cool.

“Now look here!” Nathan started to stand, but Christian’s hand on his shoulder kept him pinned to his chair.

“Shall we take that stroll to your compartment?” Eliot offered Sophie his hand. “These good people don’t need their dinners interrupted.”

She and Nathan exchanged a look. They retired to the couple’s compartment.

“How did you ...?” Sophie stopped as she handed Eliot a snifter of brandy.

Her eyes widened. “You’re THAT Eliot Spencer?”

Eliot gave a mock bow. “At your service.”

Nathan looked confused.

“We were in St. Petersburg when the news came in about Kiev ...”

Eliot and Christian both shivered. An enforcer for a local crime lord, known as the Butcher of Kiev, had snatched Eliot because he liked his long, wavy hair. Christian had educated the man in the things his uncles, both white and Cherokee, had taught him about knives. The Butcher did not survive the lesson. Lucky for Eliot the big man hadn’t had a lot of time to play with Eliot before Christian had tracked them to The Butcher’s lair.

Nathan’s hands raised in surrender. “I didn’t know ...”

“Now you do.” Eliot let his Oklahoma roots seep into his voice.

“How did you know?” Sophie was always working to hide her tells.

“Need to change your game, Darlin’.”

Sophie and Nathan nodded, the wheels in the two sharp minds were already turning. After that, they passed a pleasant evening with Christian begging off early while Nathan and Eliot retired to the club car for a cigar and a few hands of cards.

The grifters proved to be pleasant traveling companions though Eliot noticed Christian again fading into the background.

~ • ~ • ~

At Budapest, Christian and Eliot bought their tickets to Paris aboard the Orient Express while Nathan and Sophie decided to stay and play amongst the Hungarian nobility for a time. They retired to their rooms after their last dinner together.

“You could stay.” Christian noted, staring out the window.

“What?” Eliot poured them each a whiskey neat.

“I can get back to the States on my own.” Christian relished the smooth burn of the aged liquor.

Eliot eyed his brother trying to read what he was really saying. “Why would I stay?” He watched Christian closely over the edge of his glass.

“You’d make a good team, give them a fresh perspective, protect them when a plan burned them.” The earnest expression in Christian’s eyes made Eliot’s breath catch. “You love the game. You love playing the snobbish blueblood knowing their giant egos won’t let them admit they were duped. You don’t think you’ll find that in the States.”

“Say you’re right.” Eliot growled, frustrated. He could stop long enough to give some of his time to his brother. “These bluebloods are clannish. They correspond with each other. So it won’t hurt if Eliot Spencer were to disappear into Eliot Kane for a while.”

Christian smiled indulgently at his twin. Setting his glass down, he made his goodnights. Eliot clenched his jaw as the door to Christian’s bedroom door closed.

*\*Keen-eyed sumbitch,\** Eliot fumed. Christian had watched Eliot all his life and Eliot didn’t have the heart to lie to his brother.

~ • ~ • ~

Their journey to Paris started out well, with the Orient Express living up to its reputation. Eliot headed toward the club car while Christian stopped to have a word with the chef. A slim, well-dressed blonde stumbled against him. Instinctively, Eliot reached out to steady her. He smirked as he felt her clever little hands riffling through his pockets. He looked down into eyes of the deepest indigo.

“Where I keep my money, sweetheart, no proper lady would put her hands.” Eliot chuckled playfully.

The blue eyes widened when she realized two powerful hands held her fast. Her gaze darted over the retrieval specialist’s shoulder. Blue eyes did a victory dance just as Eliot felt a pistol against his back.

“Let her go.” A baritone voice from the southern United States demanded.

Fear replaced victory at the predator’s smile that crossed Eliot’s face. In a flash, he switched his grip on the blonde while disarming the man behind him. Wide brown eyes stared back from a handsome face the color of dark Belgium chocolate. The dark-skinned man jumped like a startled cat at the low dark voice behind him.

“I would ask if you required assistance, but you seem to have things well in hand, Brother.” Christian’s chuckle was low and suggestive.

“Indeed, Brother. I suggest we adjourn to our compartment to see what develops.” His laugh was just as wolfish as his sibling’s.

The blonde started to struggle so Eliot lifted her off the floor enough for her skirts to hamper her movements. She glared at her dark companion.

“Told you I couldn’t move in these blasted things!”

“Parker ... I ...” He started.

“Why don’t we discuss this somewhere more private?” Christian gave the man a prod toward their compartment.

The four were silent until the door closed behind Christian.

“Look, we’re sorry, okay ... I mean no harm done, right ... We just go our merry way ... You forget us ... We forget you ... Everybody’s happy.” The dark skinned man babbled.

“Hardison!” The blonde hissed.

“Parker.” She stuck her hand out awkwardly to Eliot.

With a sly grin, Eliot bowed low over her hand like she was a duchess and kissed the back of her knuckles.

“Eliot Spencer at your service, mademoiselle.” He winked at his brother. “Is Parker your first name or last?”

“Just one. My parents gave me two but they’re dead now, so I wasn’t sure if it was alright to keep using it.” With a slight jerk of her head and a frown, she fell silent.

Hardison frowned at Eliot’s show of chivalry. “Alec Hardison. I’m Miss Parker’s man Friday.”

“Do you always allow your charge to go around sticking her hands in strange men’s pants?” Christian chuckled.

“You’re twins.” Parker chirped up.

“Christian Kane.” He extended his hand to Parker and Alec.

“Why aren’t you the same?” Parker looked back and forth between the two.

“You’ll have to ask Eliot.” Christian commented dryly.

Eliot cringed inwardly but let the jibe slide. They sat the couple down, and the brothers began coaxing their story from them.

Both had been products of the 'Orphan Trains'. Both had been orphaned young. Alec had been taken in by a couple whose entire family was comprised of orphans. The family made their living traveling with a Chautauqua show.

Parker had been taken in by a couple, who needed a sweet-faced child to help in their scams and cons. They hadn't cared for Parker past what she could do to further their fortunes. Now the girl was a world-class thief, if a little 'touched'.

Christian watched his brother with the younger couple. He'd never seen Eliot so taken so quickly. Being twins and orphans, too, they had always been wary with strangers. They didn't miss having a large circle of acquaintances because they always had each other, but something about Alec and Parker had struck a chord in Eliot.

Parker seeing the sad smile on Christian's face cocked her head like a curious spaniel. Moving his eyes from Alec to Eliot and back to her, he stared hard into the dark blue orbs as though reading her soul. A smile like the sun lit her face as they came to an understanding.

He continued to observe their interaction as the train drew closer to Paris. They made plans on what to do while in Paris. Christian made plans of his own. They settled into adjoining suites at the hotel, freshening up for the evening's activities. Eliot grew worried when Christian begged off, but between Parker and Christian, they allayed his worries.

Later that night, the trio tumbled into Parker and Alec's suite in a tangle of jackets, cravats, petticoats, chemises, and pants. Adrenaline flowed, shiny money and shiny trinkets scattered across the duvet followed by pale, bronze and dark sweat-sheened skin. Later as Eliot drifted into a satiated sleep, Parker firmly ensconced between him and Hardison, he hoped Christian wouldn't be too upset when he moved his things out of their room.

~ • ~ • ~

A lone tear ran down Christian's face as he placed the envelope on Eliot's valise. Not in their entire life had they had ever been apart, but now Eliot was building a new family, one that didn't seem to have a place for him. Pulling his greatcoat around him he ventured out into the chilly predawn making his way to the train station. He'd bought his ticket for Calais the day before so all that was left to do was get on board. He sent prayers to the gods of his grandfather that someday he and Eliot would meet again.

In Calais, he boarded a boat to take him across the English Channel, then traveled to London where he booked passage on a steamship to New Orleans. He hoped by the time he got to Louisiana the stabbing pain where Eliot lived in his soul would become be a dull ache he can learn to ignore.

Between Calais and New York Harbor, Christian had a lot of time to think. He spent his days in discussions with the ship's doctor on new techniques and procedures in the medical profession. Some of the practices in Europe were far ahead of the States.

Nights he couldn't sleep, he played cards or roamed the decks like a restless ghost missing the feel of Eliot close by. By the time he disembarked in New York, he'd finally programmed his brain to not look for or depend on the presence of another. Alone and single were new words in his life.

Securing his belongings on the side-wheeler that would take him to New Orleans, Christian settled on deck with a cheroot and a beer, letting the bustle of the harbor soothe his tired mind.

Somewhere along the coast of South Carolina the reality of being 'home' started to sink into his bones. It had been three, almost four, years since they'd climbed on a boat with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and sailed to England. Now, sometime in the next three days, he'd be in New Orleans.

Taking in a deep lungful of air he held it. Closing his eyes he pushed it all out. When he opened his eyes he was still alone and his soul still ached, but it was muted. No longer as sharp as it had been the month before. For the first time since he left Eliot, Christian felt like he might survive ... Alone.

~ • ~ • ~

When Eliot opened his eyes the first thing he saw was long blonde hair mixed with tight black curls. Parker was sprawled across his chest like a pup on a cushion. Alec was pressed tight to his side, his head tucked under Eliot's chin.

He savored the feelings of warmth, trust, and home ... Things he'd only ever felt with Christian. He didn't understand how these two youngsters crawled into his heart so quickly and made themselves a home. While Alec being a man of color would hardly raise an eyebrow in this part of the world, if they ever went back to the States, they would surely kick up a ruckus.

He drifted for a few minutes until his sleep addled brain finally registered Christian, States, Parker, and Hardison. His first urge was to jump up and race through the adjoining door, but he didn't want to start a beautiful day scaring the wits out of his new lovers.

He smirked, entirely too satisfied at that thought. Why he wasn't mortified at the thought of having a male and female lover was a mere flicker across his brain. The thought of not having them scared him almost as bad as when Christian had been ill. Speaking of his twin, he should probably go and explain to his brother how their family expanded overnight. He was startled out of his thoughts by Parker.

"You think too loud." She muttered sleepily.

"Sorry, Darlin'. I don't usually sleep this much."

"Good." She smirked, propping her chin on her fists still sprawled on his chest. "Means Alec and I are good for you."

“Yes, sweetheart, you are.” He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “We should probably go tell Christian about you and Alec joining the family.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I like Christian. He doesn’t think I’m strange. We understand each other.” She scooted off the bed and skipped to the bathroom.

Eliot glanced from the softly snoring Alec to Parker, confused. They hadn’t exchanged more than a few words with Christian though Parker and Christian would often watch each other unabashedly. Eliot pulled on his pants and grinned as Alec buried his face in Eliot’s pillow. He opened the adjoining door between the two rooms and stepped through into silence.

The bed was immaculate, everything in place except Christian and his luggage. Eliot walked over to his valise. Tucked in the handles was an envelope addressed to him in Christian’s scrawl. Worried, but not yet panicked, Eliot unfolded the letter.

*Eliot,  
By the time you read this, I will most likely be boarding a ship for America.*

Eliot’s knees gave out and his butt hit the carpet. Parker and Alec came looking for him when he didn’t come back to their room.

“Eliot?” Hardison waved a hand in front of his face as Parker curled against his side.

“He’s gone.” He said softly.

“Who’s gone.”

“Christian.”

Parker snatched the letter from his hand and began to read out loud.

*Eliot,  
By the time you read this, I will most likely be boarding a ship for America. I’ve watched you since we left Moscow, watched you with Nathan and Sophie and now with Parker and Hardison. You know them, understand them. They make your heart pound and your blood race. They bring you to life in a way that I cannot. It was amazing to watch you, with whom I have shared my entire existence, Parker and Hardison, in just a few short hours go from being two separate parts to being a whole. They understand you as well as you understand them. You live and breathe the same rare air.*

*I cannot share that air. I have stayed by your side, waiting for someone who could go with you to the places you want to go. Now you have them, and my journey must continue—alone. I know you always wondered why I didn’t share my experience from my passage into adulthood ritual, this is why. You would have done everything in your power to make sure the vision did not come true. You would have given up your happiness to cleave to my side, and I could not allow that to happen.*

*Though it tears through my soul to leave you—I must. Your path lies with Parker and Hardison, and I know that path would be much harder if you were to travel with me, so I have made the choice for both of us. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, right di-na-da-nv-tli? Be happy and allow your new loves to soothe the hurts that I have inflicted on your heart. I pray to the gods of our grandfather that we will one day be reunited in a place we can all be happy. Until then I hold you in my heart.*

*Christian*

By the time she finished, tears streamed down all their cheeks, as they wrapped around Eliot.

It was the afternoon sun that cast its long shadows throughout the room before the three moved from their spot propped against the bed. Alec and Parker gathered Eliot's belongings and moved them into their room. They informed the maid that the room was now free and gave her Eliot's key.

By the time they finished, Eliot had entrenched himself in the window seat with a decanter of whiskey and a glass. Alec put in an order to room service as Parker bore down on the brooding retrieval specialist. She snatched the decanter and the glass out his hands. Before he could protest, he had a lapful of squirming thief.

"Parker, this is not a good time." Eliot growled low.

"He gave you to us, you know." Parker stilled, long legs wrapped around his slim waist.

Alec moved his legs so he could join them in the window seat, placing the bare feet in his lap running long fingers up and down Eliot's calves in a soothing rhythm.

