

A man in a cowboy hat and vest stands in a field with horses. He is holding a thick rope. The background shows a sunset or sunrise over a landscape with rolling hills and several horses. The overall tone is warm and golden.

# BRANDED BY SUNSET

DESTINY  
BLAINE

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BY

DESTINY BLAINE

## CHAPTER ONE

If a woman felt the need to ride like a man, act like a man, and eat like one, too, then hell's fury, she might as well be one. Problem was—Carly Corbaine was anything but. All legs and boobs, pretty as a picture, but mean as a rattlesnake, Preston Evans saw trouble just looking into Carly's wild blue eyes. After he looked the first time, he decided to linger awhile.

"So are you gonna sit there all day and stare at me or are you gonna get off your ass and move it for some work or something?" She had an incredible way with words. A saddle dropped at his feet and, with a quick whip of her wrist, she tossed the bridle right on top of it.

Preston jumped up. On his feet in record time, most gals might consider his move quite impressive, since a woman beckoned him in the first place. The one ordering him around appeared unaffected by the experience. She made a loud snort before she passed right on by him.

A few of the cowboys let out some chuckles and Preston felt the hot heat burning on his cheeks.

The sun didn't supply it. Sure, blazing heat beat down, but it didn't make his body warm to hell-hot satisfaction. The damn woman walking away from him made his temperature rise whenever she came within a few feet of him. It presented countless problems, several of them quite noticeable.

"What's the matter, Preston, is the little woman uninterested in your charms?" The digs began without any sign of letting up. "Can't get her attention flat on your back so you jump to your feet on command?" The boys on the cattle drive saw their chance to poke some fun at him. "That one there is gonna be the death of you. It's already written on your face."

It was the worst part about being on a drive with her. He had it real bad for her and everyone knew it. Most said it showed all over his face whenever he looked at her and never mind the more obvious place where a man's attention often stands the proudest.

Sneering back at them, he stepped into a challenge he never saw coming just by opening his mouth. "I promise you, if I wanted her flat on her back, she'd be there." He smirked at the thought and felt really good about the confidence he displayed to the other guys. Only, they didn't buy it. In fact, they found it down right funny.

Slim, one of the cowboys with quite a

reputation for charming the skirts right up and off the whores in Sacramento, spoke first, "Is that so?"

"Yeah, it's a fact." The young cowboy kicked the dirt and watched the only woman in camp move away from them in a way guaranteed to tempt a preacher. She deliberately swayed her small, curvy hips just enough to taunt those watching from behind.

"Then, I'll bet you a day's labor that woman won't look your way. In fact, I'll give you by sunset tomorrow." Slim nodded in her direction. "But just in case she does look at you without thinking about the way she does it, I'll make it a little bit sweeter for all of us. Seeing as she's such a fragile little flower and all." His voice lowered and then he added solemnly, "Get her in your arms for a heated kiss and I'll pay you a day's wages." The bet set in motion, the odds were against the one meant to do the kissing.

Preston's confidence held supreme in most areas and about a lot of things. Kissing a woman who seemed destined to be a man, but looked better than any whore he'd ever seen, didn't rate as an easy undertaking. It didn't take a lot of smarts to figure that one out.

Her fiery little brain must have sensed something going on and before the men could start tossing in their side bets, she wheeled around on her boot heel and headed back toward them.

Her flushed cheeks made it obvious. She appeared just red-hot sexy mad. She marched toward them with powerful intent and stopped just short of plowing one of them over.

“Got something on your mind, Slim?” Her blazing words showed them spunk, one-upped anything they might have to say to her. She placed both palms on the small of her back and continued. “I have to ride with you all day and then by nightfall, I have to do the work around the camp, too. I get mighty damn tired of you boys watching my ass, but refusing to move yours. Now, if you got something on your mind, hurry up and speak it, but if not, then I suggest tonight one of you no-counts start a fire worth cooking dinner over.” Blazing fury existed where eyes should have been and a tight lip formed to let them all know she meant business.

The obvious troublemaker chuckled and scratched his neck. “What about it, Preston?” He rolled his eyes deliberately, looking more at his hat than over at his intended target.

Preston shifted his weight. *Damnation*. Pretty as a picture, the woman needed to be tamed and there wasn’t a cowboy in the whole damn country man enough to ride her. He’d wager money on a bet like that any day of the week. So what if he was the one with odds against him, he’d still gladly place his money on the lady.

“Placing a bet on me, Preston?” The gal was intuitive or else a mind reader. She picked up easily on things. It wasn’t the first play for a kiss or even a simple touch of her skin. Her rosy cheeks turned into red flames.

Slim, the obvious instigator shook his head. “Now, Miss Corbaine, would we do something like that? You know us. We respect you far too much...” Sarcasm oozed.

