



A Cabin on
*Lonesome
Creek*

Annice Dare

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First Erotiqué Press Electronic Publication / September 2006

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Cover illustration © Karen L. Syed

Erotiqué / Echelon Press

9735 Country Meadows Lane 1-D

Laurel, MD 20723

www.echelonpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-59080-976-1

1-59080-976-9

PRODUCED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Enos drew his horse to a stop as soon as he saw the cabin. Damn! He hadn't expected to find anybody living here. When last he'd passed through this isolated valley there'd been nothing here but woods and the creek he'd named Lonesome.

From here he had a good view through the trees. The ramshackle structure in the bottomland wasn't much more than a shack, with an open lean-to on the side. He saw a cow staked out about fifty feet from the creek. From the looks of it, Ol' Bossy had been there a while. The grass all around her was grazed short.

"Let's go, boy." He nudged his horse into a walk. "Won't learn nothin' standin' here."

The place looked deserted, but the cow said otherwise. As he drew closer, he saw movement behind the shack. Cautious, because carelessness had killed too many of his friends, he turned the horse into a wide circle, staying just inside the trees. A few yards along, he got a good view of her.

A woman! What the dickens is a woman doin' way out here?

She was bent over a washtub, working away at a scrub board. As he watched, she let go of whatever she was scrubbing and stood up. With the back of one hand, she wiped her forehead. He still hadn't seen her face, but

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the figure and the arm said she was young. Not much more than a girl.

His cock reminded him how long it had been since he'd seen any kind of female person. Just visiting with one for a spell would be a rare treat.

He opened his mouth to call, but shut it again without making a sound. "'Twouldn't do to give her a fright," he told his horse. Instead he dismounted and led the horse back into deeper woods, where he removed bridle and saddle and hobbled him.

Before he walked away, he dug out a small bag of coffee beans. Chances were, folks out this far from a trading post would appreciate a contribution to dinner.

He walked back toward the clearing, careful as always to avoid sticks and rocks that would warn of his coming. At the edge of the trees he paused, enjoying the view.

She was bent over the washtub again, her back to him. Her skirt was hiked up so he could see nigh to her knees. Mighty pretty ankles she had, curving sweetly into round calves. Her bottom was round too, and it didn't jiggle as she bobbed up and down over the washtub, lifting and dropping wads of dripping fabric.

Damn, he did like a woman with a round, firm arse. His hands fisted as he thought of cupping those curved cheeks and lifting her against him.

She picked up a fat stick and gave the contents of the tub a good stir. Using the stick, she fished out a dripping something-or-other and let it drain. Her movements were quick and sure as she wrung it out and tossed it into a waiting basket. He watched as she repeated the drip-and-

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wring with half a dozen more pieces.

Once again she bent over, this time to pick up the basket. A gust of wind caught her skirt as she bent, billowing it up around her waist.

God almighty, she didn't have a thing on underneath. The brief glimpse of her beaver engraved itself on his mind.

What kind of woman went around without even a petticoat? Enos was pretty sure he knew, and the prospect of getting laid cheered him up no end. Was she the only whore here, or were there others? He let himself imagine being surrounded by women—naked women—who catered to his every whim.

His britches got real tight and he had to reach in and unkink his cock. Even that quick touch sent him way too close to shootin' his wad.

To calm himself, he watched her hang up the wash. A couple of sheets, ragged on the edges and seamed down the middle. He recalled his ma turning sheets that were worn thin. A sign of bein' poor, she'd said, and seemed ashamed to have to do it. A pillowcase, equally ragged, with a dark stain on it. He'd seen how hard she'd scrubbed, so the stain had to be one she couldn't wash out.

She hung a skirt and blouse next, faded blue that might have been calico once, and then a couple of real plain petticoats and some big longjohns with the arms and legs cut short. There were some rags that might have been dishtowels and a pair of black stockings. Enos considered on the clothesline after she'd gone inside, unable to imagine a whorehouse with no fancy gowns or lacy petticoats.

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On the other hand, they was bound to sell themselves cheap. A good thing, for he had other uses for his gold.

He hitched up his britches and strode toward the cabin. As he rounded the corner, she came out of the door. When she saw him, she squeaked and scurried back inside. The door slammed hard enough to shake dust from the lintel. An instant later he heard the solid thud of a bar dropping in place. Stunned, he just stood there. No whore he'd ever known had slammed the door on a payin' customer.