"WHAT!" Eliot tried to move only to find himself pinned in place. "When? You three barely spoke to each other."

"No reason to." Alec kept up the soothing motion. "We all understood each other perfectly."

Eliot ran his hands through his hair, his agitation growing. "I don't understand."

"My Nana always said the heart sees more than the mind. Christian doesn't just read body language, he can see your soul." Hardison's voice was so matter-of-fact that Eliot could only stare.

"He said I was as pretty on the inside as the outside even after ..." Her eyes started to fill.

Eliot unable to see her hurting pulled her close. "He was right, baby girl. He's always been right about these things. I was just too pig-headed to see."

"So you're glad he gave you to us?" She sniffed, rubbing her eyes like a sleepy five-year-old.

“If he had to give me to someone, I’m very glad it was you.” Blue/grey eyes locked with brown over Parker’s head.

~ • ~ • ~

Christian shouldered his canvas bag and guitar case leaving his hands free as he made his way into New Orleans proper. In Paris, they’d laughed at his southern accented French, but here they smiled warmly and would point him in the right direction.

The hotel he found seemed reasonably priced and clean, run by a no-nonsense woman with skin the color of cinnamon, hair white as snow, and eyes the color of old gold. In a good-natured scold, she called a teenage boy over to show Christian his room.

“Yes ‘m, Nana.” He responded politely.

Christian stopped dead in his tracks and turned back to the desk. “Begging your pardon, ma’am.” She turned back to him. “This might be a mite forward, me being a stranger and all, but is your husband’s name, Hiram?”

Her eyebrows rose. “Yes, God rest his soul it was, why do you ask, Mr. Kane?”

“You traveled with the Chautauqua shows.” Christian reached into his inner coat pocket when she nodded.

“We did.” Now she sounded suspicious.

“I was asked to give you this, should our paths ever cross.” He handed her a thick envelope then turned to follow the boy to his room.

After getting settled, he explored the city a bit before returning to his hotel for an early supper. He replenished his medical supplies, his cigars, and his whiskey supply. He was enjoying an after-dinner cigar and a whiskey perusing a copy of *The Picayune* when his hostess approached. He started to stand.

“Sit ... Sit. I just wanted to thank you, Mr. Kane.” Christian looked confused. “That envelope was from my son, Alec. I haven’t heard from him in several years, and it does this old mother’s heart good to know her boy is happy and well.”

She pulled something out of her pocket and handed it to Christian. It was a picture of Eliot, Parker, and Alec. Christian washed the lump in his throat down with the last of the whiskey in his glass before handing the picture back. She pushed his hand away.

“That’s yours. I have my own.” She patted her apron pocket. “Since you’re here and Alec isn’t, I take it the young man in the tintype is your brother?”

“Twin.” Christian’s voice was harsh. “Eliot. He goes by Spencer, not Kane.”

“Tell me about, Eliot, Mr. Kane.” She motioned one of her children over to refill Christian’s glass.

Christian’s chuckle was more hurt than humor. “Since we’re somewhat related you should call me Christian, Chris, or Kane, but not mister.” He smiled softly at the young girl that handed him his refilled glass.

Evangeline Hardison studied the young man in front of her. She saw the mountain of pain he hid behind the wall of politeness.

“Eliot is the handsome twin, has a quick mind, quicker fists, and will protect and love Parker and Alec to his last breath.”

“Why did you leave?” She asked gently.

“It’s not my place anymore.” Christian looked into the bottom of his glass.

“You’ll always have a place with your twin.”

His expression said that he believed differently but did not argue. He made to go inside. “I thank you for the picture.” He touched the brim of his hat. “Ma’am.”

She didn’t see him again until the next morning when he inquired as to where he could buy a good horse. She loaned him one of her saddle horses and directed him to one of her ‘children’ north of the city.

“Tell Elijah to treat you right or he’ll answer to me.” She patted his leg then stepped back.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You call me Nana, Boy, just like my other children. You’re family now.”

“Yes, ma’am ... Nana.” He gave her a soft smile as he kneed the sorrel out of the courtyard.

He returned several hours later riding a well-muscled Grulla gelding, leading the sorrel and a bay carrying a pack saddle. He spent the next several days gathering supplies for the next leg of his journey. When everyone had left for church the following Sunday, he loaded his horses and pointed the Grulla west.

~ • ~ • ~

His pace was leisurely. Sometimes he stayed at inns, boarding houses, or hotels, but more often than not he camped out allowing nature to begin healing the gaping wounds in his heart. With only his horses for company, he tended to go for days without speaking, though sometimes he would sing softly while caring for his animals or strum his guitar if he needed sounds other than the bayou’s spring symphony. He was soon to the point where he didn’t make small talk, he simply said what he needed to with little interaction.

Money wasn't something he needed to worry about. Neither he nor Eliot were spendthrifts. As long as he wasn't overly extravagant, he'd be fine the rest of his life.

As he drifted across homesteads and ranches, Christian would pick up work here and there when extra hands were needed for rounding up cattle or breaking horses. He only stayed until the job was finished before moving on again.

His only tie to his former life were the letters he wrote to Evangeline Hardison. She was his link to his twin, so he used her as a way to let Eliot know he was alive. Not really paying attention to what he wrote, he would fill the page until there were almost too many to fit into an envelope before sending them. If he'd stopped to read them before posting them, he probably would have thrown them in the fire thinking he spent too much time alone. He'd have thought he was becoming as unhinged as Parker, but to the person reading them, they were a heartbreaking recitation of inner workings of one man's soul.

Evangeline 'Nana' Hardison opened the thick envelope that arrived in the day's mail. It had been a year since Christian Kane had graced her establishment, but now as she read through his rambling missive, it made her heart ache that she was the only person sharing his journey.

Another year passed and Evangeline had received six packets from Christian. His letters were full of beauty, excitement, and loneliness. He told her about the ranches where he'd worked and the nights the spirits walked through his dreams. He never said where he was, but the scenery he described sounded like he'd been wandering the southeastern portion of Texas. She carefully preserved all the letters hoping to someday receive one from Alec telling her that he was bringing Eliot and Parker home.

Christian guided the Grulla along the small river looking for a good campsite. Finding a spot, he stripped the gear off the horses before leading them to the river's edge to drink. Everything was fine until the wind changed direction. The Grulla snaked his long head around his master's shoulders, ears flat, blowing a challenge toward the young mesquite bushes.

Watching the bushes for whatever upset the geldings, Christian saw something the color of the sand move. Looping the leads around their necks so they wouldn't tangle in their legs, he approached the bush, his four-legged guardians close behind. Just in the shade of the bushes was a waterlogged burlap bag. Squatting down he knew he would only find death inside the bag, but he slit it open with his Bowie knife anyway.

Shoving his knife back in the sheath, he turned to see two bright eyes staring through the slit. Tearing the bag open, Christian found a single pup. He pulled the shivering animal out of the waterlogged bag. He started to stand but was nearly toppled by his horses shoving their heads over his shoulders to inspect their find.

"Would you two nosy nags give me a little room?" He chided the large animals. "Think you never saw a dog before." He continued to mutter as they trailed him back to camp.

Pulling a dirty shirt out of his pack saddle, he dried the pup and checked him for injuries. He found only a few spots that were tender to the touch, but none were life-threatening. Finally dry, he laid him on the foot of his bedroll where the small dog promptly went to sleep. Calling the horses in from where they'd wandered off to graze, he tethered them before going to check the snares he'd set on his way to the river.

As he shared part of his supper with his new friend, Christian studied the pup. He was coal black, and from his looks, he would be about knee high when he was fully grown. The only thing he could find out of the ordinary was the pup had blue eyes instead of brown.

They camped at the river for several days allowing him to do laundry, replenish some of his herbs and the pup he named River to recover from his ordeal. Finally, with River perched in the swell of his saddle, man and animals continued their journey south.

~ • ~ • ~

Several months later, Christian was finishing up a job at a ranch a day's ride north of Corpus Christi, breaking horses for the Army. They had stayed in one place long enough to give River a chance to mature to the point where Christian no longer had to carry the pup on his saddle.

He was working with the final horse in a corral adjacent to the ranch's pens holding young bulls. One of the cowboys thought it'd be funny to play a prank by running one of the bulls in with Christian and the green broke mustang. He was able to keep the horse calm until someone yelled and clanged one of the metal gates causing the horse to rear. Overbalancing, the mustang reared and fell backward with Christian trying to free himself and jump away from the falling horse.

The mare scrambled to her feet leaving the stunned man in the dirt. The bull ignored the horse for the easier target lying on the ground. A streak of black flashed across the corral and jumped straight into nipping at the bull's back legs.

The cowboys got quiet as they watched the forty-pound bundle of fury work the thousand pound bull over to the open gate then stood watching until someone closed the gate before running back to Christian, herding the horse in front of him.

Breathing harshly, but on his feet, Christian praised River before moving to check the horse for injuries while speaking softly and nursing his own bruised ribs. An angry shout from the foreman had cowboys scattering in a hurry while three bruised and dusty critters headed for the gate to the stable yard.

Christian took extra time with the trembling horse, brushing her down, half talking ... Half singing, alternating languages so the mare paid attention to the gentle treatment and forgot the trauma of the afternoon. His attention returned to his surroundings when River gave a warning growl. When he turned, the owner and three other men were standing a few feet from the black dog.

"Kane. These gentlemen would like a word." His boss called out.

Giving the Mustang a final pat, he slipped off its halter, freeing the horse into the corral with the other Army horses.

“This is Chris Carlson and Jeffrey Dean Morgan. They own spreads halfway between here and San Antonio.” He turned to the third man. “This is James Sterling, he deals in exotic bloodstock. Sold Chris and Jeffrey here some of them English cows... Shorthorns I think he called them.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Kane, your reputation precedes you.” Sterling held out his hand.

“It’s just Kane.” He shook the men’s hands. “I have a reputation?” He arched an eyebrow in question.

His boss laughed. “Hell, boy, you show up outta nowhere, take a bunch of rank mustangs and turn them into sweet tempered ladies’ horses, then ride off into the sunset. ‘Course you got a reputation.”

“Being a *‘breed’* don’t hurt none either.” Morgan’s grin had an edge to it.

“Got a problem with *‘breeds’*, Morgan?” Christian and River both growled.

Morgan’s grin lit his whole face. “Nope. Just checking to see if you did.”

“I’ve been called worse by better people than use that term.” His posture relaxed, River sat and leaned against his leg.

“If we’re done with the pissing contest, gentlemen.” Carlson stepped forward. “I’d like to offer you a job ... A full-time, no riding off into the sunset job.”

“What sort of job?” Christian was tired of roaming. He’d been looking for a place to settle.

“Training horses for me.” He glanced over at Jeffrey. “And Morgan when things are slow at the Twin C.”

“You mean cow ponies?”

“In a way. It’s a new breed known as the Quarter Horse. We’ve taken the local mustangs and crossed them with Thoroughbreds, which gives us a horse with size that’s good for working cattle and the fastest thing on four legs in the quarter mile. They’re a good all-around horse, but we want some specialty horses, too. Cutting, roping, maybe even racing.”

“Ambitious project.” Christian tried to sound impersonal, but his mind was racing.

“My son, Steven and I feel it’s a sound one. Lots of potential once we garner a reputation.”

“I was just about finished up here, anyway. Lucky you caught me when you did.” Christian eyed his boss.

“I’ll draw your pay, Kane. These boys’ll be moving out at first light.”

“We’ll wait while you settle your business, Kane. You can ride back to camp with us.” Chris stated.

“I’ll get my gear. I appreciate the opportunity, Mr. Carlson.”

“It’s Chris. We’re a small operation and not very formal. You’ll meet Steven and my wife, Sandra when we get back to camp.”

Christian tugged the brim of his hat in acknowledgment before moving to follow his former boss to the big house.

One the way to Carlson’s camp, he watched the three men. Carlson and Morgan chatted openly like people of long acquaintance are want to do. He started to get a feel for the men and liked what he saw, but Sterling was a whole other kettle of fish. The man reminded him of the various and sundry grifters they’d met when he was traveling with Eliot. He decided to watch a while longer just to be certain.

They approached a herd of cattle and horses before they reached camp. Combined crews from the Twin C, and Rocking M keeping them settled. Christian paused to look them over, but Chris had yelled for him, so he rode on. Cowboys came to take charge of the horses as Jeffrey, Chris, and Jim stepped down. The cowboy that reached for Christian’s Grulla was met with flattened ears and snapping teeth. He tried not to laugh as the young man scampered out of the way.

“I’ll take care of my boys if you just point me in the right direction. They’re a tad particular about who handles them.” Christian drawled.

With a quick bob of his head, the cowboy headed toward a good-sized creek. The familiar routine didn’t take long to accomplish. As he tied the geldings to the picket-line he admonished them to behave. Back in camp proper, introductions were made all around. Chris introduced his wife Sandra. Christian bowed over her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles.

His rough, “Pleasure, ma’am,” brought a bright blush to her cheeks.

Carlson directed his attention to the right. “You’ve already met James. This is his charming sister-in-law, Tara Cole.”

His expression never changed, but blue/grey eyes narrowed at the tall blonde. He bowed over her hand as well.

