



# THE SHERIFF

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## Chapter One

*Giddings, Texas, 1887*

Greydon Jefferies stared down at the dead body at his feet. Damn and double damn.

He took off his black hat and swiped his forearm over his brow. Texas weather was unpredictable at best, and at worst, felt like Hell's Kitchen. August in the settling central part of the state was on the latter end.

"Looks like one of Cooper's boys," Murphy, his deputy said, spitting a long brown stream of tobacco to the side.

Flies buzzed around the body that had obviously lain out all night behind the town corrals.

Giddings, Texas was a stop-over for many people. New immigrants coming up from the coast, newly arrived in the great state of Texas, passed through on their way to the capital, to Fort Worth, to Abilene, or San Antonio. Giddings was mostly a passing through for any and all. Few stayed over and a few, obviously, had no choice.

"Cooper's gonna be pissed, Sheriff. You know him. He'll blame it on Strippen's gang and then all hell's gonna break loose."

Greydon ignored his deputy's words.

"Why do you think he's with Cooper? Any idea who he is?"

"Nope. Just saw him with two of Cooper's a few days ago."

"So, for all we know," he said, looking over his shoulder at the slowly dawning street through the buildings at the edge of the alley, "he could have ..."

"Fallen off his horse and hit his head?"

Greydon raised a brow at his young and not brightest deputy. "Murphy, no one falls off their horse and gets a bullet in the chest."

"Guess not, Sheriff."

Greydon sighed and shook his head. "Just say he was shot after the saloon closed. Who the hell knows."

"They won't buy it."

"You know for a fact he was with Cooper?"

Murphy shrugged.

Greydon turned and looked down, noticing for the first time the footprint next to the building where he stood. It wasn't a large print. Small in fact, too small for a man, or any man he knew. He looked at Murphy's boot, noticed his own was wide. Who the hell was he kidding?

"Any of Maggie's girls out here last night?" he asked, looking across the alley to the local whorehouse.

Murphy looked up. "I don't know, probably. Why?"

"He wasn't one of Cooper's, Murphy. He was playing big over at Shoeey's last night. I left before the game ended. Guess I should have stayed a bit longer. He's only a gambler passing through. We'll figure out who he is sooner or later."

Murphy frowned. "Okay, but why ya' worried about a woman, Sheriff?"

Greydon kept his ideas to himself. He looked at the footprint, perfect, narrow and small. From the angle ... huh. He ran the situation through his mind. Perhaps she had merely stood here before the storm. No, it had already been raining from the looks of the impression, which was deeper due to the mud. Yet, there wasn't another footprint. Had she eradicated the prints, or did the rain wash them away? The only reason he assumed this one hadn't been washed away, was because it was directly against the wall, at a slight incline away from the eaves.

A woman.

A friend or a foe?

He stood and sniffed, glad the rain had cooled things off. Well, it was his job to try and keep law and order in this town. He'd do it.

His stomach growled.

Time to head over to Miss Lorella's.

At the thought of the woman, her long dark hair falling out of its braid as always, her wide full lips smiling, his stomach wasn't the only thing that took notice of where he was--or rather wasn't.

One day very soon, he'd be in Miss Lorella's bed.

That was one woman he wanted. And one he would have.

\* \* \* \*

Lorella Constance filled the mug with more coffee. She had four borders today, four more people to feed and house, to clean up after.

Not that she minded, she thought as she wiped her forearm over her brow. The kitchen was warm already and it wasn't even midmorning.

An image dark and terrifying from the night before rose in her mind of two men struggling in the storm.

Lorella shoved it away and wondered how the hell she was supposed to get through today after what had happened last night.

Her hands shook as she scooped eggs onto one of the plates and then smothered the biscuits with gravy.

She was too busy. She didn't have time to fall apart.

She paused and looked out the window, the gingham curtain fluttering softly in the breeze. Not for the first time, she wished she had someone to share her troubles with, but that wasn't to be. Not for her. Never for her. If she were meant to be married, she would still be with Mr. Constance, the banker from Charleston. But fate and life had different plans for her. So here she was in the little town of Giddings, Texas wishing for a different life for some stupid reason when the one she had was perfectly fine, if a bit lonely.

Lonely. It would be nice to lean. For just a moment, she let her mind wander to the one person she would lean on right now if she could. He was the only man she had leaned on, had asked for help for small chores that had overwhelmed, or that she'd simply been unable to do with boarders. Like the roof that had needed mending and with her a full house of guests. She'd leaned and asked him for more help in recent months than she ever had, but she knew in this particular instance she had best leave well enough alone.

Lorella Constance had moved here needing a fresh start not five years ago. The old aunts she'd moved in with had taken off for parts unknown and left her with a letter

and the boarding house in Giddings, Texas. Not what Lorella had planned for her life, but it was a life none-the-less and one she was normally thankful for. And she was honest enough with herself to know that though she'd been fine as a banker's wife, she'd never really fit into that circle of people and they'd always let her know it. Then again, she'd been young and thought it wonderful the older Mr. Constance had cast his cap for her, young and foolish. Here in Giddings she was more at peace, more at home than she'd ever been in Charleston.

At least she had been until last night.

Now Lorella's normally staid and uneventful life was ... terrifying.

She turned and gasped as the backdoor opened.

And in walked Sheriff Greydon Jefferies.

Damn. Just what she needed.

Yet her heart kicked into double time, whether from fear or ... arousal she had no clue and didn't want to guess right now. She dreamed of the man entirely too much.

He hung his hat on the iron peg in the wall and she couldn't stop from letting her gaze stroll down the long lines of his body. The man might eat more of her biscuits than anyone else, but he never showed it. He was fit and trim. She knew from both local stories and witnessing first-hand that he knew how to handle the guns slung around his waist and strapped to his thigh. The sheriff's badge on his vest was as much a part of him as his sandy brown hair and creased, dark brown eyes. His nose was slightly crooked, probably from a fist. And scars nicked and dented his face as if an artist couldn't decide where to put them. He always seemed to be smiling, even when he wasn't. Or was she the only one that had ever noticed that, even when his lips remained firm and straight, amusement seemed to peak out at the edges. She'd seen the man most mornings and evenings of every week for the last year, and every blasted time she laid eyes on him, something inside her seemed to trip and slide. Maybe one day she'd be bold enough to ask the man to go for a walk, or maybe even for the Christmas dance the town held every year.

Lorella shook off the stupid thoughts and instead she smiled, and said, grabbing the plates, "Gotta get these out to the boys. I'll be right back."

He only nodded and sat at her kitchen table like he did most mornings out of any given week. She just hoped he was here for his morning coffee and biscuits and not for something else.

She pushed through the door and into the dining room where four men sat talking.

She set the other two plates down, already having served the first two.

"Miss Lorella, this looks scrumptious," one of the travelers said.

She smiled at them, asked if they needed anything else and then walked back to the kitchen. At the door, she paused, ran her damp palms over her blouse and took a deep breath.

Courage. Strength. She could do this. Act as if all was well. All was good and he'd never know the difference.

She hoped.

Lorella pushed into the kitchen and avoided the man sitting at her table. As much as she could avoid someone that pushed six feet and always looked as if he were waiting on the sun set. She'd rarely seen the man hurry. He often reminded her of a sleeping cat. He'd just sit and watch all that went on around him. But Lorella knew Greydon well

enough to never underestimate the shrewd, sharp mind that hid behind his slow drawl and slow, rolling gait.

She tried to quell the nervous trembles as she got his plate ready and set it before him with a fork and knife.

He picked them up and poured his own coffee into another mug that she'd set out of habit onto the table.

Some things were a given. The sun rising, the ever-changing Texas weather, and the sheriff coming here to eat.

If she were honest with herself, she knew that he was the highlight of her day. She had never admitted to anyone what his visits meant to her. How she looked forward to them all day and all night.

He was the man that haunted her dreams, dreams that left her aching and wet, wanting more.

But she'd never admit it to anyone, let alone to him.

Sheriff Greydon was not one to entice into fantasies and if he were, which she seriously doubted, they probably wouldn't be with her. She wasn't exactly fantasy material.