“The only respect you have for a woman is one you can find eye level to your dick so don’t give me that shit.” She ignored the man with dancing eyes and returned her focus to Preston. “So what about it? What’s the wager? These boys going to pay you to try and bed me or just steal one kiss?” She waited with a firm line forming across her pretty little mouth. Her stilled foot began to tap on the hard ground. She wanted answers and he damn sure knew how to give them to her. *Straight up.*

A cowboy through and through, he knew when he didn’t stand a chance. He wore around a hard-on for the little wench in front of him. Everyone standing in their tight circle just waiting for a response knew he had one for her now more than ever. Maybe it was time she understood it, too. Of course, it really wouldn’t have been a bad idea to approach her somewhat differently if he wanted to invite ideas of the same.



The others were quiet. *Yeah, they wanted a response. A good one to put her in her rightful place. She had one coming. Ready or not and he didn't care which.* Truth told, he enjoyed a war of words.

"Well?" Carly demanded an answer. Her foot stamped at the dirt a bit faster than the original slow tap.

He moved closer and grabbed her tightly around the waist. He didn't think about it or the consequences he faced afterward. He heard the snickers behind him, but the only thing he thought about then was how good it felt to hold a woman close. More specifically, the one in his arms.

His eyes narrowed and he moved so close to her that even just a breath away was shy of where he slanted his lips. "If it's all the same to you, Miss Corbaine, I like to surprise the women I have an interest in kissing and I'll be damned if the ones I kiss ever see me headed to their bed. But I'll tell you what," he sank into a sea of blue as pretty as any pure waters and he paused a second to drown in them, "if I ever kiss you and decide that's where we're gonna end up, then I'll let you know. That way, you can keep the bed warm till I get there."

He waited and watched after his words allowed him the opportunity to seduce her. He saw how they tempted fate and felt the small twitch bring their bodies just a bit closer.

For a split second, the world stopped moving.

The tension jelled. If not between two people, it surrounded them in the air. Everyone held their breath. Then the laughter rang throughout the camp, rippling through the ten or so men standing there as a ready audience.

When the words fell from his mouth, he'd wrapped his arms around her small waist and she barely moved with the sudden impact, but the twisting and turning came fast after the shock wore off. Soon after the cowboy's delightful speech burned her ears, a rapid slap followed through and delivered a most appropriate comeback straight across his cheeks.

"Shit woman!" He moved away from her before she wiggled free. His palm went up to his face and the chuckles behind him became ripe with snorting laughter.

"You deserved that, Preston Evans, and so help me, if you ever try to come near me again, I'll have a swift kick for you further south." Her notorious temper flared and her finger scolded him with a shake, shake, shake as the warning continued to spill from the lips he really wished he kissed.

He almost doubled over from the pain her words inflicted. It seemed like a solid promise, not a threat and he cringed when he realized that it would likely be one she'd make good on since he took his friend's bet.

"Damn you, Slim." He shot the cowboy a look

as he watched her pretty little ass quickly move toward the riverbank. Feet stomping with every stride away from them, damn madness driving away practical reason, he didn't deny himself the opportunity to watch her until she disappeared.

"You can go ahead and thank me. Now she knows you have it hard just for her!" Slim and the others roared with more amusement than before.

"If I had it cocked and ready for that bitch, I'd be in some serious trouble. She's as dried up as any old maid. I'd bet money on it." He instantly felt guilty. It ripped through him worse than the hard slap on his face.

His good friend took that bet. "Well then, let's just see if you can't climb into bed with her and change that fact, if it's the truth. Tell you what, I'll sweeten the deal. Get her under the blankets with you by sunset tomorrow night and I'll give you two days wages."

Preston tossed back fighting words. "Be ready to pay. I have a way with that one." He nodded in her direction and never heard the comments and snickers to the contrary. His mind wandered and she met him on the other side of daydreams when it did.

He had an erection when he moved into her and she didn't try too damn hard to move away from him *or it*. In fact, she instinctively moved *toward him*. Twice. She did it two times in less than

the sixty seconds his arms were fixed around her. The act alone held some value. Question was...would it be worth two days wages to find out if he could do it again?

He waited for her to come back from the river so he could apologize. When she didn't return, he made up his mind to go and look for her. She typically didn't run off without reappearing fast. Even when she went to the river to take a bath, she still came back sooner than they missed her.

The fire roared with a blaze ready to cook over yet she didn't show her face. Slim even looked up toward the path that she took a few times before he nodded off in the same direction. "Maybe someone should go check on her." He nodded first at the likely choice. The one that pissed her off seemed like the cowboy to go and fetch her again. Then he glanced around at the others. No one made the first effort to go find her, which worked to his advantage since he wanted to go in the first place.

"Ah hell. I'll go get her. Somebody start supper. She's in a mood and we're probably not gonna eat if we wait on her to fix it." Slim started in the direction they saw her walk in earlier, but he was quickly cut off.

"Oh no you don't. I can't cook and I'm not eating anything those boys whip up. Get it started. I'll go get her." Preston smiled and then tossed a

few words loaded with intentions over his shoulder. “Besides, if I know *my girl*, she’s probably waiting on me to make good on a few promises.” He snickered before he headed for the thicket.