About then he heard what sounded like shutters being closed, somewhere around back.

"Hey, inside the house. I mean you no harm," he called.

"Go away." The words came faintly to his ears, but even so he could hear the quaver in them.

About then he did some quick reconsidering. What if she wasn't a whore? What if her man was off somewheres and she was all alone here? She'd be scared of any stranger come riding by. He ought to get his horse and ride on, let her be.

He turned away from the door, intending to do just that. Then he took a good look at the farmyard. Well, he reckoned a body could call it a farmyard.

The leanto aside the shanty was built of scrap lumber and unpeeled poles. He doubted it gave much shelter to Ol' Bossy, not with all the gaps in its walls. The roof looked tight, though, so at least it should keep off the rain and snow. There was a piece of fence, like someone had started building a corral and gave it up. A wood box, about the size to house a big dog, was surrounded by

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chicken wire, but the wire was laid on the ground in one place, so he reckoned that whatever poultry it had held was long gone. Et by coyotes, most likely.

There wasn't a horse or wagon in sight, nor any sign that one had been here in a while. The ruts leading out along the creek bottom were old, weathered.

Somethin' wrong here, somethin' real wrong.

Sula had noticed when she was hanging out the wash that Violet had eaten all the grass within reach. She was heading out to move the cow when she opened the door and found a strange man on the stoop.

Her first reaction was a small scream, her next to dart back inside and slam the door. She dropped the bar in place, ran across the room to slam and latch the shutters on the one window. For a moment she stood there, hands against the shutters, her heart pounding, and her breath coming hard. *Oh, dear God, what if-*

When he called out to her, she should have kept quiet. Instead she yelled at him to go away. Standing there, in the middle of the dark cabin, she'd never been so scared in her whole life.

She forced herself to think, to remember what she'd planned if—*when*—this happened. Sooner or later someone was bound to come upon her. She'd hoped for it. Feared it. On the journey west, she'd heard some of the women talking about the raids along the Kansas-Missouri Border before the War. Bad men who found women and children alone had no mercy. The best thing that could happen was for her to die quickly.

She stepped to the corner where Pa's shotgun leaned. She kept it loaded, ever since the panther had killed

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Pansy. Losing the pig was bad enough. Losing Violet would mean she'd starve.

Holding the shotgun in one hand, she tiptoed to the door, put her ear against it. Not a sound. Biting her lip, she stood there, undecided. Then she heard the barest squeak, as if someone had shifted his weight on the wooden stoop. He was still there. Waiting.

Waiting for her to come out so he could grab her.

She knew what he'd do to her then. He'd rip her clothes off and have his way with her.

Although she wasn't quite sure what that entailed, she had a pretty good idea it wasn't all that different from what the stallions did, what the bulls did, what even the rooster did. He'd jump on her, toss her to the ground. He'd flip her skirts up over her bottom and shove his *thing* into her.

Her belly churned with a strange sensation, as if a swarm of bees was swirling there. The time Pa had bred Dobby, she'd snuck into the barn and hid in the loft. The fierce attack the stallion had made on poor Dobby had frightened her, even as it thrilled her. And Dobby—well, she hadn't really tried to fight him off. More like she'd teased him a bit before she let him mount her. And then—oh, my. The stallion had sunk his teeth into the back of Dobby's neck and shoved his big thing into her. She'd screamed, sounding almost like a person in pain. But she had stopped fighting, just stood there, shaking and whimpering, while the stallion had pounded into her.

Sula had touched herself then, had rubbed herself, until the ache that had built as the stallion had attacked Dobby grew into an awful, scary heat that seemed to want

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to burn her up. She'd rubbed harder, pressing the soft linen of her petticoat into her private parts, until the heat climbed up her chest and into her face. All of a sudden a tingling in her calves spread through her body until she felt like she'd blow up like one of those firecrackers Pa had bought her on the Fourth of July.

What happened next had been the most wonderful, the most awful thing she'd ever felt. And when it slowly faded away, she'd felt like she'd done a hard day's work, worn to a frazzle.

What am I doing, thinking sinful thoughts at a time like this? Sula crept closer to the door, aimed the shotgun at about where his belt buckle would be, were he as tall as her pa. "What—" She swallowed the terror and worked to strengthen her voice. "What do you want?"

"I was just ridin' by, saw the house. Seemed like the neighborly thing to do, stop in and say hello."

She could tell from the sound that he was right up against the door. "We've got no neighbors. Not 'tween here and Camp Augur." Not unless you'd count the Shoshoni—and most folks didn't.