No, women like her were rather plain and every day. She ran a proper boarding house, not a brothel.

Sighing and wishing again for someone to confide in, she shoved her thoughts of Greydon aside.

When she'd set the plate in front of him, she turned towards the sink.

His hand snaked out and snagged her wrist. "Sit, Lorella."

He waited, his dark eyes intent on her.

She paused, her pulse kicked up and her body tightened.

"Just a minute. I need--"

"To sit down with me," he interrupted, his voice low and calm as it always was.

She took a deep breath, pulled the same shields around her that she had since childhood.

Outward calm, inner turmoil, she thought.

"You have any women guests stayin' here?" he asked, still holding her hand even though he'd picked up his mug of coffee.

She took another deep breath and looked him straight in the eyes. "No. Four men out there eating."

His gaze darted around the kitchen.

"And before you ask," she said, "Moirra was sick this morning, so I sent her to bed."

Everyone in town knew Moira had shown up a month earlier, a young girl with a shady past and bruises to speak volumes. Lorella had taken her in since she herself was in need of some help and the arrangement worked out fine for everyone--until they had too many men boarding. Then Moira tended to get ill and hide in her room for hours on end.

Lorella didn't push the issue, though she often thought of doing so.

"Four men." He shook his head. "You need to find out what that girl is hiding, Lorella."

Lorella rolled her eyes. "Not everyone who doesn't confess all is a criminal,

Sheriff. The girl has a past. Who doesn't passing through Texas after the war?"

He held her gaze for a moment then obviously decided to let the matter drop as he looked at her over the rim of the coffee mug and asked, "You gonna tell me what has you frowning this morning?"

She pulled her hand free, half surprised he let her go and straightened, wiping her palms on her skirt, and setting more biscuits in a basket.

"Nothing. I'm just flustered doing all this myself," she lied. They both knew it was a lie as she had managed just fine by herself for years before Moira showed up.

"Hmmm."

She didn't turn around, simply kept piling all the biscuits from the Dutch oven into the basket. She took another two out, then one more and set them on a saucer which she gave to Greydon.

He still watched her, though his mouth was full of food.

She sighed.

The man always made her sigh. She was hopeless and dang it if she didn't know better.

"So what are your plans for the day?" he asked her.

She turned back around and started mixing up more biscuits. Flour, lard ...

"I don't know. Clean up around here, make certain that the dinner's ready by six, and then clean up some more." She jerked her head toward the window, looking out over the garden. "I need to weed the garden, as well."

Johnson grass speared up between her squash and onions. The earlier breeze seemed to have died down so that now the air just seemed to swelter.

Neither spoke but she could feel his eyes on her. Just as she cut the last biscuit and put it in the Dutch oven, he asked, "Any of your boarders late last night in coming in?"

Last night ...

She shuddered and turned around. "How should I know? I locked the door just as always, but if someone wants to leave, I can't very well stop them, can I?"

He ran his tongue around his teeth, his eyes narrowing on her. Then his dark gaze dropped to the hem of her skirt.

"Nice rain we had last night."

She looked down. She only had one pair of shoes, and thankfully, she'd cleaned those when she came in and her skirt was in a pile in her room just off the kitchen.

When Lorella looked back at him, the sparkle in his eyes was replaced by a hard glint that she had noticed sometimes flashed through them at odd moments. One didn't eat across from a man a good portion of one's meals without noticing little details.

"Lorella," he said in that low, calm voice. "If you had something to tell me, you'd tell me, wouldn't you?" He didn't move so then why in the world did she feel as if he were crowding her?

Taking a deep breath, she jerked the towel off her shoulder and wiped the table top. "Of course, Greydon."

His hand came down on top of hers, stilling her movements. "I think you should come by the jailhouse this evening."

She felt the blood drain from her face.

He blinked and was then standing beside her. "Don't pass out on me, woman."

Here, sit down.” He shoved her into the chair she’d abandoned earlier. “What is wrong with you this morning? If I didn’t know better,” he muttered, still watching her though he poured her a cup of water from the jug on the counter, “I’d think you were afraid of me.”

Lorella closed her eyes and shook her head. “You just shocked me is all, Greydon. Why in the world you’d want me to come by the jailhouse is beyond me. I’m tired and edgy and you just shocked me. I don’t like jailhouses. They bring back bad memories.”

“Of?”

“A past that doesn’t matter as its long since buried.”

He said nothing, just stood, leaning against the table in front of her, his ankles crossed, his arms crossed, that weighing look on his face.

“I can’t come by here tonight and I’d rather you not be here alone with those men.” He jerked his head towards the swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room.

She frowned and looked up at him. “I can take care of myself.”

“Things are happening around here and until I know what’s going on, I’d like to know you’re safe. So, bring me a plate tonight, please.”

Lorella took a deep, calming breath. “Greydon Jefferies, sheriff or not, you don’t order me about like I’m some sort of criminal. This is my house and I’ll stay in it, thank you very much. If you want a plate, you can come get it.” She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the ladder backed chair.

“Lorella,” he said, his voice dropping.

“Don’t you Lorella me. I’ve taken care of myself this long in life.”

“Everyone needs to lean a bit.”

Though he echoed her earlier thoughts, she didn’t like the fact that he seemed so demanding of her or expected her to simply do as he asked.

“I don’t need another man screwing things up for me,” she muttered, looking down.

For a long moment he said nothing, drawing her gaze back to him. He only arched a brow. “Another man?” He nodded once, twice. “And which other man messed things up for you, Lorella?”

Crimeny!

Now what did she say to that?

“Ummm ....” She tried to think what to say, noticed his eyes had narrowed. A small twitch bunched in his jaw and though he didn’t move, it was as if every muscle had tightened in him. She licked her lips.

“Lorella,” he said, his voice deep and blast it all--demanding.

“Just--just because you eat at my table, Sheriff, doesn’t give you the right to--to order me about.” She glared up at him.

His eyes were narrowed on hers. She dropped her gaze and suddenly realized with him standing in front of her as he was and she seated, she was nose-to-cock with the man.

Blood rushed up to her hair line. But she wasn’t the only one who noticed. Even as he stood there, and she simply stared, his cock grew until it was pushing against the worn tan fabric of his pants.



Her breath froze in her lungs even as her heart slammed in her chest and her breasts felt heavy. She could feel the dampness between her thighs.

She licked her lips.

He slowly leaned down and looked her directly in the eyes. His dark eyes bore into hers and there was a mixture of anger, frustration, and something else in the depths.

"Lorella," his warm breath whispered against her lips, "there's eating at your table, and there's eating at your table." He leaned closer and pressed his lips against hers.

For a moment, she couldn't think, couldn't move.

He paused, lifted his head, then leaned in again and kissed her harder. The press of his lips wasn't gentle. He demanded entrance. His tongue ran the seam of her mouth and she opened.

The kiss deepened as he tasted inside her mouth, his tongue lazily pursuing hers to play. Closing her eyes, she gave in and wrapped her arms around the man that kept her up.

He was kissing her.

Feelings long buried, rose up--arousal.

For a man.

For Greydon.

She nipped his bottom lip with her own and he jerked back.

"Be there tonight," he said straightening. He grabbed his hat from the hook.

"Thanks for breakfast." He stopped at the door and speared her with a look of promise.

"Don't make me come get you, honey. I promise you won't like the consequences."

## Chapter Two

Greydon wondered if she'd really come, if she'd be daring enough to. What had he been thinking this morning anyway?

He hadn't been. The woman had him twisted in knots. The more she sassed him, the more aroused he'd become.

Hell, if he were honest, his cock had been rock hard around the woman for months. She'd just noticed this morning.

And when he'd caught her staring at his dick, he could no more stop himself from tasting than he could from wanting to undress her.

At least he hadn't stripped her in the kitchen.

He raked a hand through his hair. He hated the thought of her over there all alone. She was too damn trusting by half, let any stay with her who needed to, or wanted to.

Not everyone was nice.