“Yeah? Well, then you’d better hurry before she changes that mind of hers.” The prime instigator shot him a knowing challenge but then turned around in search of beans and plates. The only thing better than sex on the open range, was a good cook among hungry men and since they lost their cook to nonsense, stomachs growled with hungry complaints.

Preston walked down to the river, following the same path he watched her take earlier. It was a clear path to the water, but she wasn’t there. He felt the hair tickle the back of his neck as he looked as far to the left as he could see and then back to the right. No Carly. Not one sign of her existed. He followed the river downstream. Maybe she was just angry and decided to go off and throw a fit by herself.

He didn’t blame her for being a bit on the mad side of things, but he sure hoped like hell he didn’t push her to do something damn stupid. A sudden tug of fear rolled over him. He challenged it for making an appearance, cursing himself for feeling just a wee bit concerned.

The facts were clear though. Concern flooded

over him. He couldn't deny the quickened beat of his heart and he sure couldn't ignore the labored breathing as he stepped up his pace. The darkness loomed and it just wasn't like a smart woman to run off and leave a camp full of hungry men.

He kept walking. He'd find her. He'd probably find her furious as hell, but he would find her. While he walked, he continued to swear about his raw ass stupidity. Carly had been in his dreams for as long as he remembered. Never mind the nightmares.

When he bedded the bought-and-paid-for whores the cowboys often found in Sacramento or Stockton, he saw Carly. She was the only woman who ever visited his dreams whether he covered up with a blanket under the stars or lay down on his fancy bed at home. The only one he'd ever had a true stiff one for without so much as a touch. Never mind a kiss.

He stopped moving long enough to readjust the situation in his pants, making it difficult to walk and even harder to ignore. Earlier, clothing separated them and he'd be damned if he couldn't imagine her better without it now after holding her in his arms. He was a man doomed for a bit of her wrath after his stupid stunt. If he found her, he knew he'd get some of it.

"Carly?" he shouted out into winds that traveled about as fast as the river beside him. The

weather made a rapid turn for the worst. Not that they didn't need the rain. They did. The cattle and horses were starved for better grass and a free flowing water supply.

"Carly!" he called out again as he quickened the pace and then stopped to see if he heard anything.

Nothing. Not a damn sound.

He walked another good bit down the river, following it until the night air chilled and darkness surrounded him and that's when he saw her. Perched on a rock overlooking a gorgeous rapid stream, she looked like an angel under the moonlight.

"Woman, what the hell are you doing up there?" He approached her cautiously, taking the time to climb onto nature's ledge beside her. He wondered how in earth and heaven she climbed up there.

"Oh, so they sent you out to find the stupid bitch that couldn't make it back on her own?" She questioned him with obvious motive fueling syllables and words guaranteed to turn vile.

"No. I came on my own." He looked at her straight on, somewhat amazed by the beauty she possessed, but just as startled by the cool demeanor she always carried around with her. Especially now that she looked so vulnerable. So...womanly.

"I just bet you did." Her tone changed

drastically. "I guess coming on your own is something you do a lot." She smirked.

"Damn smartass, aren't you?" It took a lot of thinking, but he caught the pun intended and added one of his own. "Maybe you do, too."

She drew her hand back, but lowered it before she dealt another blow. He prepared for it though, expected it even. For a split second, the thought of her hands on her own body just tickled the hell out of him. He had to turn away to keep from smiling and showing the pleasure the lone thought brought.

They both stared straight ahead. The night sky took favor on them and the moon lit up the waters below in a way that should have been captured and etched in their minds for eternity. Those picturesque settings in perfect little moments, few people found. If they did, they rarely had the opportunity to revel in it and claim the moment as their own, even if just for a little while.

Large and manly, he leaned back on his elbows casually, comfortable in his own skin. "Bet you this is where you came last night." He smiled knowing she interpreted his meaning in the wrong way. He quickly added, "I knew you were gone, but I thought you were with..." His words intentionally searched so he left it open ended. His tone proved he wanted some kind of revelation.

She studied his face for a long time. He knew,



compliments of the stars and heavens, she could see every expression. "Would it bother you if I was out here like this with someone like...say, for instance, Slim?"

His jaw set with the thought. *Hell would freeze over first.* He also knew she wouldn't dare.

Carly never let the uncomfortable slide. "Well?"

"Well what?" He put more weight on his palms and crossed his ankles.

"Would it bother you if I'd been out here alone like this *with him*?"

"What do you want me to say?" He leaned forward and inched toward her.

She stood quickly. "Nothing. Not a damn..."

He reached for her wrist and caught her in time to stop the word battle, the ones that spewed venom and damaged good natured men. "The hell you don't." His lips were positioned above hers, slanted in perfect kissing position. Instead of using it to his advantage, he teased her. Seeing her squirm made her all the more adorable. Feeling her body tremble with his touch, well that was something else entirely.