“Miss Tara.” His growl sounded threatening, but only to Sterling and Tara.

Before any more could be said a man about his own age with wavy sun-streaked hair that brushed his shoulders came from the direction of the chuck wagon.

“Steven!” Chris raised his voice to catch the young man’s attention. “Steven, I’d like you to meet Mr. Kane. He’s agreed to sign on to break and train our horses.”

“Pleasure ...” Whatever else Steven was going to say was lost when their hands joined.

Fire ran along his nerves as their hands joined and he looked into sherry brown eyes.

“Is all mine.” Christian purred low.

Color rose from Steven’s collar to the roots of his hair at Christian’s smoky reply. His mother’s innocent question about dinner caused him to drop the work-roughened hand like he’d been stung before giving his attention to his mother.

The Carlsons walked in the direction of the chuck wagon while Morgan spoke with the cowboy that was caring for the horses. Christian turned his attention back to James and Tara.

“Horses or the cattle?” He asked quietly.

“Horses.” Tara said bluntly. “And the son.” She swished her skirts.

A slow nasty smile stretched across the rugged face. “Think you just lost out on that one, Sweetheart.”

Sterling made a noise of protest but was quieted by a glare from Tara.

“How did you know?” She didn’t like making mistakes.

“Seen you work before. Thought you were a solo act, though.” Christian’s grin was still all teeth.

“It’s a trial run.” Sterling glared back at the blonde woman.

“Think y’all’d do better where people don’t have such long memories.”

“What’s your play, Kane?” Sterling’s tone was nasty.

“No play, been out of the game a while now. Doesn’t mean I forgot how to read the signs.” Christian chided.

They kept an eye on the rest of the group. Chris yelled for them to come to eat. Christian eyed the grifters.

“We’ll make our excuses in the morning, to go back to the city.” Sterling spat.

Christian nodded his agreement. Chris yelled again. "Tell you what ... I'll take a look at the horses after supper, you tell me about them, honestly, and if I like what I hear and see I'll take them off your hands for a fair price."

The three started toward the chuck wagon. "Why would you do that?" James asked suspiciously.

"As a favor to the horses, and we'll call it a reward for you leaving without a fuss." Christian drawled and extended his hand.

Sterling looked at the long-haired man, at Tara, who nodded, then back at Christian before taking his hand.

After dinner, James and Christian walked out to where six horses were tethered away from the others. Curious, Steven wandered along behind.

Physically the four mares and two geldings looked sound. Christian checked them over carefully then smiled when he noticed none of the horses were shod. *\*Indian ponies\**, he thought with a grin. Taking a length of braided rawhide from where it wound around his waist, he looped it around the lower jaw of a stocky black and white paint before pulling her off the picket line. Agilely swinging onto her bare back, Christian ran the mare through her paces, controlling her with his legs, knees and by shifting his weight. He brought the mare to a stop and slid easily off her back. He slid her halter back on and tied her with the others.

Looping the rawhide over his gun belt, Christian approached the group that had gathered. Chris was grinning widely at the show of his abilities while everyone else waited to see what was going to happen next. Christian simply looked at Sterling.

"Fifty a head." The Englishman barked.

Christian chuckled low. "They're Indian ponies, Sterling. Ten."

"Thirty." James frowned. "How did you know?" He barked.

"Twenty and I'll pay you in coin." Christian smirked then dropped his voice. "No shoes."

"Done." Sterling held out his hand, which Christian took.

"Bill of Sale and we'll be square."

Sandra produced paper and pen. Sterling wrote out a bill of sale while Christian called River to him. He pulled off the dog's collar and worked his fingers into the braided leather. A few minutes later he handed the gaping Englishman six gold Double Eagles.

"You let your dog carry your money!?" He gasped.

"Would you think to look there?" He smirked.

The next morning Christian was stringing his horses together and tying them to his pack horse when Steven approached asking shyly if he could give him a hand. With a smile that melted hearts across most of Europe, Christian showed him what needed to be done.

By the time they herded the cattle into the holding pens outside of town and settled their horses at the livery, Christian knew Steven Carlson's life story. He'd told Steven about growing up in Oklahoma, and traveling with Buffalo Bill, but nothing about Eliot or his stint as a retrieval specialist.

After securing a room, he gathered his kit and a change of clothes and headed for the bath house. On the way, he posted his latest packet to Evangeline Hardison. He got back to the hotel in time to see Morgan and Chris headed toward the saloon. River cracked a blue eye from the chaise lounge as Christian repacked his saddlebags.

"You should be in the barn with the horses." Christian grouched at his friend.

The dog gave an exasperated snort before closing his eyes and ignoring his human. Leaving his hair hang loose instead of fighting the curls into their usual braid and headed back to the dining room.

Steven and his mother had just sat down when Christian entered the room. The light-haired man stood and motioned for him to join them. A relaxing evening was spent with Steven and Sandra on the hotel veranda, and Christian was ready to call it a night. He'd be leaving early with the cowboys that were driving the cattle to the two ranches.

Sandra and Chris would be along after picking up their monthly supplies. Steven was riding back with Christian to help get him settled and show him around the ranch. He watched Steven and Morgan as they neared the Rocking M. Something had Morgan keyed up. While nothing showed on his face, his horse had picked up his mood and was dancing and bumping Steven's horse making the grey mare surly. Steven smiled indulgently while Christian was about to knock the ranch owner in the dirt when Steven said just one word.

"Jeffrey."

Man and horse both stopped. Giving the younger man a sheepish look from under the brim of his hat, he visibly relaxed in his saddle. His horse relaxed and started to behave.

"Sorry."

At Christian's questioning look, Steven chuckled.

"You'll see when we get to the Rocking M."

They broke over the rise to see the ranch in the distance. Christian caught sight of two riders moving towards them. He looked around to verify everyone's position. He called River to heel, his tone causing the pack horse to move closer, bumping Christian's leg with his nose. The

horses tied to his pack harness suddenly came alert. Steven's eyes widened as Jeffrey's narrowed.

"You can relax, ol' son. It's just my partner and foreman, Jensen and my niece, Alona." Jeffrey assured him.

Christian appeared relaxed but judging by his animals they were already if they were meeting trouble. The riders dropped from a lope to walk so as to not spook the cattle. A gust of wind caught the man's hat causing it to dangle down his back by the stampede cord.

"By all the Gods." Christian breathed out.

Steven smirked at his reaction to Jeffrey's foreman. "Now you know why Jeffrey's excited. He's been away from the ranch for a month."

Green/gold eyes met his. Sun-kissed brown hair brushed his shoulders and a face that made Christian wish he had his grandfather's talent for drawing. His brain finally processed what Steven said. An arched eyebrow and narrowed eyes looked for the joke at his expense. Twinkling blue eyes met his.

"Jensen and Jeffrey?" He kept his voice low. Then he noticed Jeffrey's horse pressed against Jensen's, but also included the petite blonde.

"They get away with it?" Christian still sounded skeptical.

"Most of their hands have been with them for years, and they're very careful."

Christian locked eyes with Steven. "Are you careful, too, Steven?" His husky voice dropped to a purr and heat churned in eyes like a spring storm.

Steven shifted restlessly in his saddle causing his horse to sidle closer. Christian's Grulla started to take exception until he twitched the reins. Steven blushed a deep red under his tan, but the blue eyes that met Christian's were filled with wonder and not a little heat of their own.

Their little staring contest was interrupted by Jeffrey riding up with the others to make introductions.

"Y'all might as well take a break and get some dinner while we sort out the cattle." Jensen drawled as he eyed Christian and Steven. "Jeffrey's sister-in-law, Sam's, a fair cook and you won't find the portions lacking."

Jensen exchanged a look with Jeffrey, who rode out front with his niece, while he dropped back with Christian and Steven. Using the excuse of his horses, he dropped back to let the men catch up. He found the dynamic of the men interesting in that Jeffrey deferred to Jensen though Jeffrey was older.

At the ranch, Kane pulled the bridle off his Grulla, so it was easier for the gelding to drink before moving to the horses tied to the pack horse. They all stood patiently as he talked, crooned and finally led them around the trough to drink. As delicate as a cat, River perched on the edge of the trough until the pack horse gave him a nudge causing him to fall in the water. Christian swore in several languages as his dog found it amusing to shake the excess water on his owner.

Spotting a Spanish oak not too far from the house, he led his horses over to rest out of the noonday sun. He'd just settled back against the old tree, River stretched out at his side when he heard arguing. Steven stormed out the screen door in a high temper, Jensen two steps behind his body language pleading for understanding.

"I'm thirty-two years old, Jensen, and unlike this asylum, you ride ramrod on, I do not need a wet nurse!"

"Steven. No one's trying to wet nurse you. I just ..."

"Don't even finish that thought, Ackles." Steven spun around to face the handsome foreman.

"Please, Steven ... I'm sorry. Find Kane and get him in here before I'm sleeping in the barn."

"This topic closed?" Steven glared.

"Absolutely." Jensen raised his hands in surrender.

Christian remained where he was as Steven stalked across the stable yard.

"Time for lunch."

"Trouble in paradise, Duchess?"

"Just well-intentioned friends." Steven sighed heavily.

"Because I'm an itinerant horse breaker, Cherokee or something else."

"Stranger with a reputation ... Almost mystical way with animals ..." Steven waved his hand to indicate the dozing horses and dog, "And apparently people, too." He smiled softly.

Christian rose slowly so as to not disturb the animals. "If it eases your mind—I'm not a gold digger or seducer of innocents. As an added bonus I do a little doctoring on the side." He brushed the dust off his pants before walking with a smiling Steven to the house.

The cattle were finally separated, and everyone was ready by the time Chris and Sandra arrived at the Rocking M. Together, they resumed their journey to the Twin C.

~ • ~ • ~

The workers at the Twin C were an eclectic combination of Anglo, Mexican and Native. Jim Bever was the Carlson' foreman. After staring at Christian for several minutes he stuck out his hand.

“Heard about you. Looking forward to watching you work, Boy.”

Christian returned the man's grin with one of his own. “It'll be an interesting experiment.”

His quarters were a small cabin set close to the stables. After settling himself and his horses, Steven gave him a tour of the compound. When they got back to the cabin, Steven seemed reluctant to leave until Christian asked him to ride with him in the morning to show him the rest of the herd.

Sitting on his cabin's porch with his feet propped on the rail, and River on his back, feet in the air, dreaming his doggie dreams, Christian had a cup of coffee cooling in his hand as he enjoyed watching the ranch settle into another night. Various herbs hung drying from the rafters, and a small smile graced his face as he remembered back a couple weeks when River brought a whimpering little girl with skinned hands and knees to the porch just as he finished his supper. He cleaned and patched up her scrapes, then sent her back to her parents.

It didn't take long before people would stop by in the evenings, and Christian was once again using the medical skills learned at his grandfather's knee. Steven expressed his concern that he was spreading himself too thin, working with the horses during the day and working as a healer in the evenings, but Christian shrugged off his concern and never turned anyone away.

The men's relationship continued to deepen. Steven spent many evenings with Christian, keeping him company as he treated their workers' various complaints. When Steven discovered Kane played guitar, the men were often found with their heads together bent over their instruments, lost in their music.

Sandra and Chris worried silently for their son. They knew of his proclivity toward men and hoped when Kane became aware of Steven's nature that he would not hurt him. Knowing Chris would never say anything to Steven or Kane, Sandra waited until Chris and Steven had taken an overnight trip to the Rocking M to deliver a string of horses before inviting the horse trainer to her join her for supper.

She kept things light until they retired to the patio. Christian savored the smooth bite of his cigar and the Carlson' aged brandy. He knew Sandra had something on her mind, and guessed it had something to do with Steven, so he enjoyed the expensive cigar and excellent brandy while waiting for her to speak her piece.

“Mr. Kane ... Kane ... Is Kane the only name you have?” She sounded exasperated.

“No, but only family uses my other name.” Christian offered quietly.

With a little huff, she continued. “You've been spending a lot of time with my son.”

Christian now knew the topic of their conversation. He was about to be warned or warned off ... He wasn't sure which, yet. Unblinking blue/grey eyes continued to watch Sandra intently.

*\*Damn man's as bad as his dog.\** Sandra thought, their eyes eerily the same when they were staring you down. "I don't wish to see him hurt." Christian silently sipped his brandy. "Steven's not like most men. He listens more to his heart than his head, and it tends to land him in trouble likely as not, and I'm trying to make sure he's not getting himself in too deep with you."

"Would it be a bad thing if he **was** in too deep with me?"

"You're a practical man ... So ... Yes. Your kind never stays."

Christian started to bristle. "My kind?" His tone was snide.

"Yes. Horse breakers ... Traveling men, all of you. You never stay past the job. You, sir, have an incredible reputation for it." Sandra rose off the chaise to pace the patio.

"I see." He said quietly. He set the crystal snifter carefully on the table before turning to the gate that led into the yard. "Thank you for a lovely dinner, Mrs. Carlson. I would suggest that you have this conversation with Steven ... Perhaps find out his point of view on the matter." He paused before opening the gate. "By the by ... Steven calls me by my given name."

Sandra stared dumbfounded after the dark-haired man.

When her husband and son got home the next day, Sandra was quiet, lost in thought. When she cracked Steven's bedroom door on her way to bed, she was shocked when pale eyes met hers over Steven's bare shoulder.