Who the hell knew what those men, or any man that stayed under her roof, was up to? The woman ran a boarding house, granted. However, he'd noticed that more and more lately he didn't like the fact she was over there all alone. Moira might help her out, but ... damn it all. He had no clue what his problem was. The little woman had wormed her way into his thoughts, like the scent of her baking pies wafted down the street to invade his space. The more he was around her, doing any odd job she asked him, waiting until she asked him because he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't accept help that was offered unless it was asked for, the more he wanted her. And the more he wanted her, the more he didn't like the thought she was leaving herself open to possible harm by letting travelers stay with her, even if it was what she did.

He rubbed his hands over his face.

It was late. He could hear laughter from the saloon across the street. Harnesses jingled on horses and several male voices were talking on the boardwalk.

The late summer sun had just set. It wasn't even nine o'clock by the courthouse clock, and daylight was finally giving up its hold.

He prayed nothing happened tonight.

Why the hell he'd told her to meet him here, he'd yet to know. He normally stayed in a room in the back of the hotel. It was cheap. He didn't have to worry about hearth and home. It was either that room or sleeping above the jail house. He looked up. The second floor needed new boards. Some were loose and he had no desire to traipse around up there or get up one morning to fall through the floor.

He listened.

Would she come?

Or would she test him?

He smiled. He halfway hoped she'd do the latter. He'd have a surprise or two for her. He'd waited and waited and now that he'd kissed the woman, he *knew* what before he had only suspected. Now, though, he knew without a doubt Lorella was his and he'd shoot anyone that claimed otherwise.

He'd just have convince her of that.

He waited a few more minutes. What the hell had had her so spooked this morning? He'd wondered that all day long and every scenario he came up with he didn't like. Granted, this was Texas, everyone within a stone's toss had come here to get away from something. He didn't care for the most part what anyone had done as long as the person wasn't wanted by the law elsewhere or would bring trouble to his town. Neither of which could he imagine of Lorella, but there was plenty more he could and had imagined throughout the day as to why she didn't care for jailhouses.

She wasn't coming.

He stood and then heard the soft footfalls outside the office door. Grinning, he sat back down.

He watched the door and leaned back in his chair, propping his legs on the desk.

The door opened and she strode in, her brown skirt swirling around her boots, which he noted, as he had this morning, were worn, the sole almost non-existent. She needed new boots.

He sighed and laced his hands over his stomach.

"I was fixin' to come get you."

One finely arched brow rose and she narrowed her gaze at him.

"Knowing you, you probably would have." She brought a basket over and set it on his desk. The scent of stew and her biscuits rose from the covered basket. He'd get to those later.

Instead he simply stared at her.

She twisted her fingers in her skirt, then dropped her hands to her side and took a deep breath. "Okay, I'm here, so what was the order and threat all about?"

He grinned and watched the blush steal up her cheeks. He waited until she started to fidget and then motioned her to sit.

She arched a brow and sat across from him. Still he didn't move, instead he watched her.

"What do you know about the man that died last night?"

And there it was again, a flash of fear, of ... something as the rosy blush faded from her cheeks.

"Lorella."

She sniffed and shifted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He dropped his feet and sat up. "Oh, yes you do."

"Well, I didn't kill him."

He laughed. "Honey, I never thought you had."

Her shoulders went back. "I just might surprise you."

He dropped his gaze to her lips, full and normally ready to smile. Now they were pressed together. "Oh, there's no doubt in my mind you could surprise me." He let his gaze lower to caress over her neck, to the high collar of her white blouse, a bit worn about the seams.

Her breasts looked full. He'd often imaged what her clothing hid, the curves, and the valleys.

She swallowed.

"What is all this about Greydon?" she asked softly.

He looked backup at her and said, "You."

A frown creased her brows. "Me?"

“You. I want you.” There he’d said it. He could face down criminals, round up a posse to ride down horse thieves. He’d shot men and led others to the gallows. Now his stomach tightened.

She blinked. “What?”

“I ... want ... you.”

She looked down, a small grin peaking from one corner of her mouth. Then she looked back at him from under her lashes. “You sound sure of yourself.”

“Oh, I am.”

\* \* \* \*

He wanted her? She tried to hear past the thunder of her own heartbeat, but it was hard.

Why did she feel like running for the door? It might be the predatory look in his dark eyes--as if she were some prey and he was about to pounce. The pulse in his neck drew her attention.

It was hot in the jailhouse.

She narrowed her gaze at him and realized he was in control here. She’d show him.

Sighing, she leaned back and crossed her leg, letting it swing as she often did sitting so. “You know,” she said, not breaking eye contact. “I suppose it’s a good thing you want me. I have a confession to make, Greydon ....” She waved her hand in front of her face.

For a second, she thought of running for the door, but this could be her only chance. She was thirty years old. Didn’t have a husband anymore, thanks to a twist of fate years ago, and the man she’d been dreaming of, fantasizing about, wanted her. Now wasn’t the time to act the shy virgin miss.

“It’s hotter in here than in my kitchen,” she said after a brief hesitation instead of finishing the provocative comment. Watching his eyes follow her fingers, she slowly undid the top button of her plain cotton shirt. Then she slipped the next one free. He swallowed, his gaze narrowing before rising to hers.

“What game are you playing, Lorella?”

She tilted her head. “Aren’t you going to eat, Sheriff?”

He motioned to her shirt but said nothing.

A female’s laughter danced throatily with the deeper tones of a male from across the street. The saloon. Whores.

Right now, she wished she knew a few tricks.

But men, in her experience from all that stayed under her roof, from what she’d seen of the good church-going males who visited Miss Mabel’s during the week, were all the same. All simple creatures really that were ruled by their manhoods instead of their brains many times.

“You gonna keep going, or will I have to come over there and help?” he asked.

She undid one more and then motioned to the basket. “Aren’t you going to look inside?”

He arched a brow and picked up the edge of the towel. He took a deep breath and looked at the contents. “Peach cobbler.”

She smiled. His eyes darkened. “You don’t tell an officer of the law you have a confession to make and then not say anything else, Lorella. We don’t take too well to

that.”

She stood up and walked around the edge of the desk. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. She’d just do the things she always dreamed of doing to him, with him, and see where it took them.

“Really?”

“Really. Makes us twitchy,” he said, reaching out and putting his hands on her waist, pulling her towards him.

“Twitchy isn’t good.”

“Exactly, so,” he muttered, leaning up to nuzzle her neck. “Why don’t you confess?”

“Why, Sheriff, a woman must keep some secrets.”

He kissed the side of her neck, trailed his tongue from her ear lobe to her collar bone and back up. At her ear, he licked her lobe, sending shivers down her spine.

“You’ll tell me everything I want to know.”

She chuckled.

“I have ways of makin’ you talk.”

This time she laughed out loud. She ran her fingers into the sandy brown tresses of his hair. It was soft, but courser than she would have thought, the slight curls staying even as she raked her fingers through it.

“Like?” she whispered, tilting his face up to her.

He stopped just shy of kissing her. “You gonna tell me what your confession is?”

She thought about it, but was having too much fun. Lorella pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. “I don’t think so.”

“Then you’ll have to wait and see.”

A tingle of anticipation shot through her system, making her breasts feel full, her nipples harden.

His gaze dropped to them. “Well, lookie here. Miss Lorella, did that turn you on?”

He turned his chair and pulled her closer, then trapped her between the desk at her bottom and him in front of her, between his legs.

She swallowed. The ache between her thighs grew, dampening her.

He cupped her breasts through her blouse, through her chemise. Then he popped the remaining buttons free.

She wished she had a corset but several of the whale bones had broken and she simply didn’t have time to try and find a new one.

He ran his hands under her shirt edge, and then slipped it off her shoulders. He watched her, looked at her as if she were some favorite desert. She’d never had anyone look at her that way before.

Then he untied the laces of her chemise and pulled the edges down, slipped it off her shoulders. It caught on her upper arms.

She was so hot. Moisture glistened on her brow, on her body.

On his forehead.

He leaned in and breathed deep, closing his eyes. Then he opened them again and cupped her bare breasts.

“Lorella,” he said on a sigh. He stood, so that they were closer to the same height and leaned into her, kissing her mouth.

This kiss was like none of the others. It was hard, hot, demanding. The tentative press of lips from this morning was gone.