He didn't sound dangerous. His voice was kind of soft, sounding like rabbit fur felt. *Ma, tell me what to do. I'm scared to let him in, but if I don't he'll go away.*

Sula hadn't known how much she'd hungered for the sound of another human voice until she'd heard his. Making up her mind, she set the shotgun down in the corner and went back to the door. The bar seemed heavier, somehow, as she lifted it. If he was a bad man, she could be dead—or worse—in the next few minutes.

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The door swung slowly open once the bar was removed. Sula didn't move as the wedge of light widened into a rectangle surrounding her. Her eyes were slow to accustom themselves, so all she saw at first was his dark shape in the yellow sunlight.

Tall, by several inches taller than Pa. Whip-slim, without the extra flesh that maturity put on a man, so he couldn't be much older than she was. He carried a rifle, but easy, like he wasn't fixing to use it anytime soon. His dark britches were tucked into high, laced boots, and his close-fitting vest had a sheen to it, like well used leather. An ivory-handled gun hung low on his left hip, in a tied-down holster.

As her eyes got used to the light, other things about him struck her. He had a few days' growth of beard, but instead of darkening his jaw, the fair bristles gilded it. His mouth could have been called woman-soft, if it hadn't been for his firm, pointed chin. His ears stuck out, giving him the look of an ornery little boy, except that his dark, hooded eyes spoke of sights no child should have had to see.

"I've coffee," he said, holding up a small muslin sack.

She could smell the beans. Her mouth watered. She hadn't had coffee since...since when? Before Pa left, way last fall.

Licking dry lips, she said, "Come in then. I'll build

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up the fire."

She took the coffee mill down from a shelf and set it on the table. From the corner of her eye, she saw him hang his hat on the peg beside the door. He'd been raised right, she decided, and lost some of her fear of him.

"I'll do this," he said. "Got something to roast 'em in?"

Still half-scared, she watched his swift, sure movements as he measured out a handful of beans into the frypan she handed him. His hands were long, slim, but strong looking. The white line of an old scar marked the back of one, from knuckles to wrist. The little finger on his left hand was straight and stiff, as if it had been broken and poorly set. Her skin twitched, as she imagined those hands touching her...on shoulders, breasts, belly. She tightened her legs together and stepped back, farther away from him.

"I'll build up the fire," she said, again.

He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

As soon as there was fire, he came to kneel beside her. She saw he'd wrapped the handle of the frypan in his neckerchief. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone, so she could see the base of his throat and a bit of his upper chest. The skin there was pale, not sun-darkened as his face and hands. A tuft of short, fair hair peeked from the base of the vee.

The aroma of roasting coffee filled the room. Her nose twitched, and before she could stop it, a sneeze exploded from her. Another and another, until her eyes were watering and her nose running. At last they tapered off, leaving her breathless. Embarrassed. "I'm sorry," she

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said, keeping her face turned away from him. "Sometimes it takes me like that. The smell of coffee, I mean. I love the taste of it, but there's something about the smell..."

"I was worried you were going to sneeze your head off," he said, with a half smile. "Bless you." He shook the frypan one last time, and pulled it from the fire. "These are done, I think." Returning to the table, he set the pan down. "Do you need water fetched?"

"There should be some still in the bucket." She gestured toward the shelves opposite the fireplace. "It's fresh. I brought it in this morning." She'd been unable to resist bathing in the icy creek on this, the first warm, sunny day for weeks. That was before she'd worked herself into a sweat over a boiling cauldron of lye soap. *I'll bet I stink to high heaven.* She prayed he hadn't noticed. *He* smelled of horse and woodsmoke, but it wasn't a bad smell, not like sweat and a dress worn too long.

She'd washed her other clothes because they'd been stained with blood and vomit. This one was merely soiled with food and grease and cow slobber.

While he filled the coffeepot with water, she poked at the fire again. *I ought to offer him food.* She'd eaten the last of the cornmeal a while back, but there was still a cup or two of weevily flour in the bin. The pork she'd salvaged after the panther killed the pig was gone too, eaten quickly once the thaw set in. Her traps hadn't yielded anything for several days, probably because she'd caught every critter worth eating within a mile of the cabin. There was that last bit of dried elk, though, and

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still a couple of carrots. Trouble was, she wasn't sure she wanted him to stay. She looked over her shoulder to see him standing by the table, watching her.