~ • ~ • ~

Evangeline Hardison had been blessed to be born a beautiful child to a free mulatto woman, who was the mistress of one of New Orleans prominent businessmen. She had been educated at the local convent with an eye to her also becoming the mistress of a rich Creole. Instead, she'd met Hiram Hardison when the Chautauqua had been in the city and had the show's preacher had married them. When Hiram died, she returned to New Orleans with their adopted children and took over the running of her mother's hotel. Years later, the hotel was still doing well. Now, she was staring at familiar handwriting on a thick envelope the postman just handed her. She called out to her eldest, Yvette, to watch the desk as she settled in her office.

The longer she read, the brighter her expression became. She often despaired for Christian ... That he would ever find a place where he could make a home. She likened him to the tumbleweeds he often described, rolling whichever way the wind took them, but now it appeared he'd found someone able to stop his search long enough to put down roots.

Evangeline carefully refolded the letter and placed it in the cedar casket with all the others she'd received. She hoped one day to meet the infamous Eliot Spencer. If she did, she had a few

choice words to give him along with his twin's letters. After making her rounds and checking with Cook over the lunch and dinner menus, she shooed Yvette off to make sure the dining room was ready for the lunch crowd.

During the afternoon lull, Evangeline took the opportunity to catch up on her ledgers. Pleased with the numbers for the month, she closed the door of her office safe and was about to retire to the family's living area when she heard the clatter of coaches in the courtyard. Stepping onto the porch, she recognized the coaches from the livery stable by the docks ... One loaded with baggage, the other with people.

A middle-aged man with dark wavy hair was handing a beautiful brunette down from the coach. Evangeline's hand flew to her chest and her breath caught at the sight of the man that came down the steps of the coach behind the brunette.

Dark hair flowing below broad shoulders, rugged visage, eyes changeable as the New Orleans sky and dressed as fine as any Creole dandy was Eliot Spencer. He turned to give his hand to a pretty blonde that looked to be midway through her pregnancy. Instead of taking the proffered hand, she launched herself toward the man on the ground trusting that he would always catch her. Wrapping her legs around the trim waist she gave him a smacking kiss before he set her gently on her feet and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead.

"One of these days you're going have to quit doing that, Sweetheart, the babies might not like it." He scolded gently.

"Don't care." She stated flatly before moving to Eliot's side.

They all stood staring at the door of the coach.

"Hardison, don't make me drag you out of there." Eliot growled.

Evangeline moved to the edge of the porch. A dark head popped out of the coach.

"What if ... I mean she might not ... You know I don't ..." The young black man gave an undignified squawk as Eliot snatched him out of the coach.

"How old are you?" Eliot growled. "This is your mama, Darlin', just get your ass over here—begging your pardon, ma'am." The long-haired man turned, not surprised to see a petite black woman standing at his elbow.

"Alec?" She asked softly, reaching a hand out to touch his face.

"Nana." Was said with a soft sob as he gathered her in his arms.

The two men helped the drivers unload the luggage while Alec and his Nana held on to each other. They probably would have stayed in the courtyard all afternoon if not for Parker.

"Does that mean we can't have him back?" She asked Sophie loudly.

“No, dear. She’s just glad to see him.” A soft English accent answered.

“But he belongs to me and Eliot now.” She sounded like she was pouting.

“Mrs. Hardison will give him back, Parker. She just wants to borrow him for a bit.”

Evangeline gave an unladylike yell, bringing half a dozen children of various ages running to the courtyard. Orders were barked, luggage disappeared, and she led the group into the lobby.

Sophie moved over the freshly laid tea service while Parker started poking through things like a curious kitten. Nate poured two fingers of whiskey in a tumbler, and Eliot settled where he could watch the entire room after accepting a cup of tea from Sophie. Evangeline pulled Alec down beside her on the settee.

“Introduce me to your friends, Alec.” She prompted.

He gestured toward the thin man with wavy brown hair and blue eyes. “Nathan Ford.”

Then to the beautiful dark-haired woman. “Sophie Devereaux ... Ford.”

His face softened when he looked over to where Parker had curled against Eliot. “Parker and Eliot Spencer.”

Evangeline’s expression was soft and hopeful when she looked at Parker. “How far along are you, dear?”

Parker frowned at the question, but before she could answer, Alec interrupted. “Three months.” He grinned widely.

Evangeline’s eyes widened. Her head turned sharply toward Eliot when he spoke.

“Twins.” He said simply.

“Yours?” She watched them from the corner of her eye as she faced Alec.

Both men shrugged, unconcerned, but watched her expression closely. “Maybe.”

“Will you be staying until the birth?” Her expression turned sly.

“No.” Nathan interjected. “There’s someone we need to find who they want to assist with the births.”

“Nana.” Alec pulled her attention back. “Did a man who looks like Eliot come through here about five years ago ... Maybe gave you a letter?”

“A lot of people have come through here in five years, Alec. Wouldn’t still be here if they didn’t.” Evangeline scolded.

“Miz. Hardison, please,” Eliot expression was earnest, pleading.

“There was a young man, heartbroken that he was separated from his family.” Amber colored eyes glared at Eliot.

Eliot ducked his head, Parker moved until she was practically in his lap. Alec left the settee to move to Eliot and Parker.

“Nana!” Alec tone was strident. “We didn’t ask him to leave.”

“Did you give him reason to stay?”

Alec sputtered, but Eliot put a hand on his.

“Miz Hardison ... Christian is the only person I trust to deliver our babies. I know enough to know Parker can’t deliver them on her own.”

She stared hard at the trio. “How do these other two figure in all this?”

“They’re part of our family.” Parker snapped.

With a nod, Evangeline stood. “Y’all wait here. I have to fetch something from my office.”

“Nana ...” Alec started.

“Hush, Alec. Y’all had your say, now it’s my turn. As soon as I get back, we’ll talk some more. Joshua will show you where your rooms are if you want to freshen up.” In a swirl of skirts and petticoats, she moved away from the group.

A boy of eleven or twelve with café au lait skin waited for them to decide. Sophie stood to follow.

“I’m going to get out of this hat and jacket than be right back down. Don’t let her start without me.”

Parker unceremoniously jumped to her feet. “I got to pee.” She announced.

Joshua’s eyes got wide at the blunt nature of Parker’s statement. Alec shooed him up the stairs.

“I still remember where it is.” He told the boy. Joshua nodded then left with Sophie.

When everyone returned, Evangeline and Eliot were at silent loggerheads. Nathan looked amused at the retrieval specialist being held at bay by Hardison’s Nana.

“What a beautiful casket.” Sophie remarked. “Cedar isn’t it?”

“Does it have treasure?” Parker’s eyes lit with excitement.

“Yes, it has treasure. Treasure worth more than all your money.” Evangeline still stared at Eliot.

“Oooh, can we see it? We have a lot of money.”

“Most of it probably misbegotten, too.” She muttered under her breath.

“Nana!” Alec sounded horrified.

“You denying it, boy.”

“We’re retired, Madame.” Nathan added to the mix.

“Temporarily, maybe.” She eyed Parker’s thickening waistline.

“We’re helping people, too.” Alec insisted.

She rolled her eyes at her son. “This casket holds pieces of a man’s heart and soul. I expect you to treat the way it deserves.” She walked over and handed the casket to Eliot.

Callused fingers moved reverently over the simple box. The expression in his blue/grey eyes made her breath catch.

“There’s hasn’t been a day go by I haven’t wished for him beside me.” He breathed out softly.

Alec and Parker crowded closer as Eliot opened the casket. Inside lay every missive Evangeline had ever received from Christian Kane.

“I received one just today. I had barely finished reading it when y’all pulled into the courtyard. I suspect you should take those to your suite to read. Supper is at eight, but I can have Cook make you up a tray to tide you over ‘til then.”

“That would be most kind.” Sophie added when the three moved off toward the stairs without acknowledging them.

The casket sat like an elephant in the room until everyone was comfortable, and Yvette and Joshua had rolled a cart with several platters of food and beverages into their suite. Eliot took out the first letter and carefully unfolded it and began to read. Nathan and Sophie sat transfixed as Eliot’s gravel voice painted pictures with his brother’s words.

Christian probably never realized how much of himself he revealed in his letters. In the first letter, he told Evangeline he hoped one day Eliot would bring Alec and Parker to New Orleans and she could pass on his letters.

During the fifth letter, Eliot read, the tone changed. Christian had stopped in the middle of the letter he'd started to Eliot. The next line simply said, *'Dear Nana'*. The pages dropped to the floor as Eliot stood and walked out the balcony doors. Alec and Parker exchanged a look. She went after Eliot while Alec picked up the letter. Sophie leaned heavily into Nathan, the older couple feeling helpless to aid any of them.

*"Dear Nana," Alec's voice only cracked a little, "when I began this missive I was headed to Tahlequah, the place of our birth. The shaman of our tribe still lives though he has seen many years. He arranged for me to participate in a sweat lodge so that I might clear the darkness from my spirit. Much was revealed to me during that time. I will not burden you with those that would hold no meaning but to Eliot or me, suffice to say that to find a degree of happiness as Eliot has found, I must begin to tear down the wall I built around my heart when I left Paris. I began this letter anew to correspond with the woman who showed me great kindness though I be a stranger. My journey will now take me to the south, so these letters may be few for a time. Your friend, Christian Kane."*

Alec placed the letter on the table and went to where Parker stood wrapped around a stoic Eliot.

"He hates me." Eliot forced out around the lump in his throat.

"On the contrary." Sophie injected.

Three sets of eyes turned to the grifter.

"What!?"

"All your lives you were each other's everything." Eliot nodded his agreement. "Then we became friends, but you were still each other's everything plus two." Her audience was getting restless, but she refused to be rushed. "When you met Parker and Hardison your world shifted. Christian was no longer your everything, but you were still his. You unknowingly broke his heart."

Eliot dipped his head. "So rather than stand on the outside looking in, he left trying to figure out how to survive with no one to cover his back."

"Precisely." Sophie agreed. "He had to grieve. He didn't want to mar your happiness. You had Parker and Alec to get you through his loss." She stopped and took a breath. "He had to change his focus to survive.

"Why don't we go to dinner before we delve into the rest of the past five years?" Nathan rubbed his hands together.

If Evangeline was surprised to see the group in the dining room, she didn't let on. Everyone was looking a bit shell shocked, so she seated them near the French doors to enjoy the evening breeze off the river and a little extra privacy.

Relaxed and well fed, Parker began to yawn widely and leaned first into Eliot and then Alec. The babies were placing a heavy strain on her physical resources—she never slept so much in her life. Nathan and Sophie decided to sample New Orleans nightlife, Alec went to spend time with his Nana and meet his new siblings while Eliot settled beside Parker with a fresh pot of tea, a lap secretary, his spectacles, and Christian’s letters.

By the time Alec returned he’d made good progress through the letters. He never knew his twin was such a wordsmith. Alec made short work of his bedtime ablutions before sliding in behind Parker. The blonde grumbled but didn’t wake.

“So, where are we?” Alec asked softly.

“New Year’s three years ago.” Eliot pinched the bridge of his nose. “He spent Christmas here because he was tired of talking to his horses.” His expression was sheepish when he looked over at Alec. “Your Nana must think I’m the worst brother, ever.” He said softly.

“We talked about it. She understands. It’s just that she knows Christian, she doesn’t know you. Christian only ever said good things about you, but Nana hates seeing anyone alone and hurting, so she sorta adopted him—same as he adopted her.” He gave a slight shrug. “Now put that away so we can get some sleep. You know how Parker gets in the morning.”

Eliot’s chuckle was raunchy. “Hmmm. Better enjoy it while we can. A month from now will be a different story.” He left the bed long enough to shut down all the gas lights and secure their room since Nathan and Sophie were still out.

When both men woke the next morning with a groan, Parker was proving what made her a world-class thief. She had stolen both their breath and their senses. By the time she was finished with them, all that was heard from the bottom of the pile was a weakly protesting Alec. Before Eliot and Alec got sorted out, Parker was in running her bath giving verbal jabs at men still sprawled across the bed.

“She’s killing us, you know.” Alec panted.

“But what a way to go.” Eliot rolled off the bed and headed to the bathroom. “She’s going to need every bit of that energy when the twins come.”

“Is that our revenge?” Alec dragged himself upright.

“We’re all going to need her energy then.” Eliot cautioned. “I remember what a handful Christian and I were. Not sure how grandfather managed us and his medical practice.”

“This is an awfully BIG bathtub.” Parker yelled across the suite.

“Not polite to keep a lady waiting.” Eliot grinned then left Alec still struggling out of the bed.

“Awww, not fair at all.” Alec groaned as he followed his grinning partner.

After breakfast, Sophie took Nate, Hardison, and a complaining Parker shopping—ostensibly for things the babies would need, though the wicked gleam in Sophie’s eyes had them all groaning.

“If you haven’t seen us by supper, you’ll know we died from exhaustion in the French Quarter.” Parker yelped as Sophie propelled her out the door.

A fresh pot of chicory coffee on the veranda and Eliot was back reading letters.