"Let me go." She tried to move from his lap but his palm cupped under her right arm while his left hand held fast to her tight, flat stomach.

Possessive eyes allowed him pleasure, but also reminded him that he spent the better part of a year undressing her in his mind. Now, he could

do it with his hands. That is, if he played his cards right. It brought about the biggest *if* he'd ever face. Knowing it going in, there were fewer surprises.

Her jaw tightened against the lust he guessed she felt. He saw it in her face while it made its mark on her stained cheeks and moist lips. He damn near felt it when her body moved with his grip.

"No. Not until you answer me." Damnation she felt good. Too good to let go and too hard to handle if he didn't.

A womanly voice lowered into a seductive whisper. "I asked the first question and a lady shouldn't be denied." She tempted a rebuttal with those words considering she was anything but a lady, if judged by actions alone.

His eyes lingered at her chest. A heavy breath caught in lungs ready to release, barely able to breathe in and out with the scent of a woman.

Her cleavage tempted his eye, drawing him in for more than a stare with natural gifts most women of the day would love to own. He swallowed hard. "What was the question again?"

She wiggled, trying to get free of the trap his arms helped him secure. She let out a huge sigh. "Damn you. You know what I asked and I'm not asking again."

A wide smile covered his face. "Fine, then I'll just answer you the best way I know how." He

moved closer and dropped his voice an octave and, speaking into her lips, repeated every word of the question, "Would it bother me if you were out here like this with Slim?" He looked up at the stars and then back at her lips. "You're damn straight it would." He didn't move closer to kiss her, but damn it all, he wanted a taste.

Swallowing hard was the easy part, but drawing air after his confession, wasn't quite as simple. He witnessed her struggle when she caught the one breath she needed to form words and speak.

"Well, then..."

"Your turn." His mouth turned up at the corners, showcasing perfect teeth, especially for a cowboy who spent too much time out on cattle drives.

She shifted again, trying to break his grip. "I need to get back to camp and start supper." The words fell into an open, full mouth still lingering close enough for a kiss.

"The men have supper on the fire. So take your time 'cause we have all of it you need. What answer did you want from me?" They had nothing but minutes to burn and he wasn't in any hurry to move.

"That one. Okay? That one." With all the force she could muster, she freed herself and raced away from him.

Looking back over her shoulder, she made a run for it. "So, Preston. What now?" Her little feet traveled fast and he watched her gain a good lead with laughter lingering in the air. Something he rarely heard from her lungs. It sounded like music to his ears.

*Shit, woman. Now, you're going to be the death of me.* Slowly, he stepped off the rock and followed her. He forgot to tell her that other than driving cattle, his other passion was running. Something he felt confident she wouldn't doubt once he caught up to her. As long as he had someone worthy of the chase, he loved the sport of it all the more.

## CHAPTER TWO

They weren't even half way back when he caught up to her, grabbing her first by an arm and then by a very slender, feminine waist, she was brought to an abrupt halt. "Let me go." She whined and squealed at the same time.

"Why?" he asked her the question that he knew she couldn't answer. She didn't have a reason because she didn't want him to release her. The body language said everything, but what her firm shape didn't offer to give away, her eyes willingly did. Hazy and beautiful, they told a very sexy tale. Delighted to be in his arms again, she belonged there and knew it...or so he imagined.

"Because I said so." She tried to squirm from his clutches. It didn't even qualify for an attempt.

"No way." He watched her gasp for a breath. She knew what was next. Oh yeah, she knew.

They were both breathless from the short run and stood together, locked in an embrace he held her to while stares further introduced them to

other challenges. It guaranteed them both of delicious possibilities in the near future. One they could almost reach out and touch.

When he finally quit grabbing for another whiff of air, he fired out a question sure to add rapid color to her cheeks. "Do men always do what you tell them to do?" He teased but there was a motive behind words. He wanted to know.

"Maybe." Her breast rose and fell with a steady tempo the wind inspired from the outside in.

"Maybe you should learn your place." He smirked.

"Let me go!" Lust turned to anger. She was mad, hotter than hell. *Seething*. Her teeth gritted and her body jerked with determination. Damn right. She wanted freedom and demanded it now. He almost laughed at the way he was able to read her mind.

"Not on your life. I mean it. Hold still." He moved his hip to the side to hold her in place, making sure his treasured possessions were out of reach in case she delivered a swift kick with killer power.

When she finally stopped moving under his arm, she seemed more like a wet dishrag. "Okay. I give. You caught me. Now what?" Her mischievous little eyes dared him with dances of a more scandalous nature.

"Now this." He leaned in closer. Just barely a

breath away from stealing that first kiss he knew she wanted him to take. Her devious little mouth puckered. A luscious trap parted and she all but begged. Moistened lips were only enhanced when her seductive little tongue ran over the parameter of them.

“Damnation, woman.” A jaded growl fell from his lungs. Hunger, damned-ass starvation lured him to a woman who could easily find her way into his heart if she ever found her way into his bed.

