

Excerpt from Images In Scarlet

Ringo nickered and started forward without urging. The mare answered and Allie could see that no one sat the saddle.

Something had happened to Jake!

At her urging Ringo broke into a trot, yet it seemed to take forever to reach Molly. Apprehension dried her mouth, the beat of her heart quickened, then nearly stopped when she dropped from the saddle and could find no sign of Jake.

Abruptly, a voice raised in song broke the stillness. " 'When Johnnie comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah. We'll give him a mighty welcome then, hurrah, hurrah.' Duh da da duh da...."

A loud wahoo followed by a huge splash interrupted the tune, and she broke through the trees to see Jake playing in the water like a kid, shaking his head so that great drops flew out around him, forming miniature rainbows in the dying light.

She stumbled to the edge of the creek, shouted, "Damn you, Jake, you scared me half to death."

He let out a joyful roar, high-stepped toward her. "Allie. Holy Hannah. I scared you? You just turned my hair gray. Don't sneak up on a man like that. 'Specially not when he's bare ass deep in water. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. I was frantic... uh, worried that something had happened when you didn't come back."

"I told you, Allie, you don't have to be my keeper. I don't need... I don't want... "

Anger replaced her concern, and despite being fully clothed, she waded into the water to confront him. She slipped on the last step and caught at him to save herself from falling. Automatically he steadied her, and they were nearly toe to toe, him stark naked and grinning like a 'possum.

"I don't care what you don't want," she said.

Tiny rivulets poured from his dark hair that lay plastered over broad shoulders. Stricken speechless, she gazed at the water's path down his bare chest, over the laddering of ribs and flat belly into the swirling torrent at his waist. The warmth of his breath caressed her cheeks, and neither moved.

Biting at her lip to steady its quavering, she managed to speak almost coherently. "Jake, I... God, I was so scared something had happened to you." Tears came to her eyes, making her angry and embarrassed at the same time. She could no more stop them than she could force herself to move away from him.

Tendrils of ghostly mist rose into the cooling night air; she shivered and the heat off his body enticed her. A passionate need to love and be loved thrummed deep in her belly. She ached to touch Jake in all his secret, bare places. If she looked closely she might see every part of him, for the water was crystal clear. Instead, without moving her gaze from his smoky blue eyes, she rested one hand on his hip just beneath the stream's surface.

The contact sent a bright sensation through her, and his eyes batted in surprise, turning even smokier. Desire blossomed between them, a palpable, writhing entity that couldn't be denied.

He rubbed at her cheek with his thumb, said under his breath, "Dammit, dammit, dammit," then tilted her chin up and placed his mouth over hers so gently she could hardly bear it. He tasted every inch of her mouth, then moved inside where his tongue lapped ever so slowly. She could scarcely contain the burning desire that exploded within her.

He swayed with the rhythms of her hunger, grew hard against her belly. A jagged breath passed from his mouth to hers. She suppressed an overpowering desire to claw and bite and scratch at him, to beg him to rip off her clothes and take her right there, both of them naked and wet as the day they were born. An aching need like none she had ever known shot through her and she coiled her arms around his neck. He still hadn't touched her with his hands, but his mouth claimed hers in a way that held her as fast as the tightest embrace. At her frenzied response his lips trembled under hers, went slack. A small sound came from deep within him, like a far off melancholy cry.

With an unexpected, harsh movement he grabbed her arms and shoved her backward violently, a steely grip keeping her from falling. The cry became a grating, hoarse moan.

She sagged and cried out involuntarily. If he had let her go she would have tumbled backward into the water, but he supported her at arm's length, as if he too might lose his balance. His breath came in great gasps that prevented him saying anything for a long while.

She clenched her fists and waited. If she could have found her voice she would have cursed him with every breath. Why couldn't he just hold her like they both wanted? What was the matter with him? But of course that was a stupid question. Stupid, stupid. And she ached inside so badly she wanted to clutch at her stomach and cry and moan like women did who had lost all they held dear. Instead she yanked her arms from his grip and stumbled out onto the bank, tears blurring her vision.

No woman would be fool enough to want a man who didn't want her.

And she'd had her fill of that anyway, hadn't she?

What was wrong with her that she could not make the right choices? She had known she didn't need the heartache loving this man would surely bring, yet she had let this happen. Made it happen. Had she learned nothing from Eli Martin? From her father? Maybe she liked being punished. Maybe she thought she deserved it.