Now the kiss made her think of all the fires of brimstone she'd heard through the years. It made her yearn, made her want.

And what she wanted was Greydon Jefferies.

She tried to bring her hands up, but her arms were caught in the chemise.

"Confession?" he asked, nipping her lips.

She sighed and scooted closer to him, even as one finger circled the center of her breast.

"Ummm ..."

"Still not gonna tell me?" he asked quietly, his eyes dropping to watch his fingers play around her breasts.

She looked down at his long tan fingers as he took her pink nipple between his thumbs and forefingers and rolled, pulled, and rolled again.

She closed her eyes and moaned.

"Confession?" he asked, chuckling.

"No." She shook her head.

He stopped. "You better tell me," he warned.

She licked her lips. "Or what?"

"Or I'll make you beg."

"For?"

"Release," he said, his voice deep and caressing.

She grinned and arched her breasts into his hands. "Threats, Sheriff?"

He tweaked her nipples. "Honey, that's a promise."

He stepped back, glanced to the door then cursed. Striding to it, he threw the bolt, and then stopped in front of her again. He ran a hand through his hair and frowned.

Great, now he was having second thoughts.

She took a deep breath and went to pull up her chemise.

His hand shot out and grabbed hers. "I should have thought ... this isn't exactly ...." He sighed. "We're in a jailhouse, for God's sake."

She arched a brow. "You told me to come here. Now you don't want me? Typical male."

The look in his eyes gave her pause. He jerked her off the desk and pulled her with him through the office, passed the jail cells to a room in the back. There were two beds against the wall, guns and ammo on the walls, saddles, spurs, rifles. He threw the bolt on the other door in the room, as well.

"Get undressed."

She stood rooted to the spot.

"Lorella. I'm the sheriff here. I don't get a lot of free time. What I have I want to spend with you."

She shook her head. Why couldn't things for her ever be normal? "Sheriff, I think you were bluffing." She propped her hands on her hips.

He arched a brow. "Bluffing?"

"No man's ever made me beg." She crossed her arms. "And here you are making empty--"

He was across the room faster than she could blink, his hand lost in the hair at her

nape. "I don't bluff."

"Promises, promises ...." His mouth, hard and hot on hers, cut off her words. He gave her no room for thought. He crushed her to him. The leather of his vest was smooth and warm against her naked breasts.

He rubbed against her and she moaned.

He quickly had the ties at the back of her skirt undone so that she almost tripped as he lead her backwards to the bed and her skirt slipped from her waist. He jerked it off and tossed it aside.

"You're gonna regret taunting me, honey."

She waited until he started to undo his own buttons then decided to make a dash for it. She hopped up on the bed and landed on the other side.

He only arched a brow. "You always loved to play hard to get."

## Chapter Three

Greydon dropped his vest, undid the gun belt and hung it on the end of the bed. Then he quickly undressed, watching as her breaths came quicker, as those beautiful full breasts rose and fell. He couldn't wait to see the rest of her. She stood in her worn petticoats and open chemise and he wanted nothing more than to bury his face between her magnificent breasts and his cock deep into her warm pussy.

Her impish grin told him she was enjoying this as much as he was.

He darted one way, then the other. When she tried to hop up on the bed again, he was ready and grabbed her, tossing her down on the bed. He wrestled until he had her petticoat up around her waist and his hand on her pussy. It was warm and wet.

A shudder danced down his spine.

"Settle down. I need to get your clothes off."

She rocked against him.

"Shhh," he told her. "We'll get to all the good parts. Right now, we're having fun." He pulled one arm, then the other from her chemise. Then he reached over and grabbed a strip of linen used for doctoring.

"Now, honey, you might not like this, but I'm doing it for your own good."

She squirmed beneath him. "Greydon."

"Shhh ...." He kissed her, taking her mind off what he was doing. He quickly looped the strip of cloth around her wrists and bound her to a bar in the headboard, careful not to tie it too tightly, but tight enough.

"Greydon?"

"I told you I'd get you to tell me all." He kissed her again, moved along her jaw, twirled his tongue in her ear, and grinned when she shivered.

He kissed a path down her chest, licked a path from one breast to the other. "You smell like peaches."

She laughed. "I baked three cobblers."

"Hmm ..."

He pushed the material down her stomach that sloped in before flaring out with her hips. He shucked her clothes down, over her hips, pausing when the triangle of dark hair was revealed. He leaned in and breathed deep the scent of woman.

She caught her breath.

He jerked the petticoat and chemise off her and tossed them aside. Then he stood. Here she was.

"Good, God," he whispered.

Her skin was milk white against his tanned hand and arms. Her hands were darker, her face and neck. She liked to work out in the garden, he knew.

But he'd never imagined this. "In all the times I dreamed and thought of you naked, I never .... You're beautiful."

She squirmed and if not bound, would probably have covered herself.

He ran a hand from her chest, over her breasts, down to the juncture of her thighs.

"I've dreamed of you like this," he told her.



“Confessions of your own?” she asked. “And all the times you ate at my table with that cool look on your face. Now I’ll wonder what you were really thinking.”

He looked back up to her eyes. “Do you really want to know what I was thinking, Lorella?”

She swallowed and licked her lips. “Yes.”

He watched her as he climbed onto the narrow bed. At first he kissed her, calmed her, felt her heart racing against him where his chest met hers. Her body was warm and pliant beneath his.

He didn’t say a word, just continued to kiss his way down her chest to her breasts.

He cupped them, weighed and caressed the creamy white globes. Her nipples were a dark pink, reminding him of the Indian paint brushes that grew on the hillsides during the spring.

He pressed his palms to the centers of her breasts, circled and grazed, until she was arching into his hands. Then clamped his mouth over one nipple and grinned as she arched off the bed.

“Greydon,” she whispered.

“Your nipples taste as sweet as your cobbler.” He looked up at her as he laved and suckled the other breast.

Lust rode him harder than a robber escaping a posse.

“I wonder what else tastes sweet on you.” He scraped his teeth over her nipple and licked and laved his way down her stomach, smooth and trim. He wondered vaguely if she ever ate the food she made or if she fed it to everyone else.

He eased down her long body, and spread her thighs. In the low light of the lantern, he could see the moisture on her pussy.

“This is the prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen,” he told her, running a finger through her slick, wet folds.

She didn’t say a word, only continued to watch him as he studied her. Then he watched his finger. He ran a finger down through her pubic hair, just to the side of her clit, to slide along the wet folds. He ran his finger back up, touching neither her clit, nor the opening, creaming for him.

He watched her reaction as he played her. He drew a figure eight, slowly, then faster and faster.

She mewled.

“Confessions?” he taunted.

She frowned, clearly not knowing what he was talking about. Then Greydon leaned down and put his mouth to her.

She tasted of dark, forbidden promises.

He played his tongue in the same pattern as he did his finger, around her clit, down over her slit, never touching.

“Please, Greydon,” she begged.

He pressed her thighs further apart, opening her completely to him. “Please what?”

He blew against her wet folds.

Lorella arched, wanted, ached, needed ....

The air brushed over her and she shivered.

His fingers ... his tongue ...

He leaned in and flicked his tongue ever so lightly back and forth, then circled around and around that screaming bundle of nerves.

“Oh, pleeeeeeasse,” she begged.

He chuckled against her and she felt the relieving slide of a lone finger pierce her. “What’s that?” He moved his finger back and forth.

All she could feel was the heat pressing in on her, the tightening inside her, the slide of his finger moving in. out. In. Out.

She wanted more. It had been so long, so very, very long.

He flicked his thumb over the straining peak.

“I love your pussy,” told her.

She shuddered at his dark words.

“It’s wet, straining, waiting ...”

His finger increased, then slowed, then increased, always keeping her on the edge of bliss. Then he jerked his finger free.

“Do you want relief?”

“Yes. Please, yes.” Every nerve in her body was screaming for release.

“What would you do for it?”

“Anything,” she told him, pulling on her bonds.

He arched a brow. “Anything?”

