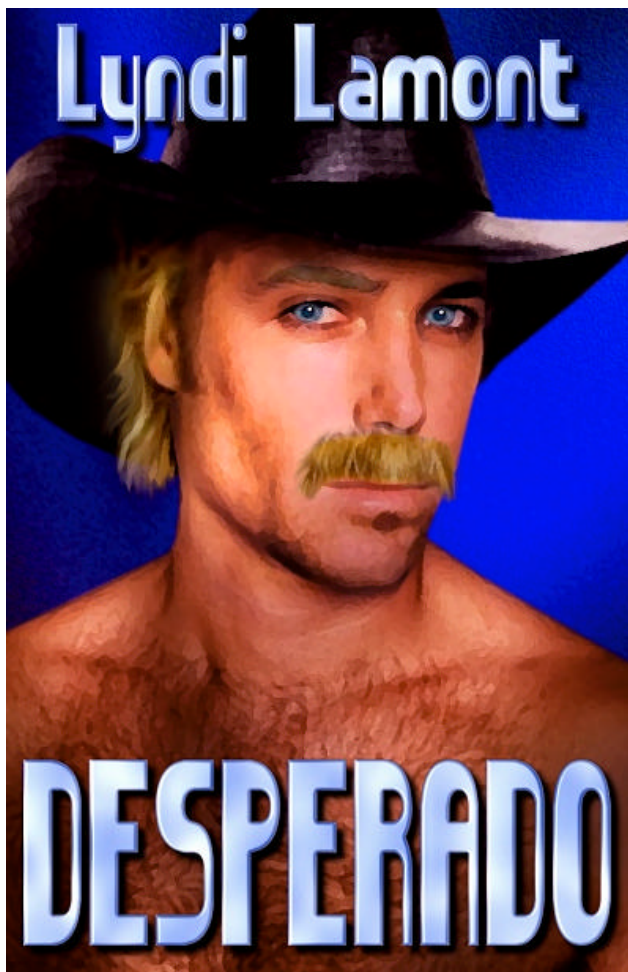


Lyndi Lamont



DESPERADO

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She entered her room, dropped her books on her desk and went into the screened-off sleeping area to hang her jacket in the armoire.

She froze in place when she heard the click.

Turning around, she saw him, lounging in her rocking chair, black Stetson pushed back on his head, Colt.45 in his hand. He looked tough, lean and sinewy, his face bronzed by wind and sun, his bright blue eyes a startling contrast. One Levi's-clad leg hooked over the arm of the chair, he appeared strangely at home.

Her heart raced and blood pounded in her head. She knew who he was. She'd seen his face on the wanted posters. Had known he'd come for her.

He'd changed some since the picture was drawn. His thick, tawny-gold hair was longer, shaggier, and he'd grown a mustache. She stared at his mouth, the finely chiseled lips curled in a sardonic smile.

He pointed the gun at her. "Take it off, teacher. Take it all off."

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DESPERADO

BY

LYNDI LAMONT

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DESPERADO

Dodge City, Kansas, June, 1876

He was waiting for her when she got home.

It had seemed like any other afternoon. When classes were over, Esther had walked home through bright June sunshine. The spring rains were over, and the streets were dusty. School was almost over and a long summer stretched ahead of her. The rough-and-ready part of town was already filling up with buffalo hunters and the first wave of cowboys. At night, lying in her lonely bed, she could hear the tinny sounds of pianos from the saloons along Front Street, shouts of drunken men, and the occasional gunshot.

She entered the front hall of the boarding house she'd lived in since coming to Dodge and greeted her landlady who was sweeping the floor. "Good afternoon, Mrs. North."

"Back from school already, Miss McFarland?"

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“Yes. Only two more days and we’re done for the summer.”

The plump little lady smiled pleasantly. “What are your plans for the summer?”

“I haven’t any,” Esther said, unbuttoning the jacket of her blue serge walking dress. She’d grown warm during the walk home. “I’d love to go back to St. Louis for the summer, but I’m afraid I can’t afford the train fair.”

“Do you have people there? I thought you were an orphan.”

“I am,” Esther admitted. She still felt a pang in her heart when she thought of the parents she’d lost to cholera as a young child. “When I was younger, I worked as a housemaid for a doctor and his wife. They took me in, educated me, nurtured me...”

Mrs. North smiled sympathetically. “They sound like fine people.”

“They were.” Esther swallowed the lump in her throat. She missed the kindly older couple who had treated her more like family than a servant. She smiled at her landlady and climbed the stairs to the room she called home. Thinking of St. Louis always left her feeling unsettled. The Henleys weren’t the only ones she missed.

But that was all in the past. Here future was here, in Dodge City, where women were scarce. If she couldn’t find a husband here, she deserved to be an old maid.

She entered her room, dropped her books on her desk and went into the screened-off sleeping area to hang her jacket in the armoire.

She froze in place when she heard the click.

Turning around, she saw him, lounging in her rocking chair, black Stetson pushed back on his head, Colt.45 in his hand. He looked tough, lean and sinewy, his face bronzed by wind and sun, his bright blue eyes a startling contrast. One Levi’s-clad leg hooked over the arm of the chair, he appeared strangely at home.