Heat rose to her cheeks. *Oh, my he's pretty. Yes, I do want him to stay.* "I could fix a stew," she blurted.

"That'd be fine. I ain't had a good stew for quite a spell." Giving the coffee mill handle one last vigorous turn, he removed the drawer and shook its contents into the pot. "I don't reckon you've got an egg."

"No, I—how did you know?"

"I saw the hen coop. Coyote?"

"That or fox. A dog critter, anyhow." Accepting the coffeepot, she set it on the hook and swiveled it to hang over the fire.

After that he just stood in the middle of the room, looking around. His gaze lingered longest on the bed. Sula wished she'd spread the comfort up, even though the sheets were out on the line.

"You live here alone?"

"No!" She forced herself to continue poking at the fire. "No, my folks are over to Camp Augur. They'll be back in a day or two. And my big brother's out huntin'."

"Ahuh. How long have you folks been here?"

Sula swung the coffee pot over the small fire. "We came fall before last. Pa's a trapper. He found this place when he was working this creek. Me and Ma and...and my brother came out from Nebraska. Pa's going to—"

He walked over and opened the shutters. "Kinda small cabin for four people."

"My...my brother has a place of his own." Granny had always told her that lies had a habit of comin' back to

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bite you. "Up the hill a ways."

"You're gonna put that fire out, if you keep fussin' with it."

Sitting back on her heels, she twisted her hands in her skirt. He was still at the window, looking out over the hillside back of the cabin.

Maybe he wouldn't see the graves.

"You're awful young to be left alone, ain't you? Seems like your brother ought to be keepin' an eye on you."

"I'm nineteen!" She bit her lip. "I can take care of myself." If only he wouldn't hear the doubt in her voice.

"Ahuh."

"Guess I'd better get that stew started."

He didn't move from the window while she pulled the elk meat down from the rafters. His gaze followed her when she went to the corner where the root cellar lay under the cabin. It wasn't a big hole, but it was deep, and it had kept the carrots and parsnips and potatoes from freezing through the winter. Too bad only carrots were left. She had to lay on her stomach to reach down into it. Her skirt pulled up over her calves. She knew it did because she felt a cool draft against them.

"Need some help?" His voice sounded different. Hoarse.

The loose sand in the root cellar yielded three wizened carrots and a wonderful surprise—one small onion. She laid them on the table while she slivered the elk meat into the cookpot. She could almost hear him wondering where the rest of the stew would come from. "I'll make dumplings to put on top," she told him. "We

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got a little low on supplies, what with the thaw coming so late. That's why Ma and Pa went to Camp Augur."

"How come you stayed here? Seems to me a girl like you would want to get to where there's people, not stay alone out here."

He was standing close behind her now. She could almost feel the heat of him.

"I just did." Oh, if she could only tell him the truth. She put everything into the cookpot and hung it over the fire. "There now, that should be done in an hour or so."

Enos was certain sure she was all alone. There were two graves on the hillside behind the cabin. One was recent. Those wheel ruts had been made before the last storm at the very least. Maybe longer ago than that. *Where the hell are her folks? And what was they thinkin' of, leaving a girl out here alone?*

He could smell her. Under the faint odors of woodsmoke and sweat, there was the sweet perfume of sun-warmed roses. He leaned closer, all but burying his nose in her sleek black hair. After one good, deep breath, one that filled his nostrils with her scent, his arms just naturally wrapped themselves around her and pulled her back against him.

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Her lush little bottom fit like it was meant to cradle his cock. Her breasts, rounder than they seemed in the loose, ugly dress, rested on his forearms, soft and heavy. When he bent his head, his mouth went unerringly to the angle where her neck and shoulder joined, and he licked the soft, salty skin.

"Oh!"

After a minute, she said "Ohhhh..." draggin' the word out in a long breath. At the same time she pushed her bottom back against him, wiggled it back and forth.

He turned her, roughly, so that she stumbled and near fell, before he got himself in hand and calmed a mite. He'd already made up his mind she wasn't no whore. She didn't deserve to be treated like one.

He put her away from him, held her at arm's length. "I'm sorry—"

She looked like she was about to cry. "Oh, no, don't be. Please. I'm willing. If you want to—" Her shrug told him she was too shy to say the words.

Her eyes told him she was scairt to death.

He'd not had a woman in nigh onto a year.

She was willing.

There was a bed over in the corner of the cabin.