Obviously startled by his words, her eyes locked and focused on the masculine mouth slanted over hers and she wondered. He could see it in her eyes, feel it in her skin. She wanted to know what it felt like to just lose herself in one simple kiss. She swallowed hard and that’s when it hit him. She was scared to death more than excited beyond reason.

Slowly he lowered his lips to hers, but it was only a peck. When he released her mouth from a gentle introduction, he stated what he knew to be true. He approached the subject cautiously. “You’ve never be touched by a man. Never kissed, and never held. Don’t try to deny it because I’m right.” His hand touched her cheek with the softest touch he’d ever delivered.

Fiery eyes shot bullets in a rapid line of fire. “Damn you.” She didn’t deny it, but she didn’t

admit it as her truth either.

He didn't think she would. It would have to be a touchy subject, given the woman's age. Hurt inched its way over her and he saw it. "Ah hell, Carly. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings it's just that—"

"Let me go," she interrupted him, "or else I will scream bloody murder."

He believed her. The woman definitely knew how to use her lungs when she went into her crazy mad fits. He recognized now as one of those mental woman-moments. Releasing her, he watched in awe as she scooted back up the hill. He didn't bother to follow close behind her. He wanted to let her go back to camp first. He could only imagine what the others would say. There were gone long enough for several rolls in the tumbleweeds.

After she disappeared from the shadows of night, he felt his smile turn up when his heart skipped several beats. "Damn, woman," he called to the wind and touched his lower lip where the stolen kiss still lingered. "Untouched. Never kissed. I may love you yet." And that just scared the heck out of him. He looked back at the river and started up the incline, too. That's when he heard her blood curling outburst.

"Help! Help! Let me go!" Her screams were probably heard all over the valley and into the



hills.

Preston approached with caution. He ducked down behind a stack of river rocks. Stones someone must have retrieved at one time and then decided they didn't need them. He slumped down low enough to watch and wait. The outlaw probably wasn't alone. In these parts, it was rare to meet a lone traveler on the open range.

The nasty looking cowpoke held her tight from behind. His face was buried in her hair. "Sugar, the only way I'll let you go is to lay you down and fuck the life out of you so you best hold still," he threatened and she continued the struggle.

"You'll kill me first, you son-of-a-bitch!" She screamed in his face with hot eyes ready to surrender to death. It would be a better fate than lying down next to a beast. Her eyes told the story.

The cowboy's over-anxious hands played in her hair and then caressed her arms. His nose sniffed out the scent of her fear and his face stayed practically covered by her wavy curls.

Preston wanted to draw his gun. Shoot the bastard dead where he stood.

Fingertips weaved through her long blonde locks and then made their way to her cheek. Stroking her skin, up and down, he kept his hands where they didn't belong. Preston knew the others would start looking for her. *Scream again! Give those lungs a workout!* If she cried out once more,

then the others would find their way to her.

Her voice was heard all over the country and he knew his friends would jump to their feet, and head toward the river. He'd wait it out just another few minutes, if possible. He looked over his shoulder and saw another unrecognizable party approaching from the river.

Slumping only lower, he saw the man loading his gun. He put in a few rounds of ammunition and returned it to his holster. "I told you, Carmack, leave the girl alone. You couldn't do it. Now, leave her be until we can ride out of here safely. You hear me?"

The one called Carmack ran his knuckles over her cheek. "So fucking pretty." His mouth went to her ear and then he spoke the words he wanted his buddy to hear. "You can scream your bloody lungs to hell and back. No one is going to hear you. Tell her. No one is alive to hear her, tell her!" His laughter flashed a mouthful of rotten teeth and his eyes marked a man who dealt death's final card. A wild look of rage deeply hidden inside carried to the outer marks of skin. Cuts and bruises were obvious to the naked eye.

Preston swallowed hard. *The others were dead? No way.* No way in hell. Sweat beads drifted across his brow. His hand went to his holster. He wanted to shoot. He could bring one of them to their knees, but he wasn't sure he could do it without

putting her at risk. The other man would either shoot to kill with Carly staring down the wrong end of the gun or he would shoot him. He didn't have time to drop both men dead where they stood. *The others? Dead?* He couldn't think about it. Maybe they were wounded. Maybe some got away.

A slow warning came across from the other man. "I'm hungry. Get that woman to camp and don't you dare lay one fucking hand on her until we're fed. You understand me?"

Carmack's hand went back to her hair. He yanked it hard. "Hear that, sugar? Not a hand till we're fed. Then, what do you suppose will happen?"

Carly pulled herself from his grasp and then turned on him with fire and smoke leaving her pretty sea-blue eyes. "Then you can go fuck yourself!" She smirked when the words tumbled out of her mouth. Obvious pride took over where the controversy lingered. The one she initiated with intent.

Preston flinched because he knew what came next. He recognized the two men in front of them. They were on every wanted poster in the valley. These two probably had bounties out on them all over the map.