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He'd changed some since the picture was drawn. His thick, tawny-gold hair was longer, shaggier, and he'd grown a mustache. She stared at his mouth, the finely chiseled lips curled in a sardonic smile.

He pointed the gun at her. "Take it off, teacher. Take it all off."

Her gaze riveted on the lust in his blue eyes as she tried to assess his unreadable features. Unable to look away, she slowly unbuttoned the bodice of her white blouse; her hands trembled, making her clumsy. He watched her every move with an intensity—a masculine hunger—that unnerved her. Sparks of unwelcome anticipation shot through her.

She unhooked the waistband of her skirt and let it fall to the floor, then shrugged the blouse off her shoulders.

She removed her bustle and petticoat and then unhooked her corset, leaving her in nothing but her chemise and drawers. He said nothing, just eyed her with a look of scorching intent, from the top of her head to the tips of her sensibly clad feet, then up again. His gaze lingered on the vee between her legs and she felt the moisture of desire.

He cocked the hammer of his gun. "Take down your hair, schoolmarm."

She reached up to pull the pins from her bun and her nipples tightened against the thin gauze of her chemise. Her long, dark hair fell around her shoulders and chest, brushing against her already sensitive breasts.

"Now the rest of it," he ordered.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. "Not until you put down the pistol." He didn't need it to control her. Lord knew she'd do whatever he wanted.

He stood, uncurling his lean body from the chair, holstered the pistol, and removed his gun belt, then hung it on the back of the chair. "Satisfied?"

She nodded. "I have to sit to take off my shoes."

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“Go ahead, darlin’.”

She walked toward the chair and he moved aside just enough to let her by. His scent of bay rum and pure male tantalized her senses. His nearness had her nearly swooning. Why did she find this dangerous man so intoxicating?

When she sat, he knelt before her to unlace and remove her shoes. He took one foot in his hand and ran the other up the outside of her leg, untied her garter, then slowly rolled her stocking down to her ankle.

“Easy and slow,” he drawled. “Just the way I like it.”

He pulled the stocking off her foot, tickling her instep, making her squirm in the chair, then repeated his actions with her other leg.

She squeezed her thighs together in a vain attempt to still the need his presence roused in her woman’s core, leaving her hungry for his touch, but knowing she shouldn’t allow it. As if that had ever stopped her before. “There’s just one thing I want to know. Where have you been, and what have you done?”

“Later,” he said before sucking on her little toe.

She snatched her foot out of his hand and stared at him, wondering how the good boy she’d known at the orphanage could have grown into a man wanted for murder. “I want to know now.”

He smiled his heart-stopping smile. “Be patient, Esther. Anticipation is its own reward, you know.”

She laughed and pulled his black hat off his head, tossing it to one side. He’d always known how to get around her. “That’s supposed to be virtue is its own reward.”

His grin grew lascivious. “Afraid I wouldn’t know much about virtue.”

No, but he did know a lot about how to torment her with just a touch and a look. And had been doing so on a somewhat regular basis for some years now. If the townsfolk ever found out the schoolmarm was carrying on with a wanted man, she’d be run out of town on a rail.

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Oh, but it's worth it, she thought as he turned his attentions to her breasts, kneading them through the soft cotton. Her own hunger came on in a heated rush.

He pulled her chemise down over her shoulders, baring her breasts to his gaze. His mouth settled on one taut nipple, sucking and laving it. His mustache lightly abraded the soft skin of her breasts, adding to the sensation. Molten shafts of need ran down her stomach to her core.

She caught his head in her hands, twining her fingers in his thick, shaggy blond hair. Oh, he was a talented devil, her desperado.

He turned his attention to the other breast while his hand probed at the opening in her drawers. She spread her legs wider to give him access to her heated center, already wet with need. He parted the soft flesh, his fingers stroking and teasing, circling her button of pleasure while he continued to suckle her breast. Tension coiled through her, spiraling outward. Her buttocks clenched, her toes curled, and her breathing quickened. Jolts of pleasure hurtled her skyward until she exploded and fell into free fall, crying his name.

The reminder this might be their last time together brought her abruptly back to earth.

Bart looked up, a lopsided grin on his face, and she smiled back despite her heartache. Might as well make the most of the time they had left.

She moved her foot between his, up the inside of his thigh until she found the hard evidence of his desire and he groaned aloud.

"You are wearing entirely too many clothes." She untied his red neckerchief, then stroked the strong column of his neck. His pulse beat strongly against her fingers.

He grinned and stood up, pulling her up with him. Patting her on the behind, he said, "Why don't you get into bed while I undress?"

Esther removed her drawers, then pulled down the covers and reclined on the bed. Never taking his covetous gaze from hers, he

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removed his black vest and pulled his white cotton shirt over his head, exposing the lean muscles of his arms and torso to her hungry eyes. Sunlight from the window glinted on the golden hair covering his body. The only thing marring his perfection was the jagged scar that ran across his left side, down his rib cage. It was his badge of courage won in war. It wasn't the only scar he'd brought home, but the others were invisible wounds of the heart and spirit. Scars she had sought to heal with her love, but that hadn't been enough to keep him by her side.