He swung her up into his arms. Three steps took him to the bed where he knelt, still holding her. "You sure?" His voice sounded strained, like he'd been yelling.

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"I'm sure." Hers sounded whispery, like she was forcing the words out.

He laid her on the bed, which creaked and groaned and sagged, and climbed on with her. Stretched out on his side, he propped his head on one hand. "You sure are pretty,"

Her fingers came up to trace along his jawbone. "So are you."

"Will you take your dress off?" He'd never seen a woman naked all over. The few times he'd had a woman before now had been quick, purely gettin' his ballocks off with whatever whore was available. Sometimes he'd dreamed of having a woman all his own, one who'd care for him. One who wouldn't see him as just another dollar earned.

"If you'll take your clothes off." Even in the shadowy light here in the corner, he could see how pink her face was.

He hesitated, then rolled to the side and sat on the edge of the bed. Behind him, he could hear her breathing, open-mouthed and a little bit fast, like she'd run a ways.

Or was scairt shitless.

Shirt, neckerchief, and vest got hung on the short bedpost. He toed his boots off, wondering if she'd noticed he'd no socks. His last pair had finally wore out, a month back. When he stood to undo his britches, he realized that he was still wearin' his gun. Sure proof he'd not had his wits about him ever since he'd seen her skirt blow up. He could almost hear his ma saying, "No guns in the house. It ain't civilized."

He unbuckled and laid the belt on the floor within

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easy reach.

"Can you turn around?"

The husky words almost made him grab for his shirt. They sounded so...well, if a cornered rabbit could talk, that's what it would sound like. He turned. "You want to watch me take my britches off?"

"I've never seen a man without his britches."

His hands froze in the act of undoing his buttons. "Never?" Mouth dry, he sought the right words, but all he could say was, "You've never been with a man?"

"I... I didn't say that. I just wanted to see you take your britches off."

She'd never been with a man, no matter how brave she made herself sound. Feeling a little bit like he was facing a firing squad, he quickly undid the buttons and shoved his britches down.

His cock stood tall and proud.

"Oh my!"

He kicked off the britches and climbed onto the bed. "Your turn, now," he said, trying to think of something—anything besides sinking himself into her soft, wet depths. *She's a virgin, you randy goat. You'll have to take it easy with her.*

Once he was laid down, on his side again, head propped up, she started unbuttoning her dress. The buttons were tiny, and there were a lot of them. Enos finally had to look away from her fumbling finders, else he'd have grabbed her, flung her skirt up, and rammed into her.

As soon as the last button at the waist came undone, the dress fell open. His eyes tried to pop out of his head

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when her breasts peeked out. They was round and full enough to fill his big hands and then some. Her nipples were wide and deep pink, puckered and firm. He swallowed and told his aching ballocks to wait their turn. He was busy lookin'.

She wiggled out of the dress, rolling back and forth while she pushed it down. Off her shoulders, past a waist so slender it reminded him of a sego lily's flexible stem bending in a soft breeze.

Her belly was flat, her belly button a pretty little dent in skin as smooth and as soft as a new calf's nose. Her hips curved from her waist into a wealth of womanly promise, revealed as the faded cotton slowly slid away. And then he saw, for the second time, her beaver. As his mouth dried out and the breath threatened to stop in his throat, he wished he knew a better word for something so magical, so marvelous as the patch of curly, coal black hair hiding her woman's treasures.

She pulled her legs out of the dress and flung it to the foot of the bed. When she rolled back toward him, her arm was hiding her breasts, more or less, and her other hand was doing its best to hide her pussy.

His hand shaking, he reached out to grasp her wrist, to pull it aside so he could get a good look at what it concealed. Swear to God, he'd never seen anything like her breasts. He touched her nipple, traced a circle around it with his forefinger.

She was all over him the next instant. Her nipples practically bored holes in his chest. Her hands came up to grab his hair, pullin' him down to where her mouth, open and wet, could reach his chin. She licked and kissed her

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way along his jawbone, until she came to his ear, where her sharp little teeth nipped before she pulled it into her mouth and sucked.

"H-h-hold on, there," he said, grabbing her upper arms and pushing her away.

She went dead still. "You don't want me?" The words ended with a sob.

"Want you? God almighty girl, I want you so bad I hurt. But there's no hurry."

Sula was confused. Her ma had told her how all men wanted was to stick their things inside women and take their pleasure as they could. The muffled sounds she'd heard from her parents' bed so many nights had only proved what Ma had said. She was willing to give this man what he wanted if he'd take her away with him. But she wasn't going to ask him until she'd shown him how she could please him.