Her gaze dropped to his fully erect cock, standing proudly in the nest of hair at his groin. He was a wonderfully naked man. His back and chest were whiter than his arms, than his neck. Muscles, corded and tight, rippled as he moved. She wanted to touch him, wanted to run her hands over him.

A memory long buried of something her husband asked her to do, rose in her mind. Newly wed, the idea had shocked and at the time repulsed her, but now, looking at Greydon, she wanted ....

“Come here,” she told him.

He arched a brow.

“I want to taste you,” she told him.

“Taste me? You already did that.”

She shook her head. “No. I want to taste your cock. You tasted me. I want to taste you. Now.”

He took a deep breath and shook his head.

“What’s wrong, Sheriff? Scared?” She pulled again at her bindings.

He climbed up the bed, until he was straddling her face, his hands against the wall. “You want a taste?”

She nodded and opened her mouth.

“I ...” He shook his head, took his cock in his hand and guided it to her mouth. Lorella reached out and licked the tip, surprised at the musky scent of him, but so hot, so aroused, she wanted nothing more than to taste all of him. However, he was long and she wasn’t exactly certain.

Watching him, she opened her mouth wider and twirled her tongue on him. His eyes slid closed. She closed her lips on him and suckled.

“Christ, Lorella,” he groaned.

She alternated between suckling and swirling her tongue. He began to move, thrusting softly into her mouth. She rolled her tongue around the head of his cock,

around and around until he groaned again. Then she sucked him deep, hard and fast.

He shouted and thrust into her again and again.

His hands went to her head and he leaned against the wall at the headboard. "I'm going to ... I can't ..."

He came in her mouth. Lorella quickly swallowed him down, the jets of come tangy and unusual to her, but not unpleasant. His pleasure had only increased her desire.

She ached. She wanted.

Lorella shifted, tried to find ...

Greydon, panting, pushed himself away from the wall and pulled out of her mouth. "Holy shit, woman! Where in the ever living hell did you learn that?" He looked down at her.

She only grinned. He took a deep breath and shook his head. "Your turn."

He climbed off her, and then scooted down the bed. "I shouldn't have done that. I can't think ...." He shook his head again, chuckled and muttered, "Damn."

Lorella knew he had enjoyed himself. "Did I do something wrong? I wasn't certain ...." At his look of disbelief she added, "I'd only heard."

He grinned and said, "My turn, honey."

His hand ran down her body and she arched into him, sighed when he let his hand rest on her pussy. As he pressed, she shuddered.

Banging on the door echoed through the jailhouse. It continued.

"Damn it. Damn it. Damn it." He climbed off her and quickly untied her. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm really sorry."

He threw her clothes at her.

Her body was awash in conflicting emotions, feeling pulled in every direction.

"Sheriff!" Gunshots echoed.

She tried to figure out why she wanted to cry as she struggled into her chemise and slid into her petticoat.

"I'm so damn sorry. I'd say stay back here, but you'd best get dressed. People are liable to be in here in no time." He jerked on his pants and stamped his feet into his boots, grabbing his holster off the end of the bed in the process. "Damn it."

The pounding started at their door. "Sheriff!"

It was all suddenly so ludicrous, she giggled as she hurried into her skirt. The shirt was out in the office. Greydon seemed to understand.

"Just a damn minute. Go round front. This door is blocked." He ran out and was back in a second with her shirt, tossing it to her. "Get dressed and go out that door. I'll be at your place as soon as I get this wrapped up."

She pulled her shirt on.

"Sheriff!"

He grabbed her, kissed her hard, muttered another apology, and then slammed the little room's door. She quickly jerked on her own boots. Her disheveled hair was hopeless so she let it go unbound.

Grinning like an idiot, wanting to laugh and cry, and yell at whoever the hell was knocking on the doors to go away, she quietly slipped out into the alley and walked back to the boarding house.

## Chapter Four

Lorella listened. The house was quiet. Two of her boarders having left, the other two men were upstairs asleep.

She sat on her back porch at the edge of town and wondered what had been going on earlier. The moon wasn't full, but provided enough light she could see.

Her body still ached for release.

Deciding he wasn't coming tonight, she stood and walked into the kitchen, then let herself into her own room. Sunrise would be coming soon. At least she'd set out biscuits already.

She let the quilt around her fall, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Her breasts were full and aching, ripe, her nipples protruding from the white cotton gown she wore. It was so hot ...

She reached over and grabbed the wash cloth from the basin. Moonlight streamed through the window onto her bed. She let the water trickle over her neck, hoping it would cool her off.

But it didn't.

Twitchy, her nerves on edge, she knew there was only way she'd get any sleep tonight.

Lorella pulled the nightgown over her head and laid it beside her. Lying back on her bed, she closed her eyes and dreamed as she often did.

Of Greydon.

Of things he would do to her.

But now she thought of things he did to her.

Her hands became his hands.

She ran them over her breasts, ran her fingers over her nipples, twirled and circled, squeezed and pinched. She let one hand roam lower over her stomach.

Spearing her fingers through her pubic hair, she opened her thighs and relaxed, falling into her fantasy.

Her wetness coated her fingers. Her folds were slick, hot, and the more she thought of him, the wetter she became.

The open window at the head of her bed allowed cool air to blow into the room, the window to the side bathing her body in pale moonlight.

Her fingers danced over her clit, slow and easy, then faster and surer.

Slowly she slid her fingers inside her, dropping her hand from her breasts to join her other hand at the juncture of her thighs.

While she pumped two fingers into her sheath, she let her other fingers play around her bundle of nerves. The coil inside her tightened, tightened more ...

She moaned. It was working, but it wasn't the same, it wasn't ...

Frustrated, she moaned again.

"That's my job," a dark voice said above her.

She opened her eyes, startled, a scream caught in her throat.

"Greydon."

He walked around to the side of her room and climbed in through that open window. "You were expecting someone else?"

He motioned to her and sat on the edge of her bed. "That's a sight that will be with me from now on."

Mortification swallowed her. God. It was bad enough she hadn't ....

"Aren't you gonna finish?" he asked, unhooking his holster and belt, unbuttoning his shirt. He slung the holster and gun over her bedpost, tossed his shirt aside, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Her heart was slamming against her chest. He sat back and waited.

"I thought you said it was your job."

He waited, tilted his head. "Is it?"

She thought for a moment. "Do you want it?"

His hand reached out and caressed her leg. "I don't share. I best tell you that right now." His hand wandered higher. "Tonight two men were fighting over a woman. One man shot the other. A husband. The other man apparently decided he wanted the man's wife to take with him. The husband did not agree and when the fight turned deadly, the husband shot the bastard." His hand tightened on her upper thigh. "Can't say I blame the man."

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears.

"You understand, Lorella? We were playing a fun game earlier, but tonight, afterwards, I realized I understood that husband perfectly. You decide now." He sat at the end of her bed, his chest naked, as if he belonged there while she lay spread out for him. "Once we do this, I don't share. Hell, I won't share you now. So if this is just a fun, passing time for you, you better say so now. 'Cause I've got different ideas all together, understand?" He leaned just a bit closer. "Once you're mine, you're mine. Period."

Taking a deep breath, she nodded.

He leaned up and grabbed her waist, lifting her to sit on his lap. "Good, no more games. I want to know what the hell frightened you yesterday. Why you were afraid to tell me?"

The other night came back in a flash--the scuffle of the fighting men, the snap of gunshots, the acrid scent of gunpowder mixing with the fresh scent of rain. She shivered.

"Darlin', did somebody hurt you?" he asked gently.

She shook her head. "No. No. I went to see Maggie. I wanted to ask her ...." She wasn't about to admit to him she'd gone to see the brothel owner to ask how to entice a man--thinking to woo him into her bed. She almost grinned as she realized he now sat there and she'd never made it to Maggie's.

"Well, anyway, I was walking and heard men fighting."

He tensed. "What men?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. But there were two men in the alley and one of them said how he didn't care. She was only a whore anyway. They hit each other and then one man pulled a knife and stabbed at the other man. He cut him twice. When he was about to throw the knife, the other man shot him. He was dead. I just stood there. I couldn't move."

The events played over in her mind. The voices, the scene as the lightning flashed as the rain poured down.