He pulled off his boots, then took off his pants and drawers. His penis, erect and proud, jutted from its nest of hair.

She felt wanton, lying naked on a sunny afternoon watching a man undress. She cupped her breasts, teasing the nipples with her fingertips, then trailed one hand down across her belly to the damp curls. Need spiraled inside her. "Are you going to join me?"

He climbed onto the bed and gathered her in his arms for a passionate kiss. "I don't know how much longer I can wait, darlin'."

"Don't wait. It's been too long."

He entered her, stretching her sheath until she was filled with him. She wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling him as close as possible. His lovemaking was hurried, feverish, needy. Her arousal rose to match his as he thrust into her. His body grew slick with sweat, his breathing labored, his male odor musky. Her senses swam with the feel and scent of him. They were one now, for this moment in time. One last thrust and he emptied his seed into her welcoming body.

Though she still ached with the need for fulfillment, she held him close as he relaxed, his body slumping over and around hers. They had the rest of the day to be together. He collapsed on the mattress, one leg thrown over hers, his head on her chest. She held him to her bosom and kissed the top of his head.

I love you.

The words filled her head and her heart, but she dared not speak

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them aloud. If she did, he would never understand why she had to send him away. For good.

* * *

Bart shifted onto his side, supporting himself on one arm while his other hand stroked the soft skin of her breasts and stomach, his touch light and teasing. Her long, brown hair spread around her, a sharp contrast to her ivory skin. She had the look of a wanton—a thought that brought a smile to his lips. But her expression was serious, her gray eyes clouded.

“What’s wrong, darlin’?”

She licked her full lower lip, as if she were nervous. “This will have to be the last time, Bart. I can’t be with you again.”

He stiffened. “Why is that?”

“I have a beau now. More than one, actually.”

His hand stilled and he stared at her. The notion of another man touching her, kissing her, possessing her body filled him with rage and despair. He fought to get control of his hurt and anger. “Esther means star. Did you know that?”

“No. Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not changing the subject, Esther. You’re my lodestar. No matter how far I travel or how long I’m gone, I always come home to you.”

“But you don’t stay.” Her voice was bleak, her expression pleading. “You never stay.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You said you’d wait for me.”

She sat up and covered her beautiful breasts with the sheet. “I did wait. I’ve been waiting forever. I’ll be twenty-eight this year. I want a husband, children, and a real home...before it’s too late.”

The plea in her eyes tore at his heart. He wanted all those things, too, but with her. Only with her.

“Who are these beaus of yours?”

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“Does it really matter? They’re all good, steady men.”

Unlike him.

The implied criticism hung in the air between them. Unable to remain still, Bart pushed to his feet and paced the small area between the bed and the window. His first impulse was to find every one of her “beaux” and beat the tar out of them. But what would that accomplish, except to anger the woman he desired above all others?

Damn, but this had happened at the worst possible time. If only he were free to bind her to him... If only he had something to offer her.

“Did you do it?” she asked suddenly. “Did you kill those men?”

He whirled to stare at her in shock. If there was one person in this world who he thought believed in him, it was Esther. “Is that what you think I’ve become? A murdering outlaw?”

She faced his anger without flinching. She knew he’d cut off his arm before he hurt her.

“I don’t know what to believe. The wanted posters have your name and your face on them. I don’t want to believe it’s true.”

He let out a pent-up breath and rejoined her on the bed. “Then don’t. You know me better than that. Or at least you used to.”

“Then what happened?”

“Someone else used my name.”

“Do you know who?”

“Yes. It was Vic.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Vic Gannon?”

He hadn’t wanted to tell her, but she had to know, had to be on her guard. “I followed him here. Esther, be careful. He’s even more dangerous now.”

She leaned back against the pillow, worrying her lower lip with her teeth. “Does he know I’m here?”

“I don’t know, darlin’. He may just be here to fleece the Texas cowpokes.”

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“What will you do, Bart?”

“Find him and turn him over to the marshal. There’s a nice reward for his capture.”

“I know, dead or alive. I saw the posters, but they have your face and name on them.”

“My name, his face.”

* * *

Esther pictured the poster in her mind and realized it was true. Problem was Vic looked a lot like Bart. She opened her mouth to speak again, but her words were swallowed when his mouth covered hers. His moist, firm lips demanded a response, and she returned his ardor with reckless abandon.

His lips left hers to nibble at her earlobe, then seared a path down her neck and he placed a lingering kiss in the pulsing hollow at the base of her throat. Renewed desire coursed through her, strong and vivid.

He trailed kisses down her bosom, her stomach, and lower. A tremor inside heated her thighs and groin. When he neared her throbbing core, he bypassed it to kiss her inner thigh, the sensitive area behind her knee. Wrapping her other leg around his neck, she stopped him. “That’s not what I want.”

He grinned at her. “What do you want, darlin’?”