A slap came down across her flawless face. Hard and fast, it was brutally delivered with one

resolution in mind, to instill fear. Carmack watched as her length of waves weaved around her face when her neck gave with the direct hit.

The other cowboy even flinched. "I told you. Leave her be!" His eyes pierced the challenge along with clenched fists lingering with the pending threat.

Every muscle in Preston's body reacted. He wanted to kill the man. The trouble was the two men were most likely the fastest on the trigger. They'd killed more people than any duo in the country. Women and children weren't exempt from their slaughter if it served them well with riches. They were born killers. The worst of their kind and he'd bet money that Carly already knew who she was dealing with, too.

"Son of a bitch!" Her words broke the still silence of night. The crickets seemed to quiet long enough for her pain to ring out and then they chirped back in as if to sound off in dismay. Her hand went to her face and her eyes burned redder and hotter than any rising flame.

"Keller, don't you tell me what to do with this woman. You hear me?" Carmack was the meaner of the two. Everyone knew it. He would drop a bartender where he stood if he gave him a shot glass barely filled with whiskey. He killed for the fun in it and reveled in the power he found in a smoking gun.

Shaking in his boots, Preston rose up slightly. If there was a why, rhyme or reason to his action, he would've loved to have known it. Carmack and Keller stood nose to nose and while he stooped right back down to hide out of sight, he knew she saw him there. He locked eyes with her for just a second. Reassurance was now hers to have. She could cling to it if she needed it and she might. Especially since these two were claiming that the rest of their friends were laying dead in the dirt.

Preston held his breath. The critters of the night fell mute once more so that low voices were heard.

"Get up that hill now. I'm hungry and supper was on. I intend to eat it." Keller pointed up the beaten path and Carmack pulled out his gun, taking the time to nudge it into the flesh of Carly's side.

They all started walking up the embankment. Once they left, Preston released a sigh. That's when he felt the hand on his shoulder.

"Shhh...don't move," Slim spoke quietly, barely above a whisper.

"You sure took your damn time." Without turning around, he quickly informed him that he wasn't surprised. "I knew you had too much luck to go and get yourself killed. What the fuck happened?" he whispered the words back over his shoulder and turned to face him.

His forefinger was at his lips. "Shh...Carmack

only has eyes for your little woman right now, but Keller is too smart. He'll know we're here. The horses give it away. There were too many horses and not enough dead men on the count. Be quiet. He'll come right back down here. Stay low."

Preston took on a serious tone that took them both by surprise. "She...Carly..." He cleared his throat and finished what he needed to say. Maybe she wouldn't want him to tell her secrets, but Slim needed to know what a man could do to harm her. "She's never been touched by a man. This is one time, she's not as tough as the rest of us." He swallowed hard, fighting the anger storing up reserves. "We gotta stop this."

The other cowboy nodded and then moved away. He huddled down behind some brush and then pointed up another path indicating he planned to walk back into camp. Then, he moved his hands in a circle and pointed in another direction indicating that he wanted another approach from behind the camp from the north side.

Preston moved slowly under the cover of night, darting behind trees, rocks, and brush. The trees were more like twigs and the brush was deadened by the drought so the only true cover was the occasional stack of nature's stonework.

An hour or so passed and the two men were in place. One approached from the north and the

other from the south. They had them surrounded. Not really. At least the score was even. Two against two worked for Preston, especially since Slim enjoyed firing a gun and rarely missed his target.

Carly slumped down by the campfire. It looked like she was knocked there. Her eyes glazed over with each scorching blaze and she didn't move.

"Woman!" Carmack called out to her. He turned up a bottle of Slim's liquor, that alone made him a dead man walking. Slim loved his booze and typically didn't share his stash.

She didn't move. Her eyes just held fiercely to the flames.

Keller got up and took a few blankets with him. "You two kids have fun." He called out with a grunt before he moved off away from them.

Thank goodness. Preston wanted Carmack. He wanted to put a bullet in the man's cock just to remind him he wasn't using it on the likes of a woman destined to become his.

Once flat against the ground, Keller pulled his cowboy hat over his eyes and from there, everything happened pretty fast.

Carmack didn't waste any time ripping her plain blouse right off her back. Her breasts were full and perfect. It was enough to give any man a reason to become possessive as hell.

Preston was greedy and selfish when it came to

her. Seeing her in the flesh drove him to damn near madness. He moved closer catching Slim out of the corner of his eye.

The wrangler's hands moved over her waist and hips fast. Speed he must have deemed necessary to tame the rage and want that he proved existed by his animalistic eyes.

"Get away from me!" She started to fight, waging a war she wouldn't win alone.

A gun was on Keller. Preston now had the permission he needed to kill. He cocked his gun with a warning that a shot would fire. "Back the hell off her!" Preston yelled at the man groveling and groping Carly with only sex in mind.

The other outlaw rose up and found one shot fired into his chest.

"Keller!" Carmack saw the tables turned. His brother lingered on the ledge of death and he drew his gun.