"And then?"

She shrugged and leaned back against him. "I don't know. I just stood there. The man who was cut walked up to me and I was about to scream. He said not to worry. He wasn't going to hurt me. He'd just finished paying a debt. Then he spit on the dead man and cursed him to hell. Said the man wasn't nice and for me to just forget I ever saw him. He walked off and I just stood there." The memory, the sick fear that had coated her stomach, flashed back through her. She shivered. "I'm sorry, Greydon. I know I should have come to you immediately."

"Damn right. What the *hell* were you doing in that alley that time of night anyway? I ought to paddle your ass!" he snarled quietly.

She shifted, naked on his clothed thighs.

His hands gripped her waist. "Sit still. So why the hell didn't you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I don't. Maybe I thought the other man was right. He could have killed me if he wanted to, but he didn't. He just walked off."

He thought about that for a minute. "Would you recognize him again?"

She thought for a minute then shook her head. "No. It was dark. It stormed that night. I saw the glint of the knife, saw the white shirts, the men as the lightning flashed, but other than that, it was dark and raining."

He said nothing for a minute then stood her beside the bed. "You ever do anything that stupid again and you won't be able to sit." He swatted her ass. She jumped at the sting of his hand on her bottom.

But then she shivered as a bolt of lust hit her hard.

"That explains the fear, but not the dislike of jailhouses."

"How many people like jailhouses?" she countered.

He waited, rubbing the sting on her bottom with the palm of his hand.

She sighed. "Fine. After my first husband died, of natural causes, I assure you, his loving family had me arrested, thinking I had something to do with it."

She felt his muscles beneath her tense. "And did you?"

Lorella started to move back, but he held her to him. "What? Wh ..., " she sputtered. "How could you ask me that?"

His breath puffed against her face on his exhale. "Why did they think that? Hell, you couldn't hurt a fly."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "I might surprise you."

Those eyes stared back at her.

"They didn't like the fact he'd left me a good chunk of what my stepchildren considered their inheritance." She shrugged, though old memories of dark cold nights, and scurrying rats flittered through her brain. "It was only two days and then the judge was back in town and he let me go, knowing my husband liked his mistress and was advised not to be too active because of his heart. The man didn't listen so ...." She trailed off and grinned. "I suppose there are few women glad their husbands sought comfort in other beds, as well. If not for her, I might have had a harder time proving my innocence."

He shook his head, kissed her cheek and motioned with his finger for her to turn around. "I need help with my boots."

She straddled his leg and bent over, pulling his boot off. She stumbled forward.

He gave her his other leg. She straddled it the same and looked at him over her shoulder. His eyes weren't on her, but on her bottom.

“Like what you see?”

“You have no idea, honey.”

She jerked his boot off. Before she could turn around, he had her on the bed and was kissing her.

She lost herself in the kiss. Her body, already recognizing him, ached anew.

He ran his hands down her, not in seduction, not in play, but in demand.

“I want you,” he said against her mouth. “I want to taste your sweet wet pussy until you scream.” He kissed her hard, traveling down her body. “And after you come in my mouth, honey, I’m going to take you again, but this time with my cock.” He looked at her from between her thighs.

There was no gentle persuasion this time. Even bound before, he’d been almost asking. This time he only demanded.

He gripped the backs of her thighs and pushed them out and up. She was spread wide and open for him.

He leaned in and breathed deep. “Perfect.”

She shuddered as he gave her one long lick, then another. His tongue danced over her clit, then away, then back. He played around and around until she was panting. Then he licked up inside her and she moaned. “Oh yes.”

His tongue darted in and out. In. Out. Then he flicked his tongue over her clit and first one then another long finger slid inside her.

“My job,” he said against her before he clamped his lips over her clit and suckled hard, just as he twisted his wrist wringing a cry from her.

The feelings didn’t just build. They collided.

He twisted his wrist again and suckled harder.

She yelled and arched, her body shattering into the night.

Without giving her a moment to think, he climbed up her body and grabbed her wrists in one hand.

He looked into her eyes, stilled, and said, “I’ve waited for this, for too damn long.”

She felt him just there at her opening. Blood roared in her ears from the orgasm that had torn through her. Yet she still wanted, still needed. She arched against him.

He positioned himself at her entrance and eased inside, inch by slow inch.

He hissed out a breath and a prayer.

He pulled almost all the way out and slid the long hard length of his cock back into her.

She sighed, moaned and closed her eyes.

“No, open your eyes. Look at me, Lorella,” he whispered against her lips as he kissed her, making love to her mouth as he had her body.

His tongue danced and glided in her mouth just as his cock slid and withdrew from her pussy.

“You feel so good,” she whispered to him, opening her eyes.

He grinned down at her. “There’s those pretty eyes that have haunted my nights and my days.”

He thrust into her, again and again, over and over, his movements slow and controlled.

“Greydon.”

He chuckled. "This time I want to watch your eyes as you come. I want to see you."

Greydon had never felt more at home. Seated hilt deep in her warm wet pussy, he sighed as he slid in again. She was tight and perfect. He let go of her wrists and cupped her face. And she was his.

He moved and changed tempo, changed angles so that with each thrust he grazed her clit.

She arched against him, moaned, and wrapped her arms around him.

Faster and faster they moved.

He reached between them and cupped her ass, spreading the cheeks wide. She cried out, her nails biting into his shoulders.

His balls tightened against his body and he knew it wouldn't be long.

He rolled onto his back, pulling her astride him, still joined. She paused and he waited. "Never done it this way, honey?"

Her breasts rose and fell with each panting breath. Greydon leaned up and pulled one of her perfect nipples deep into his mouth.

He felt her inner muscles grip and milk him. He suckled her again, and again her muscles rippled along his cock.

He closed his eyes and groaned against her breast even as he thrust up into her. She moved on him, slowly at first, then faster, harder.

He let her have control for a moment, enjoying her abandonment, but then he couldn't take it anymore.

He thrust up into her, his hands still gripping her ass. Carefully, he eased his fingers along the crease of her bottom, felt her shiver and start as he grazed over the hidden rosette. He gathered cream from her pussy and spread it around her anus. For a moment, she froze and stared at him.

He didn't look away from her, didn't still his thrusts, and just slowed them to short, sharp digs. Using just the tips of his fingers, he played, rimming her ass. Her mouth opened on a silent moan. She clamped down on him, climbing higher and higher.

"That's it baby. Come for me."

She began to move, to ride him in earnest.

"Oh God, Greydon. Oh, God, ohgod, ohgod, ohgod."

He pressed the tip of his little finger into her rosette just as he thrust deep.

She screamed and arched, clamping down on him so hard, his orgasm ripped a yell from his throat, as well.



## Chapter Five

Greydon watched Lorella and Moira bustle about the kitchen the next morning. Three other boarders had shown up with the morning coach and Lorella was scrambling to meet the needs of everyone. She kept giving him looks as if she wanted him to leave. Too damn bad.

She better get used to it as he planned to be here for a long time. He sipped his coffee and watched the way Moira still shied from him. He wondered what her story was. She'd only been here a few months. Was she in some trouble that might follow her here? Now that Lorella was opening up to him, he'd ask her about the young woman.

He didn't like the thought that shy, quiet Moira might have trouble following her, but stranger things had been known to happen. Probably safer to ask Lorella. He didn't know how to approach Moira about it since she was as wary as a wounded animal.

Lorella pushed through the doors, carrying plates that she put on the counter, near the wash basin. Moira pumped water from the pump into the basin.

Lorella pushed a strand of hair out of her face. "They've all left for an afternoon of errands, card playing, bank meetings, and driving out to see friends."

Moira looked from Lorella to him. "Well, in that case, I have a few errands to do on my own if you don't mind. I'll get these done when I get back."

Lorella opened her mouth to say something, but with a look from Greydon, shut it again and nodded.

Lorella watched the girl walk away. Just then another someone rounded the corner. A deputy. She sighed. She just wanted one moment alone with Greydon. She'd been thinking since she'd been up and about that she just couldn't be doing this. People would start to talk sooner or later.

She opened the back door before the man had a chance to knock. He took off his hat. "Miss Lorella."