She parted her legs and touched her woman’s mound, parting the dark curls to caress her wet slit. Up and back, up and back, spreading her juices over the soft, aroused flesh. Her nubbin of need throbbed when she flicked a finger over it. “I want you to touch me here, kiss me here,” she ordered in her best brook-no-nonsense, schoolmarm voice. “I love it when you kiss my clitoris.”

He chuckled. “What would Doc Henley say if he knew you studied his anatomy books after he went to bed?”

“He’ll never know, and you won’t tell him. Otherwise you’ll have to explain how come you’re so intimately acquainted with my female

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parts. Now stop dawdling.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he drawled.

He parted the hair covering her mound to stroke her nether lips, then he lowered his mouth to her needy flesh. The second his warm lips touched her clitoris, passion rose in her like the hottest fire, clouding her brain. While he used his tongue to circle her pleasure button, he inserted a finger into her sheath, then another. The added pressure reduced her to pure, gasping passion. Tremors of rapture caught in her throat, and an almost painful ache rose between her thighs. When her climax came, the pleasure was pure and explosive.

* * *

Bart smiled when he felt the tremors coursing through her body. It hadn’t taken much to arouse her passion again. She was so responsive, his Esther. His stomach twisted with the hard knot of need. He wanted her so badly and not just in bed.

He stretched out beside her and gathered her in his arms. She curled into him, her head on his shoulder, her hair drifting around her in a silky cloud.

After a few moments of rest, she sat up and stretched, her breasts jutting proudly. She smiled at him, a mischievous gleam in her gray eyes. “Now it’s my turn to torture you.”

He chuckled and ran a hand up her thigh. “Be my guest.”

She straddled him, settling over his groin. She ran her hands over his chest and belly, traced circles around his flat nipples, then leaned forward to suckle one. Her long tresses brushed his chest in a light and teasing touch. His cock responded to the sensual torment.

Lifting her hips, she moved toward the foot of the bed and used her hands and mouth to caress every inch of his chest and belly, down to his groin, circling around his shaft to kiss the top of his thigh.

His cock ached for the touch of her mouth, but he knew it would never happen. Not after what Vic did to her. Bart clenched his teeth.

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He'd like to kill Vic for that; in fact, *had* almost killed him all those years ago. If old man Odell hadn't stopped him...

He fisted his hands in her hair and tugged. "Enough teasing, woman."

Her laugh was soft but triumphant. "Yes, sir." She straddled him again and guided his cock into her pussy, encasing him in moist heat.

Hands on her hips, he helped her set a leisurely rhythm. He wanted this time to be good for her, too. He stared at her, noting the slight flush of her skin, the sheen of perspiration. He touched her breast, tweaked the nipple, and felt her shudder. Her eyes were half closed, her breathing labored, matching his own.

She leaned forward, changing the angle of penetration, and gasped. He thrust upward, faster and harder, until he felt her flesh convulse around his. Two more thrusts and he climaxed, pumping into her.

She collapsed on top of him, smiling with pleasure. He held her like that until she slept, and wondered if he could let her go. If he could survive letting her go.

* * *

Esther hurried toward the livery stable, intoxicated by the unexpected pleasure of an afternoon off. Mrs. Henley had gone to tea at a friend's house, and told Esther to go enjoy herself. It was a beautiful spring day, and she hoped Bart could steal away for a while. Maybe they could walk down by the river.

She walked into the building, squinting in the dimmer light. At first she didn't see anyone, then she spotted his blond head in a back stall. She hurried toward him, calling his name. But when he turned, she saw it wasn't Bart.

She stumbled to a halt. "Vic? What are you doing here?"

He dropped the curry comb he'd been using on the brown horse in the stall and moved toward her. "Haven't you heard? I work here now. With my old friend, Bart."

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She backed away from him, but he kept following. "Where's Bart?" "Old man Odell sent him to deliver a horse. He'll be gone a while longer."

"I'll come back then," Esther said, still backing up.

Vic moved to the right, blocking her access to the door. "No need to rush off. We can spend some time together."

"I have to go," she mumbled.

He backed her into an empty stall "You aren't going anywhere. Not until you do something for me."

Dread rushed through her. He was going to hurt her...she was sure of it. She closed her eyes and braced herself for a blow that never came. When she opened them, she was shocked to see he had unbuttoned his trousers and drawers. His boy's part, swollen to a size she'd never seen before, jutted up from a thatch of blond hair. Disgusted, she backed away until she hit the wall.

He moved closer and pushed on her shoulders. "Kneel and open your mouth."

She fell to her knees, but clamped her lips together. He slapped her, hard. "I said, open your mouth."

She opened her lips to scream, but he grabbed the back of her head and forced his shaft into her mouth. She tried to fight him, but he was too strong. He thrust his engorged flesh into her mouth until she thought she'd choke to death. Suddenly, he pulled out and she screamed.

* * *

Bart was awakened by Esther's scream. She was sitting up in bed, a haunted look on her face.

He pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back. "Hush, darlin', I'm here. You're all right."

She sobbed against his shoulder. "I had a bad dream. About Vic, in the livery stable."