Could she please him? Ma had warned her that men were fools for women with full bosoms and round bottoms. That was why Pa had left her and Ma behind every time he'd gone to Camp Augur. So the soldiers and rowdies there wouldn't see her and come sniffin' around his claim.

Sula hadn't seen anybody but her Ma and Pa for three years. Besides the baby brother who'd scarce drawn his first breath.

Something poked her in the belly. After a moment's startlement, she knew what it was. Hesitantly she reached down and clasped it. The feel of it in her hand wasn't at all what she'd expected. It was soft on the outside, smooth as a cow's teat, but hard, like an iron bar under the

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soft. And it was alive. She could feel the life in it.

"Careful there," he said, almost a gasp.

"Why? Does it hurt?"

"No... Yes. Oh, yeah, it hurts like nothin' I ever felt before, but it's a good hurt."

His hips bucked and the skin under her hand moved.

Instantly he went dead still. "I think you'd better let go now," he said, through clenched teeth.

She did, but didn't know what to do with her hand. So she laid it, palm flat, against his chest. The thick golden brown mat was springy under her touch. She flexed her fingers, burying them in the hair.

His hands had been on her shoulders, but now he stroked them down until they cupped her breasts. Was this how he'd felt when she took hold of him—aching and hungry? She felt herself grow wet, down in her private parts, and clenched her legs tightly together. Maybe he wouldn't notice.

Heavens, what a strange, wonderful feeling it was, to have a man's hands cupping, squeezing, rubbing her breasts. When he plucked her nipples, arrows of heat drove through her belly, until she ached sort of like she did before her monthlies came—but different, because this was a hungry ache. She didn't want it to go away, but to go on and on and on.

"They're so soft, soft on the outside, but firm, sort of like peaches." He nuzzled his face between her breasts, turned his head, and licked the side of one. "You don't taste like peaches though. You taste better. Like...like heaven." He fastened his mouth around one nipple and suckled, pulling the heat arrows back up, making them

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explode through her body, until she thought she was going to flare up, like a pinecone in a hot fire.

Unable to lie still while his hands were working their magic, Sula threaded her fingers through his chest hair, dug her nails into his skin, and scratched him in the same gentle way she used to scratch her little cat. *Scratch, scratch, scratch*, and with each *scratch*, he shuddered. Until he caught her chin in one work-hardened hand and raised it so he could cover her mouth with his.

She'd never seen her parents kiss like this. Not with open mouth and busy tongue. He tasted the inside hollows of her cheeks, the backs of her teeth. He stabbed at her tongue, inviting it to play, to push and draw, to suck and lave. A little bit of her stayed aware of what was happening, but mostly she just *felt...on*, and on and on, while he stoked her inner fires hotter and hotter with each touch.

When his fingers delved into the thick bush hiding her private parts, she stiffened, afraid he'd be repelled by the moisture there. Instead he said, "You're wet. Wet and ready. Oh, yes—" He pushed farther, urging her to spread her legs. Unable to resist, Sula rolled onto her back and opened her thighs, opened herself to him.

He sat up, draping her legs over his. "Pretty," he whispered. "You're so pretty." He wasn't looking at her face.

His fingers explored, parting her, dipping into her and spreading the moisture. She closed her eyes, wishing he would do the same. Surely it was sinful, for him to have such an intimate view of her. Her mother's voice spoke in her mind. *Keep your skirt down. The sight of a*

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woman's legs tempts a man to sin. If he ever sees her private parts, he goes plumb crazy.

Was he crazy? Opening her eyes again, she studied his expression. Intent, hungry, but not crazy. His tongue came out, licked lips that looked dry. She remembered the taste of him—a faint memory of tobacco, coffee and something else, something she knew had to be his own personal flavor.

All thoughts flew away when he slipped one finger inside her. Sula tightened around it, thrilled and scared at the invasion of her body. *I'm willing*, she reminded herself. *I'm willing. And if he likes me...*

Even that thought vanished when a second finger joined the first, stretching her. His thumb was stroking her folds while his fingers probed her, gently, rhythmically. Her toes started to tingle, like they were asleep, and the tingle spread, up her calves, followed by waves of heat. She tried to clench her legs together, but he was in the way.

He was leaning forward now, rising to his knees.