He had to stop several times and force himself to breathe. A cattle stampede in Beaumont during a tornado, being part of a rescue team when a side wheeler’s boiler exploded in Port Arthur, working himself to the point of collapse doctoring survivors. Several rank bulls that tried to kill him along with various and sundry broncs. If not for the protective nature of his horses, Eliot was sure Christian would have died several times over. The letter in which Christian tells of finding the pup on the river bank set his teeth on edge at people’s cruelty, but it also gave him his first real clue since Tahlequah of where his twin was located. The letter mentioned breaking horses near Corpus Christi for the Army.

He was down to the last letter. The one Nana said she received the day they arrived. If his hands trembled as he opened the envelope, Eliot blamed it on Nana’s rich New Orleans coffee. He carefully smoothed the paper, noting the excellent quality and that it was written with ink instead of pencil. Either Christian had loosened his purse strings, or he’d found a very lucrative job. A lump lodged in his throat when he read the first line.

*‘I think I have found a home.’*

Christian glowingly described the Twin C Ranch and his job training a new breed of horses. He talked about the family he was working for, but he especially wrote about the family’s son, Steven. Eliot’s final clue that there was more going on than Christian was able to say was the fact that he included an address for Evangeline to answer his letters.

In all the letters he wrote, Christian had never included an address. He wondered if this Steven had captured this brother’s heart. He carefully refolded the letter, making note of the name and address of the ranch in Texas, then carefully placed all the letters back in the casket. Pulling off his spectacles he rubbed his eyes, blaming their dampness on the strain they’d been under the last two days.

When he felt more himself, he went in search of his tiny nemesis. Evangeline was just coming from the kitchen when she saw Eliot headed for her office.

“Something I can help you with, Eliot?”

He set the casket of letters on the table and engulfed the small woman in a hug. He kissed the top of her head with a whispered ‘thank you’ before handing her the casket and heading to their room for his coat. It was time to make travel plans for Corpus Christi.

Over supper, Eliot explained his plans. Alec and Parker both nodded their agreement. Alec, because he was worried about Parker and Eliot, was convinced Christian would be the best to care for her. Parker because she was feeling twitchy being in a city with so many shiny things to steal, and unable to fit in her clothes and harnesses.

As much as she loved her boys and didn't want them to worry, she missed being slim enough to fit in all the places they couldn't, but they helped distract her from her burgeoning waistline by taking her to museums, banks, and shops and then sat and planned jobs to keep her mind occupied. They sought out and bought the newest locks to keep her clever hands busy.

Nate and Sophie decided to stay on in New Orleans, and maybe travel the eastern states before going west. Nathan still had family in Boston he wanted to visit. They agreed to use Evangeline's hotel as a place where they could communicate with each other. The three exchanged a look then looked back at the grifters.

"Try not to leave too many angry people behind you." Eliot smirked. "Whatever you do don't let them follow you back here. We need a few cities where we can live without people wanting to ride us out of town on a rail."

"Nana won't let them get in trouble." Parker pointed out.

"She's right about that." Hardison grinned.

Nathan rolled his eyes but arched an eyebrow and nodded at Sophie.

"We must keep our skills sharp even though we're retired." Sophie said in a practical tone.

After dinner, they all packed their bags. Nate and Sophie to move into a regular room, and the others so they could leave for the train station after breakfast. They said their goodbyes in the privacy of their suite and set Christmas as the date they would meet back in New Orleans.

~ • ~ • ~

They'd traveled and worked together for three years, so if there were tears, choked voices and growled admonishments—they were the only witnesses. Sophie took the address for the ranch and promised to contact them as soon as they got settled.

The train ride to Port Arthur was smooth, the first class accommodations allowing Parker to be as comfortable as possible. Even with all the amenities, when the train pulled into the station twelve hours later, she was longing for solid ground without the incessant rocking that was making her slightly nauseous. Parker was glad they would have a day or two to rest while they made arrangements to travel to Corpus Christi.

A side-wheeler took them on an uneventful trip from Port Arthur to Corpus Christi. They ran into their first trouble at their hotel, the desk clerk starting to say something snide about Hardison. Glares and growls from Parker and Eliot had the clerk quivering in his spats and

keeping his thoughts behind his teeth when he was made to understand Alec was a rich businessman from New Orleans.

Their first stop the next morning was the mercantile sans post office to inquire about directions to the Twin C. The couple behind the counter stared almost open-mouthed when they saw Eliot. The silence was broken by someone on the other side of the store calling out.

“Hey, Kane! Somebody die or you getting hitched?”

Eliot turned to the speaker. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well shit, you ain’t Kane. Begging your pardon, Ma’am. Didn’t think he’d go around all dandified and without his guns.” The man chuckled.

“Be about your business, Caleb.” The woman scolded.

“I’m sorry, mister, but you look like you could be Kane, except we don’t expect the crew from the Twin C or the Rocking M to be in town until next week.”

“As a matter of fact,” Eliot let his Oklahoma drawl creep in his voice, “I was about to ask if you could direct us to the Twin C. I’m looking for my twin brother, with whom you seem to have a passing acquaintance.” The proprietress eyed the odd trio. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I seemed to have forgotten my manners. I’m Eliot Kane ... This is Parker and Alec Hardison.”

“If y’all have the notion, it’d be best if you waited for them to come to town. It’s practically a two day trip to the Twin C. It’d be easier on the missus with her breeding an all if you travel with a group.”

The woman stopped to draw a breath, but before she could continue the man who’d been helping Caleb chastised her. “Martha!”

“Hush William. This here’s Kane’s brother. He’s wanting information.” She shot back with a snap. “Kane’s pretty fair at doctoring people so waiting for him to come to town would be your best bet.” She eyed the way the three were dressed. “Might want to let me outfit you with proper clothes. Y’all want to pack them fine clothes away ‘til you get back to the city.”

“We appreciate your help. Though I’m from Oklahoma, it’s been a lot of years since I’ve been back.” Eliot turned on the charm. Parker and Hardison were already poking through the store. Eliot rolled his eyes before wrapping an arm around Parker and grabbing Alec by the nape. “Do you have what we need for say two weeks’ worth of clothing or do we need to purchase material and find a seamstress when we get to the ranch?” Eliot was all business as he kept his lovers corralled.

“I can have everything ready by the time the ranch crews git here. Miz Carlson always travels with them so there’ll be some female company for you.”

Parker just stared at the woman, her eyes wide. Eliot seemed to know every time Parker was about to say something because he'd squeeze her around the waist. So Parker just gave Martha the fake smile Sophie had taught her and kept quiet. Not that Martha was deterred by her silence. Alec just rolled his eyes as he continued to investigate the contents of the store.

They had measurements taken, picked out materials, and purchased necessities. Parker was pleased to trade her long skirts for the divided riding skirt and boots. At least she could move better, but she was hungry and tired and though her new boots were more comfortable than her shoes she really wanted to curl up with her boys and sleep.

Eliot had several other stops he wanted to make, but seeing how wilted Parker was looking, they went back to the hotel for lunch. He left Parker and Hardison curled on their bed while he went to see about the few things the mercantile didn't carry.

His next stop was the hardest. He hadn't carried a gun since the Russian Baroness had shot Christian. The sweat trickling down his spine had nothing to do with the Texas heat everything to do with his loathing for the weapons. He grabbed hold of his emotions and walked into the shop. The proprietor had the best and the brightest in the display case. The bell over door brought a middle-aged woman from the back of the shop.

"Help you?"

Eliot was so hyperaware he could smell the gun oil she was wiping from her hands. Taking a deep, steadying breath he got down to business. "I need three Winchesters and three pistols plus ammo for all, one pistol for a woman."

The gunsmith's no-nonsense attitude soon settled Eliot's nerves as he competently handled the weapons she suggested. It wasn't long before he was leaving the shop wearing his new rig and carrying everything else.

The minute the hotel room door was closed behind him the gun belt was stripped off and put away. Eliot had learned all other manner of fighting with and without weapons, even kept up on the latest innovations in weapons, but avoided guns like an anathema. Parker and Alec had watched him with wide eyes when he came in the room wearing a gun. Parker held her excitement until after Eliot had put his gun away.

"Did you get me one?" Parker bounced on her toes.

"I got everybody one." There's too many things need shooting out there to not carry one." Eliot growled as he secured the rifles and ammunition.

He picked up his valise and feeling for the hidden latch opened the compartment between the walls to retrieve a bundle of bills.

"I'm going to see about buying a team and three saddle horses along with a wagon if you want to come along."

“I guess I’ll have to ride the wagon.” Parker pouted.

“Only if you want to, sweetheart. You should be okay to ride for a little while longer ... IF you take it easy. No crazy stuff.” Eliot cajoled.

“I got the wagon.” Alec offered.

Eliot watched Alec for several minutes before nodding. Hardison rode as well as any of them but always chose to take care of their luggage and equipment. Alec grinned at Eliot’s frown. He knew he sometimes confused the man. That was good in Alec’s world, it kept Eliot from getting complacent. Though with Parker in the mix complacent wasn’t even in their vocabulary.

He handled their luggage and gear because he didn’t trust anyone else to do it right. It also freed up Parker and Eliot to do what they did best. Besides, people tended to overlook him and talk about things they ought not. That’s what made Alec so good at gathering information.

They were looking over the horses in the corral when a shout caught their attention.

“Where’s those nags you promised me, Kane. You weren’t supposed to be here ‘til next week!” A tall wiry man with a full graying mustache and a knee-high yellow cur came out of the livery.

“Damn, you ain’t Kane, but you’re not far from it.” He grumbled before he spit tobacco juice into the dirt.

“Christian Kane is my brother. I was hoping to meet up with him when he came into town.” He extended his hand. “Name’s Eliot. This is Parker and Alec Hardison.”

“Tom McIntyre.” He shook Eliot’s hand while eyeing Parker and Hardison. “Looking for something in particular, Eliot?”

“I’m hoping to spend some time with my brother, and I understand the Twin C is a ways from here—so we’ll probably need three saddle horses with tack plus a team, harness, and wagon.”

McIntyre nodded. “Think we can fix you up. Y’all riders or city folk?”

“We’re all decent on a horse.” Eliot confirmed. “We can all handle a team.”

“Got a few head. Have a better selection if Kane was coming in this week.” He pointed to three horses standing together in the shade. “Sorrel mare, bay gelding with the star, and that black paint gelding were all trained by Kane. Good animals. Mare be good for the little lady.” He grinned unrepentantly at Parker’s glare. “Them two chestnut geldings are a pretty good team. Treat them right and I’ll buy them back when you leave town.”

“May I?” Eliot indicated the gate.

“Wouldn’t expect nothing less.” The two men crossed the corral to the horses.

The paint placed himself between the bay and sorrel. Eliot rolled his eyes when he heard Parker and Alec snicker.

“Look!” Parker yelled. “It’s Eliot with four legs.”

“Feisty little gal.” Tom chuckled.

“You have no idea.” He growled.

“The other fella?”

“None of your concern.” Ice dripped off Eliot’s words.

“Gotcha.” He spit again.

Thirty minutes later, an agreement had been reached.

Buying horses his twin had trained made Eliot feel a step closer, proud of his brother’s reputation with these people. He was curious as to why they called him Kane and not Christian but decided to ask his brother that question when they met. They passed the time getting used to the new horses, picking up the last of their order from the mercantile, enjoying the luxury of having a hotel suite to themselves.

~ • ~ • ~

They had stopped in the mercantile to get Parker a bag of penny candy before heading back to the hotel. There were no customers in the store, but the level of activity was high.

“Martha, has something happened?” Alec asked as he paid for the candy.

“No just getting the orders ready for the Rocking M and Twin C. Good thing y’all already got your supplies.”

“Are they here?”

“Not yet. Sent one of my boys out a while ago looking. They’re close enough they’ll camp by the river and bring the cattle and horses to town in the morning.” She continued to work as she talked. “They’ll load the wagons and be back to camp about dusk.”

“They don’t stay in town?” Eliot asked.

“Some of the cowboys will, but more often than not they keep to themselves.”

The three exchanged a look. They needed to pack tonight.

“Here tell they’re having some big doings around New Year’s to show off them new fangled horses the Carlson’ breed. Inviting folks from all over the country.”

“Thank you for everything, Martha. You and William have been a godsend.” Eliot herded the other two out the door. They had a lot to prepare.

~ • ~ • ~

After camp was made and the animals were settled, Christian grabbed his saddlebags and headed for the river. It'd be an hour or two before Cookie had supper ready, and he intended to put the time to good use. Two days of trail dirt was starting to make him itch. The cottonwoods deepened the evening shadows affording him privacy.

His dogs came up beside him, their attention on the sounds coming from the river. He gestured for them to be quiet, so they flopped with a huff down beside the saddlebags already there. A grin broke over the handsome face at their antics.

Three months after he'd settled at the Twin C, River had disappeared. He resigned himself to the idea that coyotes had ganged up on the black dog and killed him. Two weeks later River had shown up with a gyp that looked exactly like him—black with blue eyes.

It had taken a few days for her to accept the no one was going to hurt her, while she was affectionate with him, she LOVED Steven. Steven named her Spirit, complaining she and Christian were always disappearing only to reappear where you least expected.