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Bart tightened his hold on her while cursing under his breath. *Damn Vic Gannon and his cruel ways.*

He held her until she stopped sobbing, then laid her down and pulled the sheet over her. "Go back to sleep, darlin'."

She snuggled under the cover and closed her eyes.

"I should've killed him then," he murmured.

He'd very nearly killed Vic that day. When he'd returned to the livery and seen what was going on, he'd pulled Vic from Esther and pummeled him with his fists. While Vic lay on the floor, groggy from the beating, Bart picked up a pitchfork and stood over him. Mr. Odell had intervened, taking the pitchfork from him.

When Esther quit screaming, she ran out of the livery stable. Bart ran after her, to the Henley's house, but she refused to see him. Two weeks later, he was drafted into the Union Army. He didn't see Esther for another year. By then she seemed to have forgotten about the incident with Vic, and Bart never asked her about it.

He stared at her sleeping form. She looked so young and lovely it made his breath catch. Gently he drew her closer. He couldn't remember how long he'd loved her, probably from the very beginning.

He would never forget the first time he'd seen her, the day she came to the orphanage, a lonely, frightened five-year-old. Her face had been tear-stained, the expression in her big, gray eyes wary. One hand held tight to Sister Dominick's, while her other arm clutched a bedraggled doll. His heart had gone out to her that day.

He didn't really understand what she was feeling. He'd come to the orphanage as an infant and had never known any other home. But Esther had. Until the age of five when her parents died of cholera, she'd had a normal home. Despite her obvious grief, he had envied her even that much.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. She was a good woman, his Esther, with a loving nature. He'd seen that as she grew older and

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helped nurture the younger children at the orphanage. She deserved a better man than he, but damn if he wanted anyone else to have her.

* * *

When Esther awoke, Bart had dropped off to sleep. In rest he looked more like the boy she remembered. She wasn't sure she'd have survived those first days at the orphanage without him. He was a strong boy, big for his age, and he'd used his strength of body and mind to protect the weaker, younger children from the bullies.

Then he'd gone to war and returned as a man, hardened by battle and privation. She hadn't noticed at first, so glad was she to see him return alive and unhurt, lean and tanned, and so handsome in Union blue. It wasn't long until they became lovers, but he was too restless to settle down. For the last ten years, he'd come and gone as he pleased. And she'd never denied him. Now the time she would have to shut him out of her life was not far off.

She smoothed a shock of hair off his forehead. He was still handsome, but older now, with lines around his eyes from squinting in the sun. His chest and shoulders were more powerful, manlier. She ran a hand over his jaw, feeling the stubble of his beard. He was all man, and for right now, he was all hers.

She knew what a chance she took in letting him into her bed. If she were to conceive, she'd lose her reputation and her job. But the idea of carrying his child filled her with fierce pleasure. He was her first love, and he always would be, no matter whom she ended up marrying.

"I will marry," she whispered. It was her dearest wish to have a husband and children, a family, to call her own. The prospect of spending the rest of her days teaching other women's children devastated her.

A knock on the door startled him awake and he reached for his gun.

She laid a hand on his arm and whispered, "No. Let me handle this."

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Grabbing her wrapper, she donned it and headed for the door. "Who is it?"

"It's me, dear," came Mrs. North's voice. "I brought you some supper."

Esther glanced out the window and saw the sunset. Drat, she had missed dinner. She smoothed her mussed hair and hoped she didn't look too wanton.

Pasting a smile on her face, she opened the door to find Mrs. North holding a tray of food.

Esther took the tray from her. "I'm sorry to miss supper. I fell asleep. It's so kind of you to bring me this."

Mrs. North peered at her. "Are you all right, dear? You seem a bit flushed."

"I'm fine, just a little tired. I'll be fine in the morning."

"Are you sure you're not feverish?"

"Perhaps a little." Feverish didn't begin to describe how Bart made her feel.

"Shall I send for the doctor?"

"No, thank you. I'm sure I'll be fine in the morning."

"If you're sure—"

"I am," Esther said firmly, shifting the tray to one arm and reaching for the door knob with the other. "I'd best eat this while it's still warm. Thank you again, and goodnight."

Mrs. North finally left and Esther gratefully closed her door. When she turned around, she saw Bart grinning at her. He'd pulled on his trousers, but his chest was still bare.

"What did she bring? I'm starving."

Esther set the tray on her desk and removed the linen napkin. Underneath was a plate containing a Buffalo steak, fried potatoes and baked beans.

Bart cut a big piece of meat and wolfed it down. "Um, this is good.

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Maybe I should get a room here.”

“Don’t you even think about it,” she warned. “Besides there aren’t any available.”

He offered her a bite, but she declined. “I’m not very hungry. You go ahead.”

It didn’t take him long to devour the plate of food plus a piece of blackberry pie, all washed down by a glass of milk. He’d always had a hearty appetite, and not just for food.

While he ate, she picked up her hair brush and worked at the tangles in her hair. “How long are you staying this time?”

“I’ll sneak out after dark,” he mumbled through a last bite of pie.

“I meant in Dodge City.”