And then he was looming over her, pushing himself inside her. Slowly stretching her. His thing was too big for her. She knew there wasn't room inside her for it, yet he wasn't hurting her.

He stopped pushing, held himself on rigid arms. "I'm probably gonna hurt you. There's no help for it, I guess."

Before she could react, he thrust himself into her, until she felt as if she might split clear in two.

It didn't hurt, she realized after a moment. Not really, not like if she'd banged her head on something. It stung, like a skinned knee or a scraped palm. But inside. Way

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inside, where his thing was filling her.

"Are you all right?"

She thought about it. "Yes. Yes, I'm all right." When was he going to start panting and grunting and groaning?

"That's good." He started moving then, pulling himself out and pushing back in. Each time he buried himself in her again, she felt the hunger grow. It started with the tingling in her feet, a hot tingle. It spread up her legs at the same time as her face grew hot. She twisted under him, wanting the feelings to go away, wanting them to get better, wanting...

His hand came between them, close to where they were joined. He touched her, rubbed and plucked, and then the ache in her belly, the tingle in her legs, the heat in her face all came together in one staggering explosion of release that went on and on. She screamed and screamed, until her body was drained of all strength, her mind of all will.

He slammed himself into her one more time with a shout of...of triumph? Slowly, carefully, he lowered himself until he lay sprawled across her body.

He was still inside her, though. Smaller now, but still enough of him to make her feel filled.

She must have slept then, for the next thing Sula knew, the cabin was dark enough that she could see a soft glow from the fireplace. He was still sprawled across her, still inside her. She was afraid to move, for fear she'd dislodge him.

He moved then. "You awake?"

"Uh-huh." She didn't know what to say to him. After

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what they'd done, how could she look at him without her face telling him what she hoped?

"Gettin' dark out. I ought to bring my horse in." He moved, and she felt him grow hard inside her.

"I'll bet that stew's about done," she said, as she moved against him. No more sting, now, just a sensation of heat kindling again in her belly.

He pushed himself in deeper. "I reckon the horse'll have to wait." His hand threaded through her hair and turned her face to his. When he kissed her this time, he was gentle, not hungry. "Did I hurt you bad?"

"No, not really. Only for a little while. It was—"

"Good," he finished for her. "God almighty, girl, it was so damn good. I've never before—" He thrust again and said no more as he worked her, deep and hard, shallow and gentle. He kissed her again and again, murmured formless sounds to her as he moved upon her.

She clung to him, meeting his every thrust, welcoming him into her body, wanting to seal him to her forevermore. At last she again felt that unstoppable force taking control of her body. And once more screamed her release.

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~*~

"I've got to fetch Violet," she said, sometime later, when all light had faded from the world outside the window. "There's a panther comes around now and then."

He rolled off of her and sat on the edge of the bed. "I'll bring my horse in. Is there room in the leanto for him?"

"Yes, Pa kept...keeps our horse in there." When he stood to pull up his britches, she reached past the foot of the bed and felt around until she found her dress. Hating the musty smell of it, she pulled it over her head. At least she had something clean to put on later, once she'd brought in the wash.

When he walked into the timber, she wondered if she'd ever see him again. Determined not to worry over something she couldn't change—hadn't she had plenty of practice at that?—she led Violet into the leanto and milked her. She needed to be bred. Her milk was drying up. *What am I going to do when that happens?*

After she'd carried the milk into the cabin, she made sure there was plenty of water for the two animals. She gathered the wash then, taking a moment to bury her face in a sheet, still warm and smelling of sunshine. When she'd washed the sheets from Ma's bed, she'd had to hang them inside. For three days the cabin had smelled of damp, and the floor had taken forever to dry out.

She was carrying the clothesbasket to the house when

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he emerged from the trees, leading a big, rangy horse. Sula whispered a small prayer of thanks. He hadn't gone away. Not yet.

The stew wasn't as bad as it could have been. There'd been enough of the elk meat to flavor it, and the dumplings had helped thicken it. Enos had watched her make the dumplings, and wondered if he wasn't taking the last of her flour. Hungry as he was, he refused a second bowl until she took some for herself.

He pulled a small packet of lemon drops from his saddlebag while she was bringing the coffeepot to the table. The look in her eyes when she saw two of them lying at her place went straight to his heart.

"Candy," she breathed. "Oh, Enos, candy. It's been so... I mean..." She closed her mouth and looked away.

"Hadn't you better tell me how long you've been alone?" he said when the silence had gone on far too long.