There was no doubt in her mind that Jake would continue to look for Lorena until he found her, and when he did, he wouldn't hesitate to go to her, sparing Allie not even a backward glance. She had lost everyone in her life she ever loved. Why set herself up for such pain once more? Better not to ever love again than go through that.

She stood on the bank for a moment with her back to him, hoping he would call out to her, praying he would not. If she didn't walk away that very minute, he would surely break her heart.

"Allie?"

That soft, husky way he had of saying her name sent shivers through her, but perhaps the reaction was only from being soaked to the skin.

Her boots squished as she fled at last into the darkness. The wet jeans dripped down Ringo's sides when she climbed into the saddle. Jake waded out of the water, and

it took every ounce of strength not to turn around. Shameless of her, but she wanted to see him in the silvery twilight emerging from the creek wet and sleek and bare. Instead, she hunkered on Ringo and dug in her knees, the only sign the great stallion needed to send him into the night, carrying her up over the rise and down again, out of sight and hearing of the man she both loved and despised.

Back at camp she peeled out of the wet boots and clothing, draped pants and shirt on nearby brush and crawled into her bedroll without building a fire or fixing supper. She lay there for a long time gazing at stars that flared in the purpling sky. She had dozed into a restless sleep when he returned, and awoke immediately but didn't move.

She hoped he would leave, prayed he would not.

Jake built a fire and put on some coffee. Once in a while he glanced at her still form, sensed that she was not asleep but instead lay listening, waiting. He wanted to say something to her, had to, but it would take a while to figure out how to get started. All he knew about women was what he knew about her, and that didn't give him much to go on.

He breathed deeply of wood smoke laced with the fragrance of boiling coffee and the lingering tang of photographic chemicals. And Allie. He could smell her all around, enclosing him, reaching out. He regretted what he had done, for now he feared she would want him to leave. Allie was not ready to give her heart to a man—her father's death was too near—and even though she had made the first move, he should have backed away immediately, not let it go so far.

He sat there for a while thinking about that, and knew it wasn't entirely the truth. The truth, of course, when he would admit it, was that he wanted her desperately, but could not bring himself to be unfaithful to Lorena. And yet tonight a passion had been awakened, had sprung from the void he had lived with for so long. He had wanted Allie with all of his body and soul, his mind and heart. He ached for her, but still he would never betray Lorena. Surely Allie could understand that and forgive him.

He remembered nothing, knew nothing for sure about the man who had once lived in this shell he now inhabited. Didn't even know if the occasional memories were any more than fantasies, dreams, nightmares. Hell, he might as well be a damned virgin for all he knew about making love to a woman. The way his body had responded to Allie, though, it hadn't forgotten anything even if his mind had, and he'd been just a step from taking her, loving her, forgetting all about Lorena.

That was a laugh. He knew nothing about Lorena except that he carried her picture, he had done something unforgivable to her, maybe even killed her, and she had probably loved another man. Why in God's name didn't he just put it all behind him?

He sat there with his regrets, gazing into the fire while he drank two cups of very hot black coffee. Finally he went to bed fully clothed, head propped on his saddle.

Allie lay still for a long while listening to Jake's breathing smooth out. She must have fallen asleep, for she was next aware that she walked in a graveyard. She moved from the graves of her mother and sister to that of her father, much as she had the day she buried him at their side and left Missouri for good. In one hand she carried rose petals, which she sprinkled over each grave. On and on the petals fell until great

mounds were heaped at each stone, a blood red in a black and white world. Then she knelt at her father's grave—strangely thick grass covered the raw earth as if he had been buried there for years—and began to beat at the ground.

"Why?" she screamed. "Why did you do it? Why, why?" She pounded until her fists were raw and bloody, and awoke sobbing.

Once fully awake, she considered the dream. Clearly she was still very angry with her father over his leaving the family to go off to the war and shoot his pictures. Yet, that had been forgiven when he returned for her, hadn't it? From that moment on they had never had so much as a harsh word. He had been a gentle man, a successful man, who provided well for his family, yet clearly she hadn't resolved her anger, still blamed him as well as herself for what had happened to her mother and sister.

Wiping night tears from her eyes, she sat up and hugged both knees. Then she saw Jake's still form, head propped on his saddle, boots lying near his stockinged feet where he could pull them on at a moment's notice.

Her heartbeat quickened. She had expected him to be gone when she awoke—actually had thought that's what she wanted, but seeing him lying there so peacefully, she knew it wasn't.