He shrugged. “Not sure. Until I find Vic or he leaves. I can’t rest until I clear my name.”

She sighed. Vic, it was always Vic. He’d been her nemesis at the orphanage, and even later after she’d gone to work for the Henleys. He was the source of her greatest fears and her greatest humiliation. “I hope they put him away for good.”

“Put him away, hell,” Bart exploded. “He deserves to hang for what he’s done.”

Troubled, she stared at him. “If you do find him, how are you going to convince the marshal that he’s the one who committed the crimes? Your name is the one on the poster.”

Bart grinned. “Haven’t I introduced myself? Sam Sloan, bounty hunter, at your service.”

She folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot. “Well, you’d best have Vic bound and gagged before you turn him in, because he’ll be quick to accuse you instead.”

His expression sobered. “I know the risks I’m taking, Esther.”

“Be careful,” she whispered.

“I will,” he promised. “I have a lot to live for.” He sealed his

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promise with a kiss.

* * *

Bart strolled into the Occident Saloon and spotted Vic in a back corner playing billiards with a bunch of fresh-faced cowboys. Cheating them, no doubt. Slowly Bart made his way to the back of the room and approached Vic from behind.

“Howdy.”

The men looked up at him. “We’ve got a friendly game here, mister. Want to join in?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Bart moved to where Vic could see him. “Well, if it isn’t my old friend Vic,” Bart drawled. “Or are you going by Bart Braddock today?”

Vic stiffened and turned his head. “As I live and breath, it’s the real Bart Braddock.”

“Sam Sloan is the name.”

Vic snorted.

One of the cowboys pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and opened it. He and his friends stared at the infamous wanted poster. One of them looked at Bart. “This sure looks like you.”

“I think it looks more like Vic here.”

The first cowboy looked at the picture again and scratched his head. “Could be either one of them.”

Vic brandished the cue in his hand. “Be careful who you accuse of murder.”

The cowboys backed away in a hurry.

“Shall we take this outside?” Bart asked, hand on his Colt.45. He’d like nothing better than to kill his old foe in a fair fight. He was worth just as much dead as alive, and he’d be a hell of a lot less trouble that way. But he knew it would bother Esther if he were to kill anyone, even Vic.

He needn’t have worried. Like most bullies, Vic was a coward.

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Vic was sweating now. "Let me go, Bart, and I won't bother you no more."

"And leave my name on that wanted poster? Not on your life."

"Put up your hands, both of you," a voice boomed out.

Bart turned slightly to see a mountain of a man with a star on his chest pointing a pistol in his direction. He raised his hands. "I take it you're the marshal."

"That's right," the big man said. "And who are you?"

"Bounty hunter," Bart said. "Name of Sam Sloan."

"No, he isn't," Vic cried. "He's Bart Braddock and he's wanted for murder."

"A murder you committed," Bart said.

"Shut up, both of you," the marshal ordered. "Someone get me that wanted poster."

The first cowboy handed it to him. The marshal studied it for moment. Raising his head, he looked at Bart, then at Vic, then back again. "Well, hell, I can't tell which one of you fellers is wanted. So I'm arresting you both."

* * *

Esther dismissed class early on the last day of school to her students' noisy delight. She hadn't been able to concentrate on the lessons and neither had they. She had one rugged, handsome man on her mind.

After dropping her school supplies at the boarding house, she wandered down to Front Street and into the dry goods store. She whiled away some time looking at material and patterns. Summer was always a good time to replenish her wardrobe, especially since Mrs. North allowed Esther the use of her sewing machine.

Idly she listened to a conversation between the storekeeper and a customer until something made her start.

"Did you hear the marshal arrested two fellows claiming to be the

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same wanted man?"

The storekeeper snorted. "You mean both claiming the other to be the wanted man."

"What man?" Esther asked as her concern mounted.

The storekeeper scratched his head. "Bart somebody."

"Braddock?"

"Yep, that's it."

Esther whirled and rushed out of the store, walking as quickly as possible toward the jail. She had to speak to Marshal Deger. What if he listened to Vic instead of Bart? She couldn't bear the thought of him paying for something that despicable Vic Gannon had done. Vic had been her enemy, and Bart's, for over twenty years, and it was time it stopped.

When she entered the jail, the corpulent Marshal Deger heaved himself to his feet. "Why, if it isn't little Miss McFarland. What can I do for you?"

Ester took a deep breath. "I understand you arrested two men and that there's some confusion about their identity."

"That's right, miss. But I don't see why that's any of your concern."

"May I sit?" Esther asked, stalling for time. How much should she tell the man?

The marshal held a chair for her, then sat behind his desk.

"You may not know I grew up in an orphanage in St. Louis," Esther began. "I think the two men you arrested grew up there also. Their names are Bartholomew Braddock and Victor Gannon."

His brows shot up. "The devil you say. What else do you know, miss?"

"I know their characters, sir. I know Bart Braddock is a good man. If he said he didn't murder anyone, I would believe him."

"That's the name on the wanted poster," the marshal pointed out.