"What makes you think—"

"Girl, I ain't stupid. There's no sign of anybody else about. No sign anybody else has been about for quite a spell. What happened to your folks?"

She took a sip of coffee, set the cup down. Picked up a spoon and stirred.

"Tell me!"

"They're dead," she said at last. "Leastways, I'm pretty sure Pa is, too. He'd have come back if he was alive. I know he would have."

The hopeless tone of her voice near broke his heart. "He went to Camp Augur?" The Army post was a couple of days' journey in a wagon, he reckoned, and the only place for several hundred miles where supplies were to be

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had. "When?"

"September, I think it was. Early fall, anyway. He said he'd be back in a week, but he never came."

"How come you didn't head out when he didn't show? You should have been able to walk there in four or five days."

"We talked about it, but Ma wouldn't have made it, even riding Violet. She'd been ailing all summer, a little worse each day. That's why Pa left us behind, because he didn't think she could stand the trip."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks now, but she seemed unaware of them. "When did she die?"

"I don't know. I lost track of time, but I think it was sometime around Christmas."

As close as he could figure, it was now the middle of May. He'd left Alder Gulch on the last day of April, determined to go back and find the hidden valley he'd stumbled across whilst he was prospecting a few years back. The disappointment he'd felt this morning was gone now, traded for new hope. "You've been here alone since then? That's nearly five months."

"I was going to try for Camp Augur as soon as I got the wash done," she said. "Me and Violet. I figured the snow was off the pass by now." She stirred the dregs in her cup again. "Trouble is, I wasn't sure where it is, since I've never been there. Pa brought us in a different way."

His heart froze in his chest when he thought of her striking out alone with her cow, not knowing where she was going, and looking like she did. Talk about a small tender critter staking itself out for any wandering eagle.

"Did your pa stake his claim here?"

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"No. He said it'd be years before anybody cared. There's no gold here, and not enough good grazing land to run cattle."

Oh, but there's good, abundant water, and in this dry land, that's like liquid gold. He reached across the table, took her hands in his own. "What would you say to me settling here with you, the two of us proving up a claim to this land?"

She stared at him, open-mouthed. "With you?" she squeaked, after a while. "Here?"

He squeezed her trembling fingers. "With me. I found this place a few years back, and I've been thinking on comin' back here ever since. When I saw your cabin, well, I just about died of regret."

Enos stood up and pulled her to her feet. With one arm around her, he led her to the door, pushed it open. Outside a gibbous moon cast pale light over the yard, made the tumbling creek sparkle like something alive. "Your Pa knew a good place when he saw it, and I'd like to take on what he wasn't able to finish. Will you stay here with me, help me turn this into a home for the two of us?"

She was very still for a long time. About when he was opening his mouth to urge her to answer him, she stepped out of his loose embrace and faced him. "I gave myself to you because I hoped it would hold you here. That or take me with you. I was scared to go by myself. I've been scared ever since we realized pa wasn't coming home."

"I've been scairt a few times myself. There's no shame in admitting it. Come, darlin', tell me. Will you

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stay? Will you be my woman?"

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then let it go and smiled, a weak, wobbly kind of smile. "I will if you'll tell me your whole name. Mine's Sula Mae Smith, and I'm really seventeen, not nineteen."

He pulled her against him. Wrapped his arms around her. "I'm Enos Larimore and I'm twenty-three. I've got a saddlebag full of gold and enough coffee and cornmeal to get us to Camp Augur. I reckon the Commandant can marry us when we get there. We'll buy us a couple of heifers and a bull calf and a mule to do the plowin'."

"You'll take me with you? For true?"

"I'll take you with me. This ain't no place to be leaving a woman alone. When can you be ready to leave?"

She flung her arms around his neck. "Now! Tomorrow! Oh, Enos, whenever you want."

With one last look around the valley he'd thought of as home for so long, he swung her into his arms. The bed was waiting. They'd seal their bargain in the best way possible.

With lovin'.

THE END

Annice Dare

Annice Dare started collecting erotica a long time ago, when Santa Claus brought her a very thick book titled *Erotic Poetry*. Intrigued, she went looking for more of the same, and discovered Victorian erotica, popular in England during that very prudish period. Although she still collects erotica, she would rather write her own, sharing some of her fantasies with her readers.

Annice lives in the Pacific Northwest with the man of her dreams. Their small house is filled with overflowing bookcases, more paintings than wall space, and as many glass paperweights as she can afford.