Preston confirmed the other man's fate. "This is for every woman and child you ever murdered." The shots were simultaneous. Slim got him from the back and Preston unloaded three into his chest. Even as he dropped to his knees with life holding him just a little at bay, he eyed Carly with wicked lust howling in his gaze.

She set her jaw as she crossed her thin but strong arms over the best a woman had to show. He could look on as he began the journey up to



death's open door, but she would never be forced to know the touch of her skin on his because Preston saved her.

## CHAPTER THREE

When the smoke settled and the gunfire stench blew away with a different wind, they were left with the dead bodies of friends and neighbors. Men they knew from past cattle drives. Good people who often helped them move their own herds into the hills when the drought became unbearable.

They were friends who would lend a helping hand if they had one to give. Honorable people, cowboys who shared blankets with them in the cold while turning up a bottle of whiskey by the campfire before waking up at dawn over a hot cup of coffee, now lay dead.

She looked around at death. It surrounded her. She didn't move. She just glared at the bodies. Earlier, they were full of life and more than ready to poke fun with her and start another card game. They had wives and children back on their farms. Men, good ones, who rode with them on countless drives and across broad stretches of land, who

wouldn't be riding home.

Preston went to her saddlebag and pulled out a shirt for her. She stood completely still and allowed him to drape it over her. He couldn't help it. He noticed how beautiful she looked in the campfire light, but refused to let his eyes wander and focus on the rise and fall of splendor. It wouldn't be right to take advantage of her even though he would've paid a ransom just to linger long enough for a simple indulgence. The death around them brought anything but inspiration. It was sickening and quickly consumed each of them. Closing her blouse, he expected her hands to button the shirt up, but she didn't move. The shirt remained opened.

"Is she alright?" The rough words of the other man left standing interrupted his act of saving her. Both men locked in a mutual stare and then together seemed to look away at the bloodbath around them.

He smiled at her weakly. "She'll be fine. You're a fighter, aren't you, Carly?"

She didn't move and words never formed on her lips.

His hand trembled over each button, taking the time and the pains to pull the material out enough so he didn't touch her where she didn't want or need a man's hands to impose. He secured all of the pearl buttons without touching her, but once

her blouse was secured, her tears flowed. The truth of their reality hit her all at one time.

“Oh hell no! No!” she screamed out as she went to first one fallen cowboy and then another. After she checked all of them for a pulse, she walked over to Keller with intent. She unloaded her gun into his chest, making certain he was dead. She reloaded with focus and purpose.

The men watched in horror as she walked over to Carmack with a movement fully calculated. She stooped down and brought his head up from the ground with a yank she wanted him to feel. “You son-of-a-bitch!”

His last struggle for breath was obvious. He held on and fought for a life he wasn’t going to have.

“These were good men! They were honest men! They had families. Wives and children! Why? Damn you! Why?” She swiped back her tears and stood over him.

“Say goodbye to this world you son-of-a-bitch. Say goodnight!” She unloaded her gun. The only place the bullets struck was the one place that doubled both living men over where they stood. Then she kicked him there, too. Just for added measure.

Preston was in shock. She’d gone from a totally helpless woman to a ruthless killer all out for revenge and it happened so fast that he wasn’t

even sure he saw it with his own eyes.

They worked through the night digging graves. She slept for a few hours and the men took turns. There were bodies to bury before the vultures circled the camp in search of the fresh meat that lured them in. When the dead weight filled the shallow graves, she backed away. There were two corpses remaining.

"I will not bury them. I will not," she spoke with finality.

Slim spoke the obvious, "There's a bounty on their heads. Dead or alive."

"We can't take them in like this. These two make it look like we were out for revenge. Not a bounty." Preston looked down at the damage done to both bodies.

Her lips curved up in sarcasm. "Revenge? Oh yeah. I wanted it. Don't care who knows it." She walked over and kicked their corpses once more. Something she'd done several times throughout the night.

The living men exchanged looks. They'd kept her in their focus and knew she was untouched by Carmack, but the way she shot up the man's cock, indicated otherwise. The men's bodies provided a good place for rumors to start.

"Don't give me your shit, men." She looked back and forth between the two cowboys. "I know how this looks. I know what others will say, but

think of it this way. We'll collect a bounty worth five times as much as these fellas would have earned out here on this drive. These cowboys have families and they deserve something." She walked over to a bush and stripped it of twigs. Her tiny fingers worked at constructing makeshift crosses for the men buried and the graves they'd leave behind.

"It's up to you." Slim nodded in another direction. "And you know why I'm leaving it up to you, so decide," his words formed with a whisper.

Yes. He knew why. He'd already seen it in her eyes. Felt it in one simple brush of lips. She was going to belong to him. Maybe she didn't know it yet, but he didn't have a doubt. Not one.

Slim wanted him to decide if he could help her through the fallout. After all, the evidence of a man without his manhood would indicate one thing...rape. Even though it wasn't true, the rumor mill would churn and she would pay the price. Gossip spread throughout the valley because there was little to talk about outside of the Gold Rush news.