"Yes, but I believe Vic Gannon used Bart's name. Vic is not to be

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trusted. He never was.”

“What did he do to you?”

Esther felt heat rush to her face. “Suffice it to say he’s a bully and always has been one. He made my life, and that of the other younger children, miserable. Bart always stood up to him, tried to protect us.” She leaned forward. “Marshal, I know Bart didn’t kill anyone. I’d stake my life on it.”

The marshal eyed her speculatively. “I see.”

Esther was afraid he saw too much, but there was no going back now. “May I see Mr. Braddock?”

The marshal stood. “You may see both of them.”

Esther shuddered at the thought of again coming face to face with Vic, but she had to make certain Bart was all right.

She followed the marshal to the cell block. Vic was lying on his bunk, apparently asleep, while Bart paced his small cell. He let out a gasp when he saw her and rushed to the bars, grabbing them with both fists.

“Esther, what re you doing here?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

She covered his hands with hers. “I had to make sure you were all right. Is there anything I can do?”

He stared at her stonily. “Esther, you shouldn’t have come here.”

She blinked back tears. “I had to see you. See if I can help.”

He brought one of her hands to his mouth and kissed her knuckles.

A harsh laugh startled her. “Ain’t that sweet?” a sardonic voice said. “Little Miss Esther come to comfort the condemned man.”

“We’ll see who is condemned,” Bart said, a scowl on his face.

Turning to Esther, his expression softened. “There is one thing you can do for me.” He reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and handed it to her. “Will you send a wire to my boss? He can account for my whereabouts on the day Vic here was committing murder.”

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"I'll take care of it," Esther promised.

"Promise me one more thing."

"Of course,"

"That you won't come here again."

"But, Bart—"

"No buts. Visiting a prisoner won't enhance your reputation with the respectable citizens of Dodge."

Esther stared at him sadly. He was correct, of course—not that she cared. "If that's what you really want..."

"It is."

"You can visit me anytime," Vic put in. "I never turned a lady away."

"Shut your trap," Bart ordered. "You aren't fit to be in the same town with a lady, much less the same room. You proved that a long time ago."

"Esther didn't mind, did you?" Vic taunted.

She turned to face him. "You are the most despicable creature I've ever known. You'll burn in hell for your many sins, and it can't be soon enough for me."

With one anguished look at Bart, she turned and left the jail, head held high.

* * *

Esther tried to enjoy the Fourth of July ball at the Dodge House hotel. She wore the new yellow-and-white gingham check skirt and frilly white blouse she'd sewn for the occasion. She danced the waltz, the polka, the Schottische with any man who asked her, and she smiled until her face ached from the strain of pretending to be happy. Finally she pleaded sore feet and sat in a chair by an open window to cool off.

While the rest of Dodge City's respectable citizens enjoyed themselves, she sat and fretted over what had happened to Bart. Two weeks ago, he and Vic had been taken back to Missouri under armed

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guard. One of them surely would stand trial for the murders Vic had committed. She just hoped Bart's employer was able to get there in time to provide an alibi.

Though she was determined to move on with her life, it was difficult. There would be no future with Bart, not the one she wanted. But she wouldn't be able to let go of her concern until she knew he was safe and free. He had been an important part of her life for too long now to let him go easily.

When a young man approached her and asked her to dance, she gave in gracefully and joined the couples clogging the dance floor. A few minutes later, there was a stir across the room and Esther turned her head to see what had happened. To her shock, she saw Marshal Deger and Bart standing by the doorway. She stopped in her tracks, pulling her partner off balance.

"Please excuse me," she said to the startled young man, then hurried across the room, dodging the dancing couples.

Breaking clear, she ran toward Bart, calling his name, her arms outstretched.

He caught her hands before she could throw herself into his arms. "Miss McFarland, what a pleasure to see you again."

She pulled up, abruptly aware people were looking curiously at her. "Mr. Braddock," she said breathlessly. "What a surprise to see you here."

"May I have this dance?"

"Of course," She moved into Bart's embrace as he waltzed her smoothly around the floor. Her hungry gaze studied him. He'd gotten his hair cut and shaved off his mustache and he was dressed in a fine black wool suit. The change made a difference. He looked like a sober businessman, not a desperado.

"I take it everything went well in Missouri," she said finally.

"Yep. I'm a free man again with a spotless reputation."

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She squeezed his hand. "I'm glad, Bart. What will you do now?"

"Go back to St. Louis. I still have a job there."

Esther looked away. "I see."

"I don't think you do. Look at me, Esther."

She turned back to him and saw his tender smile.

"I want you to come with me."

She sniffed. "And ruin my reputation? You know I can't be seen traveling with a man."

"You could, if he were your husband. Marry me, Esther."

She stared at him in stupefaction. "Wha-What did you say?"

He stopped dancing and drew her to the side of the room. Taking both of her hands, he stared into her eyes. "Miss McFarland, will you give me your hand in marriage?"

"I never thought I'd hear you say that."

"Don't make me say it again, Esther."

She laughed. "All right, Mr. Braddock. The answer is yes. Yes, yes, yes!" With that she threw herself into his arms for a passionate kiss in front of everyone who mattered in Dodge City.