She smiled.

"Sheriff." He nodded to Greydon. "I was wondering ..."

"Jones. I have two deputies and more if need be. Is anyone bleeding?"

The deputy shook his head. "No."

"Dead?"

"No."

"Robbed?"

The young deputy shook his head. "No, sir. I just came over to see if Miss Lorella would like to go to the fall festival dance with me next week."

The poor man looked so hopeful that she hated to crush him.

"I--uh ..."

"She would *not*." Greydon stood from the table. "Deputy. That's all."

The poor man's face fell. He looked from her to Greydon, and then back to her. Then the man's face split into a grin. "I see. Well, then. I guess I better be asking Miss Samantha."

Lorella laughed and hugged the brash young deputy. "Here, take some biscuits.

And if you want my advice, pick her some flowers if you happen to see any.”

“In August in Texas?” he asked, stepping back out with the biscuits wrapped up and putting his hat back on. “Maybe. Or maybe I’ll just grab some over at Mrs. Maybel’s house and give them to her.”

“Jones. Mrs. Maybel will then be storming the office demanding the rose thieves be brought to justice. Go on and just ask the gal.”

When he was gone, Lorella grinned and said, “Well, at least I was first choice.”

Greydon frowned. “I’ve been thinking, Lorella. I don’t want other men asking you out. Don’t want them to even think they can.”

She had started to mention that maybe this wasn’t a good idea, but hushed to see what the man had to say.

He took a deep breath and stared at her, not saying another word.

Deciding to prod him, she cocked a brow and propped her hands on her hips. “So I was just a good time, a quick poke, and now you’re off to ....”

He grabbed her shoulders. “You’re not a damn whore. I’m asking you to marry me woman.”

She grinned. “Were you? I missed the question in there somewhere.”

He frowned. “I was getting to it.”

“Hmmm.”

They stood there, with his hands on her shoulders, she grinning up at him, he glaring down at her for several seconds. Then he leaned in and kissed her on the mouth, softly, gently. “Is everyone really gone?”

She nodded.

He sighed. “Good.”

He picked her up and whirled, plopping her on the table. His hand was under her shirt in seconds and she could only laugh.

“I’m on the kitchen table!”

He kissed her, kept kissing her until she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. All she saw, all she sensed, all she knew was Greydon.

Without knowing exactly how, she found herself half naked, her shirt and chemise open, her skirt around her thighs and lying back on the table with Greydon standing between her legs.

He leaned to the side and put his finger in the cobbler he’d wanted for breakfast. “Hmmm.”

Grinning at her, he trailed the sticky syrup around one areole and then the other.

“Greydon Jefferies!”

“I love peach cobbler,” he told her leaning down to lick it off her breasts. She could only giggle.

“I swear! You’ve a devil in you sometimes.”

He wiggled his brows. “Don’t you know it.”

She squirmed as he trailed another glob of peach syrup over her stomach. He leaned over and licked it off, then straightened and kissed her, full and hot on the mouth.

She licked his lips, tasted the peaches, the sugar.

“You didn’t say yes,” he told her against her mouth.

“I didn’t?” She squirmed as one of his hands moved up her thigh.

“Nope. I think I ought to make you pay for that.”

She sighed as his fingers found and pierced her. She closed her eyes.

“What were you gonna confess in my office?” He stilled his hands.

Lorella opened her eyes and looked at him. Reaching up, she cupped his face.

“That I’d fantasized about you for months, since I first saw you when I arrived in town.”

A quizzical look came over his face. “You did?”

She nodded. “You had just ridden up to the sheriff’s office and you climbed off your horse.” She sighed at the memory.

“I’m a fool!” he muttered. He leaned over and kissed her again, his fingers playing over her clit, circling as he loved to play her. She felt her own wetness, felt the slick glide of his fingers.

With one touch, one flick of his finger, a twist of his wrist, he broke the kiss and dropped between her thighs. His tongue licked her, promised, and taunted, bringing her closer and closer. She arched into him, moaning and wanting more.

Just as the crest was in sight, he pulled away from her and stood. His chin glistened with her moisture. He quickly freed himself and paused at her opening.

“You never answered my question.” His dark eyes bore down on her.

She licked her lips. “Did you ask one?”

“No.” He grinned and eased just the tip of his cock inside her. “I want to marry you.”

She smiled and nodded. “I’d hoped so, or I’d have dragged you to the altar.”

He chuckled and thrust into her.

She sighed and welcomed him, loving the glide of him as he stroked in and out, slow and easy.

“Lorella.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him.

“This is what I consider eating at your table.”

She laughed out right as he stroked harder and faster and brought them both to the peak.

Devil indeed.

The End

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## WICKED WEST: THE GAMBLER

By  
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### Chapter One

*Galveston, Texas, 1887*

"She's all I have left to offer," he said, as if talking about the weather.

Gina's heart slammed in her chest, yet she stood frozen behind his chair.

Her husband was using her to cover his losses. He was practically going to sell her. Regina couldn't get over that fact. Her heart thrummed louder and louder against her ears, beating against her chest. Inside she trembled. Outside she was calm.

Sell was the wrong word. He was gambling her, but it hardly mattered.

She didn't dare look up. She could only stare at the scarred wooden table, now piled high with chips and Egan's pocket watch that she knew his father had given him--or so he'd once told her in a letter. Then again, he'd lied about so much, perhaps that was a lie, too.

Egan was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a good man.

He was selfish.

And cruel.

She tried to take a deep, calming breath, but her corset was too tight. She'd tightened it because he wanted her to look right. Of course, it hadn't been tight enough, and Egan had laced it even tighter.

So Regina St. Martin Briggs stood silently, trying to force air into her lungs.

She could smell the sea, the sweat of too many men, the liquor and the smoke.

A woman's bawdy laughter floated from upstairs.

Gina glanced up and saw a man pumping into a well-dressed whore against the stairwell. As she lowered her eyes, she caught the quick glance of the man her husband played the game against.

The gambler.

He was the owner of *The Southern Belle*, a notorious saloon near the docks in Galveston. She hadn't wanted to come here. However, since marrying Egan Briggs, she'd done a lot of things she hadn't wanted to do. Once upon a time, she'd had a normal life, a life she took for granted. Then her parents died in a cholera outbreak, and she and her younger sister were left in the care of Uncle Hubert and Aunt Sheila.

Gina had become a mail-order bride, with the hope that her husband would help her keep her sister safe from Uncle Hubert by allowing her sister to live with them. In the three months since marrying Briggs, she'd learned that wouldn't be the case. Briggs

had lied over and over in his letters. She now knew she'd been stupid, not only for herself, but for her sister. It had been her intention that once wed, she'd be able to help save her sister from their uncle.

Gina shook off the thoughts and focused on the hand of cards being dealt. All the other players were out.

She shifted, wishing she could sit. The gambler had offered her a chair earlier, but Briggs had declined, saying she'd stand beside him--his lucky charm, after all.

Now?

"You can't be serious," the gambler replied.

What was his name? He had an even-tempered voice--calm, reminding her of the ocean. Not at all like Briggs' voice.

Egan Briggs downed another shot of whiskey and hiccupped as he set his empty glass down. "Damn serious. Woman's not worth much. Thought I'd at least get something out of the damn marriage." He shook his head. "Stupid wench could do with a stay in this place. She might learn a thing or two, eh?" Egan laughed.

Chills of humiliation danced over Gina's skin, but she didn't move. Didn't lower her head or turn away, like she wanted to, didn't take a deep, steady breath, as she wished she could.

A piano played a fast, ragged tune in the alcove beneath the stairs.

"I hardly think a lady as beautiful as your wife would have any use for a place such as this," the gambler said, drawing her gaze back to him. His eyes, green as wet spring grass, raked her in lazy appreciation. He cocked one blond brow, only a shade darker than his gilded hair. "Perhaps the problem lies--" He paused, looking away from her, back to her husband. "--elsewhere."

Shame and anger warred within her, but she did as she often had in the last year. She simply ignored them--or tried to. Let them talk about her. Let them plan. If this man won her ....

Then what?