He quickly stripped and left River and Spirit on watch as he slipped silently into the dark water. Coming up behind the well-built man already bathing, he grabbed the soap covered torso and toppled the man backward into the water. He started to fight until he recognized the callused hands that held him.

“Dammit, Christian!” Steven hissed. “That’s a good way to catch a rock alongside the head.”

“Come here and let me make it up to you, Darlin’.” Christian purred.

He caught the frowning lips in a kiss that held everything he'd been repressing since they left the safety of the Twin C. When they separated to breathe, Steven tried to push away.

“Supper ...” He started.

“Hour maybe two.” Christian started working his way down the tanned neck then further down to the paler torso.

“Need more sun.” Christian teased.

“Not all of us are exhibitionists.” Steven chided.

“My own shy little ...”

“You really do not want to finish that statement, Kane, especially in light of our present activities.” Steven’s growl turned to a groan as Christian’s mouth closed over the head of his cock.

When had he moved onto this rock with an indentation perfect for what they were doing? Then he didn’t think at all. An hour later, Steven stowed his saddlebags by his bedroll. He grabbed a cup of coffee and joined his parents by the fire. They gave him an indulgent smile at his relaxed demeanor.

“Nice swim?” His mother looked at him over the rim of her cup.

“Very.” Steven blushed hotly when his father chuckled.

Cookie had just called everyone to eat when Christian appeared out of the dark, long hair looking sleek as an otter’s pelt.

“Everything settled?” Chris asked.

Christian gave a curt nod. He laid his saddlebags next to his saddle as they moved toward the chuck wagon. Jensen and Jeffrey from the Rocking M joined them after their own dip further up the river.

After supper, Christian, Jensen, and the dogs walked the camp perimeter. They set the guards for the night before going back. Spirit went to Steven and sat pressed against his leg. Concerned, Steven looked at the two men.

“Spirits are whispering.” Jensen stated.

“Danger?” Chris asked.

Christian closed his eyes. “No. I think it has something to do with me.” He answered in a detached voice.

Goose flesh rose on Steven’s arms.

“Spirit boy’s right about that. It’s all about him.” Jensen tried to lighten the mood. “Hell, I was only raised by the Comanche, and I can tell how much the spirits love your *breed* ass.”

It was an old joke left over from when they’d first met, and it brought a smile to everyone’s face.

“Ruggedly handsome wins over pretty every time.” Christian shoved the younger man out of his way. Everyone relaxed and enjoyed the evening by the fire listening to Jensen, Steven, and Christian play their guitars and sing.

When Christian made his last perimeter check, Steven went along. After checking the last guard, Steven pulled Christian to a stop before they got to their bedrolls.

“Christian ...?” Steven’s voice was soft, but his tone was firm.

He heaved a sigh at the lengths he would go to for this man ... Voicing his feelings out loud was not on the list of favorite things. “It’s something I haven’t felt in five years.” He closed his eyes. “It feels like Eliot.”

Steven gasped. “You think he’s close?”

Afraid to give voice to his hope, Christian shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

~ • ~ • ~

Eliot dozed fitfully. He woke at every sound as though Christian would magically appear at his bedside. He tried to roll away from Parker and Alec, but the thief kept a tight grip on the arm across her waist, not letting go until he relaxed.

He finally buried his nose in her hair hoping her scent would quiet the clamor in his brain.

Around three, Christian gave up trying to sleep. His body twitched to wrap around Steven, so he could sleep, but that path led to probable death at the most ... A horrific beating at the least ... With him and Steven chased from the Twin C if for no other reason than to protect Chris and Sandra. Instead, he kicked up the fire and started a fresh pot of coffee. While it brewed, he walked the perimeter, River, and Spirit at his heels. Every cowboy on duty cursed the cat-footed horse trainer as he appeared out of the dark like a haint. Cookie nearly toppled over when he came out of his bedroll to start breakfast.

“Sweet Jesus, Kane, make some fuckin’ noise ... Warn a feller, something.” He continued to grumble about ungrateful cowboys slinking around like thieves as he started breakfast preparations. Christian simply smirked and continued running his hand over the dogs’ heads—soothing both man and dogs.

When Steven opened his eyes, he expected to see Christian’s blue eyes looking back. The empty ground beside him almost had him jumping to his feet and waking the camp with a shout. The first blush of dawn was lightening the sky, so when his eyes moved over the camp, he saw Christian’s bedroll leaning against his saddle before seeing the man himself sitting by the cook fire nursing a cup of coffee. Releasing a deep sigh of relief, he shook any unwelcome visitors out of his boots and started his morning ablutions.

He was irritated at not having his morning private time with Christian. Taking a few minutes to work out his mood, Steven greeted Christian with a soft smile after tweaking the braid that hung down to Christian’s belt, before reaching for the cup of coffee Christian offered.

“How’d you ...?” Steven sputtered.

“Always know where you are, Darlin’.” Christian pitched his voice low to keep it from carrying. “The rest of you reprobates are on your own.” His voice lifted to include the others stumbling into the firelight.

He grinned at everyone else’s morning grumbles and Jensen’s growled opinion of his parentage.

~ • ~ • ~

Since only the livestock and supply wagons were going to town, it didn’t take long for everyone to be hitched and saddled up, ready to go.

First stop, the cattle pens. Christian, Sandra, and Jeffrey continued on with the horses and wagons. Christian made sure everyone was situated at the mercantile before he continued to the livery stable.

Stormy eyes, hungry for the sight of his twin had Eliot watching from the hotel balcony. White-knuckled hands gripped the rail as the string of a dozen well-behaved horses and a black dog trailed behind his brother toward the livery. When Christian disappeared from sight, Eliot was finally able to move back into their room where he was met by the sight of his lovers ... His family dressed and waiting, not patiently, but quietly, took his breath with the feelings that were clogging his heart and mind with their intensity. They engulfed him in a hug, chiding him to breathe and teasing him about tarnishing his Mr. Control persona. When he could breathe properly, he pulled away.

“Is this where we have sex for comfort?” Parker asked brightly.

Alec sputtered for words as Eliot chuckled and pulled Parker back into a hug. “You ain’t right, girl, but don’t ever change.”

“Why would I change?” She asked, puzzled. She pulled out of his arms and adjusted her hat. “Are we going to steal Christian, now?” She smoothed her skirt over her rounding belly.

“Let’s find out how he feels about us dropping into his life then decide if we need to steal him,” Alec suggested. “Maybe he has somebody. This is the longest he’s ever been in one place.”

“Speculating won’t solve anything.” Eliot growled. “Let’s get this done.” He spun on his heel and was out the door so fast the other two had to scramble to follow.

Christian was tucking away his payment for his string of horses when the air stilled and the hair on the back of his neck rose. River pressed hard against his leg, but gave no indication there was a threat.

Tom had started to prattle about needing the new string because he’d sold the last of his horses to some guy that was looking for him and how he bore an uncanny resemblance to Kane when Christian turned to see what leeches all the air and sound away.

He actually shook his head thinking he needed to clear his vision at what he saw. River stood planting himself directly between the brothers only understanding his human was upset and the three people in front of them were the cause.

“Di-na-da-nv-tli.” Christian breathed out.

“Brother.” Eliot’s voice was just as breathy.

They moved as one embracing each other whispering in a multitude of languages that no one could follow. Tom stood slacked jawed as he watched the always calm and collected Kane with his brother.

“It’s been awhile.” Parker poked the livery owner.

“I’d say.” Tom agreed with a stream of tobacco juice for emphasis.

“Think we’ll be needing everything saddled and hitched.” Alec added.

“Say you’re right ‘bout that, too.” He moved off to gather their horses.

They turned back to the twins in time to see Eliot land a punch to Christian’s deeply tanned cheek. Christian stepped back, eyes narrowed. River growled low in his chest.

“That’s for sneaking out in the middle of the night.” Eliot growled low.

“You were better off.” Christian turned away.

Only to bump into Parker who leaped into his arms and gave him a wet, smacking kiss on the lips. “Glad to see us?”

Doing the only thing he could do, he wrapped his arms around her waist. “Yes.” His expression was confused then cleared. “How pregnant are you, little sister?”

“Three months.” She beamed. “We didn’t think we could it’s been so long.” She glared at Alec and Eliot over Christian’s shoulder. “Big surprise—Eliot thinks it’s twins.” After another kiss, she let go of his neck and slid to her feet.

Alec grabbed the shorter man in a tight hug. “Eliot FEELS it’s twins.” He took a step back. “Missed you. Nana says you better come visit soon.”

Christian blushed and ducked his head. “Nana’s an exceptional woman.” He checked to see where Tom was lurking before pulling the trio closer to the corral fence and telling River to keep watch. “Why are you here? You’re not exactly safe here.”

“We’re aware.” Eliot replied. “We want you to deliver Parker.”

Shocked Christian gaped at the three of them. “But ... They’re better equipped and trained in Europe ... I ...” He turned away struck by the enormity of what they were asking. “If something goes wrong ...”

“You’ll save me.”

The surety in Parker’s eyes nearly drove Christian to his knees. When he looked at the two men, he saw the same conviction in their eyes.

“I’ll have to talk it over with the Carlsons.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “Get your gear, come back to camp with us. Sandra’s not the type of woman to turn anyone away, and Chris loves his wife too much to deny her anything. Female company—even if she’s a little bent—would be a change, throw in babies and we’re all pretty much putty in those nimble little fingers.” He slanted a look at Parker, who was fussing over her horse.

He gave Eliot a sly look. “No stealing.”

“She’ll put it back. Says she needs to stay in practice.”

Christian moved in close enough to breathe in his twin. “This is MY home.” He emphasized the word.

Eliot nodded his understanding. When Christian bent to touch his dog Eliot noticed the bracelet of braided blond hair around his wrist. If Christian had someone special in his life, why wouldn’t he simply tell them? His thoughts were broken when Christian swung up on his gelding.

“We need to get a move on.”

Eliot tied Alec’s horse to the back of the wagon before climbing on his own paint. Christian smirked at his twin.

“That one’s a lot like the man that bought him. Hard-headed about doing what he’s told ‘til he figured out I was the boss.”

He was jogging out of the stable yard toward the hotel before Eliot could form a reply. A giggling Parker followed close behind.

Christian left the luggage to Eliot and Alec while he rode ahead to the mercantile, Parker was quietly nervous next to him. Chris, Steven, and Jensen had concluded their business at the cattle pens and were helping load the wagons. Jensen was the first to spot him.

“Kane, about time you showed. Tom give you ...” His words trailed off when he saw the obviously pregnant Parker. His face shuttered, and his speech became clipped. “Ma’am.” His polite tone was cool.

Christian looked stricken at Jensen's actions. The assumption that Christian would step out on Steven with a woman cut him to the quick. He covered quickly with a bland expression that chilled the Carlson family. Steven groaned silently. The silence was broken when the blonde woman laughed.

"Was he kicked in the head?" She asked Christian seriously.

Christian shrugged indifferently then turned toward the Carlson, which made Jensen cringe. He was so screwed.

"I'd like you to meet Parker, a member of my brother, Eliot's family. They would like me to deliver their babies. I don't wish to impose on your hospitality, but could you put them up at the big house until her time? I know it's a bit much ... I can make other arrangements ...." Christian trailed off, still smarting from Jensen's actions. Parker reached across their horses to squeeze his hand.

Sandra glared at Jensen before turning to Christian. "Christian Kane, you're as much my son as Steven. If any more of that drivel passes from your lips, I'll kick your behind from here to the Twin C. Your family is always welcome for as long as need be."

Christian ducked his head. "Yes, ma'am."

Steven breathed easier when he saw the shy smile Christian gave his mother.

Sandra whirled on Jensen. "Jensen Ackles, pull your boot out of your mouth and apologize to Christian and Parker for your poor manners." She scolded.

Jensen blushed deeply but grabbed his hat off his head. "Parker, ma'am, I apologize for being a loutish oaf. I don't often jump to such conclusions, but you acted so familiar with Kane that I assumed ..."

Parker stared at the sun-streaked reddish-brown hair, freckles, and green eyes. She slanted a look to Christian.

"He's pretty. Think Eliot and Alec would let me steal him?" She asked innocently.

"There's someone that might get to missing him, Darlin'." He drawled nonchalantly.

"I'd put him back ... Eventually." Parker's eyes lit with a slightly off-kilter expression.

"Christian ..." Jensen stopped at the frozen glare. "I'm sorry ... I ... There was ... In the past ..." He looked away, but not before Christian saw old hurts chase across the handsome face.

"I'm not that person." Christian touched the front of his shirt where Jensen knew a locket containing a lock of Steven's blond hair lay against the broad chest.

Jensen knew Steven wore a matching locket holding one of Christian's dark curls. He and Jeffrey at been at the Twin C picking up horses Christian had trained for them when the men had stood before their family and committed themselves to each other. He breathed a sigh of relief, it would take some time, but in the long run, the two men would be fine. Parker giggled at the gasps of surprise when Eliot and Alec made their appearance just as Christian stopped glaring at the pretty cowboy.

"Took long enough." Christian quipped.

"Yeah, well, Alec has more stuff and gewgaws than any three women I know." Eliot grouched.

"Hey! Now! It's not all mine! There's stuff for the babies and things and you know ..." Alec trailed off when he saw everyone grinning at his ruffled feathers. "I fell for it again." He sighed.