* * *

They were married two days later. After dinner at Delmonico's, Bart took his new bride back to his room at the Dodge House. Dressed in the same yellow skirt and white blouse she'd worn to the dance, she looked more beautiful to him than ever.

She threw her arms around his neck. "I'm so glad you asked me to marry you."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Besides the fact I love you?"

"There's another reason?"

A blush stole up her neck and face. "I wasn't sure I'd ever find a man who pleases me more. You know, in bed."

He chuckled and started working on the tiny buttons on the front of

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her blouse. “Glad to hear it. Now, Mrs. Braddock, I suggest we remove these lovely clothes of yours. I can’t wait to see you naked.”

She giggled and let him remove her garments. He took his time, carefully undoing each tiny button down the front of her lacy white blouse. Stopping to kiss each inch of bare skin he uncovered. Lingering to caress her breasts through the white gauze of her chemise. He fondled each breast in turn, teasing the peaks marble hard. Her breathing quickened and her gray eyes took on that slumberous look he loved to see.

He removed her blouse and laid it on a chair, then drew her into his arms for a long, slow, wet kiss. She kissed him back with love and passion, her tongue dueling with his in a prelude of things to come, until he had to slide his lips to one side to catch a breath. His heart was pounding and his cock throbbed against the restriction of his pants. He drew a deep breath and willed himself to control his rampaging needs. This was her wedding night, and her pleasure was his first priority.

He unfastened her skirt and petticoats and pulled them down, then knelt to remove her shoes, one foot at a time. He took the opportunity to run his hands up her legs to the slit in her drawers. Her cleft was moist and soft, ready for him.

She grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up. “Why are you dawdling?”

“Patience, love. We have all night. Are you happy?”

Her eyes glistened, as if she were about to cry. “So happy I could burst.”

He drew her close, drinking in her sweet scent—lavender, soap, and womanly musk. Her full breasts pressed against his chest, and his cock pulsed against her belly. He wanted—needed—to be inside her and soon.

Stepping back, he sat to pull off his shoes and stockings while she removed the rest of her undergarments. Her body glowed in the dim

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candlelight, warm and welcoming. His cock was so hard now, it was almost painful.

When he stood to take off his jacket and vest, Esther unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it up, baring his torso to her touch. He pulled it over his head as her fingers ran lightly over his chest, playing with his chest hair, then circling his nipples. He sucked in a breath when she touched her mouth to one nipple, laving it with her tongue.

Her hands moved lower to the waistband of his pants, but stopped there. She looked up at him suddenly, her expression troubled.

“What is it, darlin’?”

She swallowed, then asked, “Remember what Vic forced me to do?”

“Don’t think about that now,” he soothed.

“I have to. I need to know if it was bad.”

“Of course it was. It’s always wrong to force someone to do something against their will.”

“I know that. I mean the act itself.”

“Ah. Now I understand.” He tipped her chin up to look into her eyes. “Sweetheart, any carnal act between two people who love each other and want to give each other pleasure is never wrong. It’s only bad if one person tries to force it on the other.”

“I see.”

She touched his groin, his cock straining against his pants. She unbuttoned them, freeing his cock. She knelt, pushing his pants and drawers down around his ankles. He stepped out of them and reached to pull her up, but she shook her head. “No, not yet. There’s something I want to do.”

He willed himself to remain still while she ran her hands up his calves to the sensitive area behind his knees. Her hands moved higher, until she was cradling his balls in one hand while stroking his cock with the other. He let out a groan.

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“Does that feel good?”

“You have no idea. Only one thing could feel better.”

“If I use my mouth?”

He gripped her head and looked into her eyes. “But only if you want to, love.”

* * *

Esther smiled at the man she loved. Her new husband. The one she'd desired with all her being, but never thought she could have. Now she wanted to please him in every way. “I want to try.”

She knelt before him and took his aroused penis in her hand. The skin was taut and smooth over the engorged flesh. Had it always been so large? For a moment, her courage failed her, but then she remembered he had often kissed her in her private place, sending her into ecstasy. It was a selfless act of love, and she couldn't deny him the same.

She used her tongue to taste the head of shaft, licking the salty liquid on the tip, surprised that it wasn't unpleasant after all. She ran her tongue the length of his shaft, up and down, again and again, urged on by his groans of delight. Finally she closed her mouth over the head and sucked gently. His hips twitched, forcing more of his shaft into her mouth, making her gag. She drew back and gulped a deep breath.

“Use your hands.” His voice was thick and gritty.

She wrapped her hands around his shaft and squeezed gently, moved them up and down. Using hands and mouth, she massaged and caressed him until he climaxed with a moan of delight.

He pulled her up and into his arms for a kiss. “I love you,” he whispered.

Tears pricked at her eyes. “I love you, too, Bart. I'm so glad I waited.”

Taking her hand, he led her to the bed. “Come to bed, darlin'. It's my turn to pleasure you, and I plan to spend all night doing it.”

LYNDI LAMONT

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance.

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* * *

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