Would he be better or worse than Egan Briggs, who jerked her gown up every eve and rutted over her? She hated those nights, with Egan's breath reeking of whisky, his body sour and heavy.

Straightening her shoulders, she looked back at the gambler and saw his half smile.

He was sprawled in the chair, the cards held loosely in one hand. He slowly rolled a chip between the fingers of his other hand. Long, elegant fingers with sinewy wrists. Seated as he was, she couldn't tell exactly how tall he was, but then, she assumed he was taller than Egan, who was rather on the short side. Where Egan was balding on top, this gambler's fair hair reflected his lazy attitude. No pomade for him. His hair lay in gentle waves over his head, a bit longer in the back than was currently fashionable. He didn't dress like a frontiersman, but neither did he dress like the high rollers of The Strand. She knew enough to see the shirt was expensive, the material soft, his vest was of imprinted satin, black and dark gray.

"Besides, I have a policy about taking another man's wife," the gambler said, his voice soft and even, yet she caught something ... some edge to the words.

Gina looked again at his face, the long, almost aristocratic countenance, the straight nose, high brow and startlingly green eyes that were zeroed in on her. He didn't

so much as blink.

Gina couldn't look away even as he again slowly looked down her body. She felt as if he were undressing her, and unlike the times Egan looked at her, her nipples hardened against the fine linen of her chemise, and she felt a tingle between her legs.

Gina could only stare at him.

His full, lush lips tilted at one corner.

"You should guard such a treasure, Mister Briggs, not toss it away on a whim." Still those green eyes bore into her.

Gina looked back down at the hand lying lazily against the side of his chair. All she could watch was his fingers. The chip, a white one from the pile in front of him, danced nimbly over his knuckles. Then, quick as a blink, he tossed it and caught it.

"Treasure, my ass," Egan muttered and grasped her arm, jerking her forwards. "Look, the gal doesn't even have tits enough to fill a hand."

He squeezed her arm so hard she couldn't contain her wince.

Against her will, she glanced at the gambler and saw something hard glint in his eyes. Then she realized he wasn't looking at her, but at the hand on her arm.

Slowly, he leaned over, dropped the chip on the table and cupped her breast. It was a shock of lightning down her spine, to her toes.

She gasped and jerked back.,

Egan's cruel laughter brought her harshly back to where she was and what was happening.

*Fool. All men were the same. All of them.* They only thought about women as things, existing merely for their pleasure.

This time, she didn't keep her emotions in check when she locked eyes with the gambler. Let him win. Let Egan keep her. She really didn't care.

Egan tapped the marriage document on the edge of the table, then flicked it onto the growing pile of chips, jewelry and other belongings. "I almost hope you win, just so I don't have to keep the bitch."

How in the world did she ever end up here, all the way down here in Galveston, Texas, practically being sold?

\* \* \* \*

Draven McCormick breathed carefully. What he really wanted to do was to kill the stupid bastard across from him.

Instead, he slowly sat back, never taking his eyes from the beauty standing behind Mr. Briggs' chair. The man was a drunken fool. And Draven didn't feel a bit of remorse with knowing he was about to clean the man out.

He still couldn't believe the man was betting his wife. A wife, for the love of God. He didn't let his shock show. Hell, in this place, this time of night, any number of things happened, and no one did a damn thing about it.

*The Southern Belle*, his own pride and joy, was hopping tonight. He didn't need to look at his main man, Clarence, to know things were going perfectly. He could hear it, see it and all but taste it. Money was flowing in tonight, as smooth as the high-dollar whisky his counterpart was swilling faster than a sailor with his first whore.

Unless he was mistaken, which Draven knew he rarely was, Mr. Briggs swilled his women the same way he did his drink, too quickly, too crassly and without a hint of appreciation.

What a damn pity.

The beauty behind the chair was breathtaking. She had garnered more than one look from the gentlemen in here. First, it was rare any woman, other than his painted pretties, graced the doors of this establishment. He'd first thought the woman was Briggs' mistress.

A wife.

Draven shook his head and waited, watched as the man smiled and laid his cards down. A flush and two ladies.

Draven merely quirked his lips and shook his head. He laid his own cards down. A royal flush.

Briggs merely sat staring at the cards for a minute. He opened his mouth, his hazel eyes trying to blink. Then he slammed it shut, obviously thinking better of whatever it was he was about to utter.

Draven caught Clarence's eye and motioned him over. "Clarence, please see Mr. Briggs out and make certain he doesn't come back."

With a muttered curse, he stood, swayed and staggered to the door. Never once did he look back.

This little alcove was his own, with a view of the rest of the establishment. In the low lamplight he could see the woman's pallor.

"Sit down," he said.

The dealer got up and left. Draven caught his slight raising of a brow as he gave a passing glance at the beauty who was now Draven's for the taking. She took a deep breath and sat down across from him.

Her eyes were a dark gray, her brows dark, her hair the color of mahogany and piled high atop her head.

Her lashes were long as they swept down to hide her eyes. Her smooth skin seemed to catch the golden lamplight and hold it. He admired the soft, oval face, the full, wide mouth. An image of her with those lush lips wrapped around his cock lodged in his mind, and he all but hissed as blood rushed to his dick, hardening it.

She sat poised and controlled on the edge of her seat, as any proper lady would. Her hands were still, though he'd caught the fidgeting of her thumb before she stopped. This was a woman of contradictions. He'd caught the flash of fire in her eyes when he'd weighed her small breast.

She wet her lips and looked at him from beneath her lashes.

For the last few months, he hadn't touched a single woman here. Before that, there had been several women along the trails. But that was before, when he'd ridden for the thought and idea of justice, when he'd been a Ranger. Now, however, since his wastrel father died, he'd returned to Galveston and had taken over the business almost a year ago.

He was used to whores.

He knew several women who were in love with the Ranger. The guys had given him hell over it. He couldn't think of a single *lady* who would have anything to do with him now that he was the owner of *The Southern Belle*, a highly renowned brothel near the docks of Galveston Bay.

"Did you want to leave with him?" he heard himself ask, not sure why he did.

She slowly shook her head. "No, not really. But he is my husband, even if he

wasn't what the type of man he claimed to be."

Honesty.

"Well, darlin', I'll tell you straight. I'm a gambler, not accepted within the hallowed parlors of the Silk Stocking District, but I don't really give a damn. I do business with the men of this city, own this saloon and cater to the needs of those who walk through my doors. I'll lie if I have to, though the truth tends to get me what I want and need the most." He carefully stacked the chips and laid aside the watch, the jewels, the marriage certificate. "What did he claim to be?"

She looked right at him. "A good man. Someone to help me."

Now he was intrigued. He handed her the marriage certificate. "You want this?"

Her head cocked to the side. "I never realized before, but it's just a bit of paper, isn't it? Not worth anything other than that, not really. Not unless one wants it to be." Her voice was soft, husky. Made him think of dark, tangled nights, the ocean breeze blowing through the windows.

He looked at the paper and tapped it, then locked eyes with her. "You could keep it for blackmail."

She grinned and dimples winked at him from her cheeks. "I could, but what would be the point?" She pointed to the money chips, the jewels. "You have it all. Can't get blood from stone, can you?"

"This certificate proves you're married."

She looked for a moment at the paper folded beneath his hand, then back into his eyes. "But you own the paper, don't you?"

So he did.

He studied her again, saw the faint tremble in her hands, but also saw the straightened shoulders, the slightly jutted chin. This was a woman who faced what life dealt her. He decided he'd deal them both a pleasurable hand.

Draven stood and offered the woman his hand, pocketing the deck of cards and the certificate. He'd burn the latter and keep the former.

"Come."

He waited, wondered and watched. She looked at his hand, then up his arm to him. Those lush lips parted, and he knew that he'd teach her all sorts of things tonight.

And maybe the next night. And even the next.

She put her small hand in his and stood. Draven leaned close, his lips brushing the small rim of her ear as he whispered, "I want to teach you things."

Her breath stopped, and she seemed to freeze. Then he felt the warmth of her breath as she exhaled and slowly nodded.

Draven smiled and led her from *The Southern Belle*, down the street to his house not four blocks away.