"So we're not here all night," Christian looked over at the Carlson, "Chris, his wife, Sandra, and Steven Carlson, owners of the Twin C." He turned to Jensen and Jeffrey. "Jensen Ackles, half owner and foreman at the Rocking M, and Jeffrey Morgan, the other half of Rocking M." He turned to the other half of the group. "You've already met Parker ... This is Alec Hardison, his Nana runs the best hotel in New Orleans, and my brother, Eliot Spen ..."

Before he could finish, Eliot interrupted. "Eliot Spencer Kane."

He took in Christian's wide-eyed look of surprise. "Fresh start, Di-na-da-nv-tli."

Christian blinked rapidly several times before clearing his throat. "We're wasting daylight, and Cookie'll be hopping mad we don't get his supplies to him."

They finished loading the wagons in silence, but Eliot observed as he helped. He watched the interactions of the group. Could see Chris and Sandy were deeply in love ... A love match, not a marriage of convenience. He couldn't quite get a picture of Jensen and Jeffrey ... The careful way they moved around each other made him think they were a couple trying not to look like a couple. Steven constantly threw glances at Christian, a bracelet of his brother's dark hair encircled Steven's wrist to match the one he'd seen on Christian's earlier.

The ride back to camp was full of laughter and conversation. Christian even started to unbend toward Jensen after the two had dropped back from the others for a while. By the time they reached camp, the families had begun to merge.

~ • ~ • ~

Parker sighed as she sat in the cool shade of the large adobe house, feet propped on an ottoman. If she'd known having babies in the summer was this miserable, she'd have had Alec carry them. She smoothed a hand over her belly, her cotton dress was one the workers' wives had made for her ... Loose, cool, and comfortable. She felt the babies turn ... Can see them in her mind. She described them to Christian once when he was doing her check-up. He'd given her his soft smile that he saved for family and told her he couldn't wait to meet them. Then his

eyes twinkled as he whispered conspiratorially that it would serve Eliot right for the nightmares, he caused other fathers until he'd met her and Alec.

She loved Eliot and Alec, but Christian was her big brother. He always seemed to understand her and didn't think she was strange or crazy. They shared smiles and winks between them and made everyone else crazy trying to figure them out.

Loud voices on the patio drew Parker out of her musings. She looked at the clock on the mantle surprised to see it was the end of the day. She started to roll off the couch onto her feet when Eliot's voice made her stop.

"If you're right, I'm not running off to the city. You promised Parker you'd deliver her babies."

"There are doctors better qualified than me to deliver them. It's not safe here." Christian pleaded. "Alec talk some sense into him."

"I agree with Eliot." Parker heard Alec's reply.

She walked over to the French doors but kept out of sight. She saw Christian throw his hands in the air. "She's carrying your children! Don't you want her safe?"

"She's safe here." Eliot crossed his arms over his chest.

Parker grinned. She knew that stance. She covered her mouth to keep from giggling when she saw Alec mimic Eliot. Looks like they were staying no matter what Christian argued.

Steven came quietly up behind Christian and wrapped his arms around his waist. "You can't send us all away because of a vision."

"It's not just that." Christian sounded pouty. "I hear things." He pulled away from Steven. "I've seen signs when I'm out working the horses. I just got finished talking to Jim, sent a rider to Jensen at the Rocking M. I was gonna talk to you and Chris after supper."

"You can talk all you want ..." Eliot glared, "We're not leaving." He spun on his heel and left the room.

After supper, Christian told the family what he'd seen and heard, but they all agreed with Eliot. They would stay and if the bandits came, they would face them together.

Cattle and horses were rounded up and brought closer to the house. The gate to the house was kept closed and guards posted around the wall. There were tunnels under the house. Christian had used the one that started in the linen closet by Steven's suite of rooms and came out at the river to visit Steven before he had moved into the big house. One tunnel led to the large wine cellar, which had a fortified oak and iron door with weapons and ammo stored alongside the wine. The third tunnel went from the dry goods pantry to the tack room in the barn. Sandra checked all the tunnels and packed saddle bags of supplies that were left in the tunnels should they need to abandon the house.

Arrangements were made between the Rocking M and Twin C if they should need a place to go to ground. Eliot and Alec had scouted the area on the other side of the river and laid in provisions where a camp could be made and easily defended.

All the while the Carlsons continued to prepare for the debut of their Quarter Horses at New Year's. Temporary quarters would be erected in the courtyard to house the guests. Christian continued to prepare the horses. With Parker in her eighth month, he refused to travel too far from the main house. The thief was irritated that her body wouldn't move and obey as was her norm, but Sandra kept her occupied fixing up a nursery for the twins and making clothes with the material they had brought with them from Corpus Christie.

Eliot and Alec had been making the monthly supply run to Corpus Christie, often returning with packages from Nana Hardison containing knitted and crocheted items for the babies. During the nights when Parker was restless, they would lie in their room and talk of the future. They decided when they returned to New Orleans at Christmas so they would help Nana run the hotel, among other things. Parker had asked if they could steal Christian and take him, too. Alec pointed out Steven would be sad if they took Christian. Parker adored Steven because he wrote songs just for her. Though she wanted Christian close, she didn't want Steven sad.

"They better come visit or I'll steal them both." She announced as she finally drifted to sleep.

~ • ~ • ~

Steven rolled over expecting to bump into Christian's solid back. He sighed when he looked around the room finding Christian's clothes and gun belts missing. Dreams were riding Christian hard, stealing his sleep. He constantly woke to prowl the compound walls, scaring the life out of the guards as he cat-footed around the perimeter making sure his family was safe.

No matter how worn both men were from their day's work or their exhausting bouts of lovemaking, more often than not, Christian would be slinking through the shadows, pale eyes causing the superstitious cowboys to cross themselves whispering about spirits and brujos behind his back.

There had been several small run-ins between the bandits and the ranch hands with only minor injuries on both sides. Christian and Eliot both felt they were merely testing the ranch's preparedness.

Not finding Christian in their bed, Steven rolled over on his back. He gave a quiet moan as bruised skin and ill-used muscles protested his movement. Christian was both--rough and tender--almost desperate to crawl inside Steven as they'd made love. He didn't know what had been riding Christian besides him, but when Steven passed out across his chest his last thought was, he needed to ask Christian what he'd been whispering in Cherokee.

Ready for the day, Steven moved quietly down the stairs to find Christian on the couch with Parker dozing against his chest while he rubbed her lower back. The stormy eyes told Steven the babies would be making their entrance into the world soon and that Christian was worried.

The warm smile he received when he brought Christian a mug of coffee made waking up alone almost worth it. He pulled the ottoman closer to the couch so they could talk.

“Soon?” He asked softly.

“Today.” Parker started to wake until Christian soothed her. “Labor’s already started.”

“Long?”

“Hard. She’s so slim ...” Emotions rolled across the rugged face. Steven loved that Christian never tried to hide from him, but he didn’t know how to ease his worries. “I can’t ... Eliot and Alec ... What if I can’t ...”

Steven reached out and grabbed Christian’s chin to force him to look up. “You’ll do your best. You save who you can, and we’ll deal with the rest.” He placed a chaste kiss on the full lips. “I’m bringing the weanlings in today, so you’ll have a new batch of babies to worry over tomorrow.”

He threw Christian a teasing look over his shoulder as he carried his cup back to the kitchen. He stopped to have a quick word with his mother. She nodded her agreement. He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before heading out to meet his father at the barn.

Soon it was only Christian, Parker, Sandra and the dogs at the house. Christian’s sixth sense had been prodding him until paranoia had him and Sandra fixing a pallet in the wine cellar for Parker. After making the thief comfortable, they brought all, clothes, swaddling, and medical supplies they would need along with plenty of water to get them through the babies’ delivery. Christian left River on watch while he secured the house. He sent Spirit to patrol the house, so he would know if anyone slipped through their perimeter.

Hard labor had finally started, and Parker, bless her heart was being as quiet as possible. Christian had left the door open so he and River could hear what was happening on the upper floors. The babies were in position, but where Parker’s slimness helped her slither into places others couldn’t, it was not conducive to birthing twins. Christian feared he was going to have to cut open her womb and take the twins before all three died. Though she had only words of encouragement for Parker, Christian could see the worry on Sandra’s face.

Finally, he could wait no longer. He calmly explained to Parker what he was going to do. Eyes wide with pain and exhaustion searched his face. Giving him one of her bright, off-kilter smiles, her slim hand cupping his cheek, she boldly stated, “I know you’ll save us all.”

Too choked up at her faith in him and his abilities, to say anything, Christian kissed the palm of her hand and directed Sandra on how to put Parker to sleep sparingly using drops of ether.

Christian sat back on his heels with a weary sigh. They had Parker cleaned up, and in one of her Mexican peasant dresses, she’d worn during the late stages of her pregnancy. He smiled sadly as he brushed the blonde bangs off her face. There would be no more babies, but somehow, he didn’t think any of them would mind. He looked across the room where Sandra had just finished cleaning up the second twin.

Parker had been dead on when she described her twins. Christian wasn't sure how his clever little sister-in-law had managed it, but she had given each man a child. Christian had delivered the boy first. He showed his father's impatience by trying to push his way out to clear the way for his smaller sister.

The miniature replica of his own face left no doubt the boy was Eliot's, but the little girl was a perfect combination of Alec and Parker. From the café au lait of her skin to the dark blonde ringlets on her head, she was already a heartbreaker.

Christian scouted the house before deeming it safe to move Parker and the twins to their rooms across from his and Steven's. Sandra fixed them a quick snack before putting the finishing touches on the pot of stew she'd set to simmering before Parker's labor.

Christian got Parker to rouse enough to eat and drink a bit before feeding the babies and drifting back into a healing sleep.

The shouts from the guards outside Steven's bedroom window had Christian checking his knives and guns and heading outside after setting River to guard Parker and the twins while Spirit continued her patrols.

Chris, Steven, Spirit, Eliot, and Alec were heading to the house from the barn when the guard shouted. Seeing Christian rush out the door they hurried toward him.

"Hurry you need to get the women and babies out of here." Christian barked.

"BABIES?!" Alec gasped.

"Parker?" Eliot asked quietly.

"I had to take them. She pulled through fine, but there'll be no more babies." Christian looked away from the men. He was surprised when he was engulfed in a hug by Eliot and Alec. Christian pulled away. "Come on. We have to move."

"Chris grab Sandra. She's got supplies for the twins. Have her grab one of the babies, then get to the tunnel that goes to the river."

Chris nodded and went in search of his wife.

"Alec gets the other baby, Steven you'll be carrying Parker. Be careful of her stitches. There's plenty of medical supplies at the campsite. Eliot and the dogs will have the rear guard."

Everyone else was moving not stopping to think about Christian's barked orders ... All but Steven.

"Christian?" He stopped in the middle of the kitchen.

“What?” Christian grabbed a couple extra canteens of water to give Eliot.

“You are coming, too?” His expression was suspicious.

“Right behind you as soon as I get things situated.” Christian brushed past Steven toward the stairs.

“Christian. Look. At. Me.” Steven demanded.

Taking a deep breath he turned to face his life. Looking into beloved blue eyes, Christian pulled out the heavy artillery.

“I need you to keep my family safe. I trust you to protect them for me.” He drawled quietly.

“You sonofabitch. You expect me to leave you behind while you stay here and play hero. Let Eliot and Alec take care of their family. Dad will take care of mom. You may think you’re expendable, but you are NOT expendable to me. Please, Christian. I love you don’t do this to me.” Steven pleaded.

Christian cupped Steven’s face in his callused hands. “I love you, too, Darlin’. I promise I’ll follow so quick you’ll never miss me.” He kissed the frowning mouth fiercely. “After we get y’all’s fancy cow ponies spread across the country, we’ll take that trip to Mexico we always talked about.”

Steven’s smile was sad and angry at the same time as he gave Christian a final hard kiss before moving up the stairs. He gently folded a quilt around Parker, who gave him a sleepy smile as he settled her in his arms.

“Did you see the pretty babies Christian gave me?” She rubbed her face against him sleepily.

“You did good, Sweetheart,” Steven assured her.

He almost dropped Parker at her next statement.

“Don’t go to Mexico ... Come to New Orleans. Nana Hardison will take care of you after.” She suddenly fell back to sleep.

“I never get used to her and Christian saying crazy stuff like that.” Eliot drawled. Steven looked at the retrieval specialist. His face was full of awe as he looked at the babies being held by Alec and Sandra. “Meet your niece and nephew, Christiana Evangeline and Spencer Hiram Hardison-Kane. I want you and Christian to be their godparents, as well as their uncles. There’s nobody I’d trust more to raise them other than Nana or Chris and Sandra.” Eliot and Alec looked expectantly at him.

The lump in his throat threatened to choke him as his emotions roiled through his chest. He nodded, but before Steven could tell Eliot Christian’s plans, shots sounded outside. River and Spirit growled at the humans they’d been told to protect.

“Time to move!” Eliot growled.

Chris took point with Sandra, Alec, and Steven in the middle with Parker and the twins. A moue of distaste on his face, Eliot pulled his gun as the group started down the tunnel. They paused to rest at the halfway point giving Steven a chance to rest his back and arms. He quietly told Eliot his conversation with Christian. Before Eliot could respond, River’s yip of impatience had everyone on their feet. The dogs were as anxious to get back to Christian as Steven.

Finally, they reached the tunnel’s end. Eliot and Chris cautiously opened the camouflaged entrance, checking for threats to the women and children. Finding none, they quickly crossed the footbridge and headed to the previously prepared site. Gunshots could be heard even this far from the house. Exclamations of surprise had Eliot and Steven hurrying to catch up with the others.

Eliot and Alec had found a shallow cave in the rocks, but Christian had used canvas to hide the entrance and weatherproof their hiding place.

After getting Parker settled, Steven and the dogs started back toward the ranch. When Eliot made a move to follow, Steven turned to him with a glare. Pointing a finger at the dark-haired man in his path, he tried to keep his voice low.

“You stay here.” Steven punctuated his statement by pointing at the ground. “Christian’s doing this for you—for your family. So you will stay here and protect that family, and what’s left of mine. I will take care of whatever he’s left for me.”

Steven’s anger left Eliot slack-jawed. He knew people. He read them like others read books, but never had he seen any clues that this man before him could be this angry—this dangerous. He continued to watch the blond man striding angrily back the way they’d come, a black dog on each side. He startled when he heard a quiet chuckle behind him.

“Eliot Kane meet Steven Carlson.” Chris’s tone still carried laughter.

Eliot turned to the older man. “I’d have never thought ...”

“No one does. He seldom shows his temper when there’s an audience, but once he’s got you alone, he can gut you with the sharp side of his tongue. Gets that from his mother.” Chris said more to himself than to Eliot as he turned back to the camp still chuckling.

“The others settled?” Eliot called out. When Chris nodded Eliot turned his face back to the ranch. “I’ll keep watch.”

Steven crept through the quiet house, pistol in hand. One part of his brain was sighing with relief that none of the bandits had gotten into the house. His mother would have been a terror if she’d come back to find things broken and bodies in the parlor.

The three quietly moved out the side door that led to the stable yard. He noted the bodies on the ground. Another wave of relief washed through him when he saw that most of the bodies were strangers. He noticed their foreman, Jim, leaning against a gatepost, a slightly bloody field dressing wrapped around his shoulder.

“What’s going on, Jim?” Steven crouched next to the man, the dogs were on watch for threats.

“The bunch that attacked us are all dead but two. That Christian’s a sneaky bastard. Had weapons and booby traps all over the place. Don’t know how any of us kept from getting caught up in them.”

“Probably put them where we normally don’t go.” Steven mumbled more to himself than to Jim.

“Probably right.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“If I had to guess I’d say between the last two bandits and them fancy horses of yours.”

“Shit.” He stood to go to the barn, but he only got a couple steps when the dogs hit his knees from behind sending him face first in the dirt. Before he could shout at the dogs, three horses charged by his hiding place. Since they were saddled, Steven assumed they belonged to their attackers until he saw a familiar body hanging from the side of one of the horses. A stranger standing in front of the Quarter Horse barn had to scramble out of the way or risk being run over. When the running horses disappeared into the shadow of the barn, Steven saw Christian roll into the cover of the barn wall. When the intruder passed Christian’s hiding place, an arm snaked around his neck, broad hand covering his mouth as his Bowie knife slid between the bandit’s ribs. He was dead before he hit the ground. If what Jim said were true, only one attacker remained.

Pistol in hand, Steven started making his way toward the barn. The dogs had run into the barn looking for Christian when he heard the soft footfall he’d come to associate with his lover. He turned just in time to see him, his heart in his eyes, purposely step between the remaining bandit’s gun and Steven. Time seemed to stop as Christian began to crumble as Steven fired hitting the stranger in the heart. His gun was holstered, and he was wrapping his arms around Christian as his knees hit the dirt.

Steven laid him down gently pulling on a jacket, vest, and shirts, thankful his cowboy didn’t wear a union suit. A little higher and the bullet would have gone through his shoulder instead of his upper chest. Steven cursed Christian as he tried to bind the entrance and exit wounds until he could get him to the house. By the time he got his precious burden on the living room couch, the rest of the household had returned from the campsite. Eliot and Chris rushed forward to help Steven with the bleeding man.

“Where’s his kit?” Eliot asked.

Sandra came up from the wine cellar carrying Christian's medical kit. Though he didn't have Christian's skill, Eliot did the best he could. By the time Christian was settled in their bed, Steven, Alec, and Chris had made the rounds, bringing the wounded men to the house for Eliot to patch up, checking the horses, gathering the horses of the dead men, and hauling the bodies away from the house for burial. From what they found in the leader's saddlebags, the bandits were after the Quarter Horses Chris was planning to showcase.

~ • ~ • ~

It was well after dark before everyone got cleaned up and settled down. Sandra moved between Parker and the twins and helping Eliot. Christian had yet to regain consciousness, but his skin remained cool to the touch. Now that the bleeding was stopped and the wound stitched, their biggest concern was fever and infection.

Steven crawled in beside Christian gathering the wounded man against his chest before drifting into a fitful doze.

When he woke the next morning, Steven was worried by the overly warm skin pressed against his. He knew a little fever was normal, but Christian still being unconscious had them all concerned. Steven left him long enough to continue Christian's training routine with the horses. Once the trainer was back on his feet he'd be upset if his babies had been neglected.

Parker was on her feet, moving slowly in deference to her stitches. She couldn't lift her babies, but she could sit in a chair and hold them while they nursed. A sly look entered the indigo eyes as she convinced Sandra to settle her and the twins in the big bed with Christian.

Being careful of his wound, she laid one baby on Christian's chest while she fed the other. She chattered like a magpie the entire time—telling him the babies' names and why they chose those names, about how worried Steven was, how growly Eliot was acting, and Alec staying out of everyone's way by helping with the repairs from the attack.

Parker yawned as her eyes drooped. Babies and wounded people were hard work. With the twins tucked securely between them, Parker snuggled down in the blankets and drifted to sleep. Sandra woke her gently with lunch. After the twins were fed, she took them to change, leaving Parker talking to Christian again.

Parker stared, her head cocked as she studied the problem of waking Christian. She ran through the process like Christian was something to steal. A slow smile lit her pixie face. Men hated when women cried—it made them feel helpless. Under their tough exterior Eliot and Christian, both hid a soft heart.

Using tricks she'd learned from Sophie, Parker concentrated on how she would feel if she lost one of the boys or her babies. Tears welled in her eyes and she started to snuffle. Her voice cracked when she talked about Christian and Steven coming to New Orleans to spoil their babies.

“You can’t go to Mexico. You can’t even drink the water. They don’t have any real good stuff to steal.” She brushed the tears off her face. “You have to come back. You can talk to your grandfather some other time. Steven needs you here. You can’t walk into the sunset, there’s too much here for you.”

Steven stopped at the bedroom door and listened to Parker try to cajole Christian awake. *\*Wait a minute!?! What did she mean Christian was talking to his grandfather. He thought Christian and Eliot’s grandfather was dead. HELL’S BELLS!\** He’d never given it serious thought when Christian said the spirits talked to him.

A loud sob from Parker drew his attention back to the bed. Long dark eyelashes fluttered. It took several tries before sounds came from the fever dry throat. Steven was by the bed in a flash with a glass of water. The blue/grey eyes were dull, the rugged face creased with pain, but it was the most beautiful thing Steven had seen.

“Christian?” He cupped the stubbled jaw.

The corners of the full mouth quirked up. “Hi.” His eyes roamed the room until they landed on the teary-eyed Parker. “Parker ... Sweetheart?” He looked to Steven for clarification.

“Everyone’s fine except for you. You ever scare me like this again and I’ll have to kick your ass.” Steven promised.

Sandra stepped into the room holding Spencer. Tears of relief filled her eyes when she saw an awake Christian being fussed at and over by Steven and Parker. She deposited Spencer with his mother, went to get Christiana, and alert the others that Christian was awake.

Needing to reassure himself his twin was on the mend, Eliot became brusque with the crowd in the room. He shooed everyone out save Steven and Parker. He went to her to help her to her feet.

“Time to go back to our room, sweetheart.”

“Why?” She was genuinely confused.

Eliot forgot he was dealing with Parker.

“I need to change Christian’s bandages and help him clean up.”

Parker simply stared—waiting for someone to answer her question. “So?”

Eliot rolled his eyes as Christian and Steven tried not to laugh. “Christian’ll probably want some privacy.” Eliot was trying to be patient.

Parker chewed her bottom lip in thought. “You and Christian are identical, right?”

Eliot cringed. He just knew he was coming in on the short end of this conversation. “Yes, Parker, we’re identical.”

“I’ve seen you naked lots so that means I’ve seen Christian naked—not seeing a problem—unless you’re not exactly identical.” She grinned happily.

Choked snickers continued on the other side of the room. Blushing hotly, Eliot crossed his arms over his chest. “Parker ...” He growled.

“Fine.” She huffed as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

Christian gave a contented sigh as he rested against Steven’s side. His chest wound was healing nicely, Parker and the twins were fine, and the ranch was returning to normal. He drifted down into sleep.

~ • ~ • ~

When he opened his eyes he was in bed, but he was alone. Instead of the warm tones of wood of his and Steven’s suite, everything was in shades of red, even the ceiling?... Sky?

He climbed out of bed surprised to see he was dressed in buckskin pants and moccasins; feathers and beads adorned his long braids. A road led into a blood red wall. His grandfather and parents stood at the beginning of the road. His parents opened their arms beckoning him to them. His grandfather stood to the side, his expression concerned and uncertain. Smiling, Christian started walking forward, anxious to know the people who died before he had a chance to know them.

A sound behind him caused him to stop and turn. Happiness lit his face when he saw Steven. He tried to step toward his love only to find he couldn’t move. He looked at his grandfather.

*\*It is not your true time, v-gi-li-si. You must choose to stay ...\** he pointed to Steven, *“Or go.”\** He motioned to Michael and Laura Kane.

His mother implored him. She wanted to know her sons.

Christian’s eyes never left Steven’s face.

*\*You could have lived when we were born.\** His voice was flat. *\*You chose your husband over your children.\** He started to move toward Steven.

*\*Please. I didn’t know how.\**

Christian turned his head toward his parents. Then he heard a click and the sound of a cylinder turning on a revolver. He turned back to Steven who now held a cocked pistol.

“Steven?”

*“If you want to go with them ... Then I’m coming, too.”* Steven stated flatly.

*“What about your mom and dad? The plans we made.”*

*“None of that matters without you.”*

He raised the pistol.

The oppressive heat of the Indian Summer day lingered after dark. Sandra smiled at her unconventional family as they scattered across the patio. Eliot and Alec passed Spencer back and forth while Parker nursed Christiana. Chris sipped a snifter of brandy while catching up on his stockmen’s periodicals. She reached across her mending to steal a sip or two from Chris’s glass.

Worry nagged at her mother’s heart for her son. It had been two days since Christian had gone back to sleep. She could feel the desperation rolling off Steven. His odd comments about someone wanting to keep Christian had not eased her mind. The adults stopped and raised their heads as the night stopped and held its breath.

Eliot handed Spencer to Alec and started for the house when the sound of a gunshot caused the night the exhale. Eliot, Chris, and Sandra raced for the stairs—afraid of what they would find.

A pistol lay on the nightstand. Christian sat up against the headboard, tears streaming down his face as he held an equally teary-eyed, shivering Steven against his chest. Christian and Eliot exchanged a look, Christian shifting his eyes to the heavy roof beam. Eliot looked up to see a bullet embedded in the wood. He damned the spirits that came out of the West.

~ • ~ • ~

Torches burnt brightly around the perimeter of the house and stable yard. Candles and oil lamps scattered over tables laden with fine china and crystal that twinkled like fairy lights. Two shadows merged into one hidden from the eyes of their guests. The shadow separated into two men left breathless by their midnight kiss.

“Happy New Year, Darlin’.” A voice full of whiskey, expensive cigars and lust floated on the night breeze.

“Happy New Year, Christian.” Steven panted against tan skin covered with black silk.

Christian was smiling, but it was tinged with sadness as they took a step back from each other. Not wanting to separate entirely, Steven pulled Christian back against his chest.

“I miss them, too.” Steven whispered in his ear.

Eliot, Parker, Alec and the twins had left after Thanksgiving. Alec wanted the twins’ first Christmas to be in New Orleans. Eliot wanted to find them a home. Parenthood had apparently

cured his wanderlust. Parker just wanted something to steal now that she could fit back in her harnesses.

Christian and Steven had traveled with them to Corpus Christi to bring the wagon back to the ranch. Before they got on the boat, Parker pulled Steven to the side and threatened him with things that still made him shiver if he didn't promise to bring Christian to New Orleans after their Quarter Horse showcase.

"I'd say your high dollar cow ponies are a success." He grinned at the group of men and women talking animatedly by the corrals. With a grin, he stepped away from Steven and handed him a flute of champagne.

"To the future." Christian toasted.

"To our future." Steven added.

When they finished the sparkling wine, Christian reached out his hand leering at Steven over his shoulder with an arched eyebrow and shimmering blue heat in his eyes. Without hesitation, Steven took the hand and stepped into the light.

~ *Finis* ~