"No. It's not up to me." He stared hard at her as concern bit at his soul. "It's really your decision, Carly. Whatever you decide, we'll honor it."

\* \* \* \*

A few days later, they rode into town with several horses behind them minus the riders who left on them. One man had two of the horses loaded with the dead body weight of the country's most notorious killers. Pathetic torsos wrapped tightly in blankets with obvious bloodstains offered the evidence, as if any was needed. Dead men were strapped beneath. Has-beens. *Outlaws*.

The lines on the riders' faces showed battle wounds as they seemingly drifted through the streets of the western town. Worry existed. Sadness prevailed. Those in Stockton knew them well. They were wealthy men who made their living the old fashioned way...using their hands or so it was believed.

The two friends left alive were known around town as ladies men, Slim more so than Preston. The women from the saloon stood out on the balconies, watching in horror as the two cowboys rode at an easy pace with one woman right behind them. Shopkeepers came out to see the commotion stirred in the dusty streets and the town fell silent with nothing but the clop, clop sound of hooves dragging against the ground. Even the horses were too tired to get excited by the stirring of a small crowd.

They pulled their mounts to a halt in front of the sheriff's office. The one in charge was already

waiting. He looked equally disturbed by the plain interpretation of death. A telegraph arrived the day before and he knew what to expect. He just chose not to share the news. Families lost their heads of households and women were waiting in the streets to welcome them with open arms. They would come up empty handed. Go home alone.

The buzz traveled fast and news of the trio's arrival worked its way down the street faster than the three rode through. Their bodies showed worn evidence of days on horseback. They were tired when they met up with some of Slim's men on the outskirts of town, but happy to see familiar faces so they could pass off their herds. Now, the harder tasks were straight ahead. They would turn over the dead bodies and collect a bounty. Then they'd stable their horses in town for the night before breaking the news and handing over money without meaning to the fallen men's widows.

The two surviving cowboys knew their rewards for living waited for them in the saloon. The whores looked on from up above. They were waiting for them. Clad in material to draw in the wanton eye of those heated with desire, they flaunted it. One man wasn't interested, at least not in the women who were available for the night.

Carly wanted to get the worst over with, the dreaded cries she knew they'd hear. She would share what she knew, break some hearts and



watch as women crumbled with the knowledge. Then she would eat a hot meal. Not because she was hungry, but because her body needed some nourishment. After that, maybe she would watch Preston disappear behind the saloon's door and know she would go home alone.

The sheriff nodded at them. "Tough ride boys?" He moved closer and recognized the third rider as soon as her hat came off with a golden flow of hair to follow. "Ms. Corbaine." He took his hat off and nodded. A deep sadness washed over his face.

She felt certain it was because of the death he knew she'd witnessed once more.

Carly's family was murdered when she was a child. Out of five children, she remained as the lone survivor. Her parents were killed and her brothers fought to keep her protected. She lived because they hid her in the barn under mounds and mounds of hay. They weren't so lucky.

The sheriff found her in the aftermath of a battle fought and lost that day. Now, he knew where her skeletons were and the lines crossing his face presented proof of deep-rooted remorse. He clearly hated to know she'd waded through the valley of death once more. She saw it in his deeply troubled glare.

She despised that she'd been forced to tread through death once more.

"The toughest of days are behind us, but we

lost some good men, sheriff." Slim was used to casualties. He saw a lot of it back in Dodge City and most heard about it on the cattle drives. He spent most of his youth in the Wild West with legendary gunslingers fighting their way to California. A product of death and the rewards that it brought, his father as a bounty hunter, and the sights of fallen bodies held some measure of familiarity. His family still lived in Dodge, but he came to California for the Gold Rush and, by the looks of things, he intended to stay. He must have liked it there.

The sheriff held the wanted poster in his hand and he untied the men strapped to the horses as they were loaded onto an awaiting wagon. "Looks like I owe you boys...and Ms. Corbaine...a hefty sum."

"No. You don't owe us." The negotiations stopped before they started. She decided there was one part in all of this that she couldn't play. The role of delivering the news. It was agreed upon early that she would take the bounty money and split it up between the families, but she decided against it. She just couldn't do it. There wasn't enough energy left in her body to muster up the courage. Death was hard to face in the eyes of the widows who would never see their men alive and well again. She just didn't want to witness it.

Preston's solemn expression was one that was immediately mirrored. They both nodded slightly at one another and then back at the sheriff before Slim took the lead. "We would appreciate it if you would give the families the money. We don't want it."

The lawman nodded. "Somehow, I knew the three of you would feel that way. You're right about one thing. You lost some good riders." He looked up at the delivery driver and started to wave him off when the blanket from Carmack's body moved to the side.

"Holy hell." He looked at both cowboys. He couldn't let his eyes drift back over in her direction, probably out of fear of what he might find there.

Preston spoke up. He never knew he planned to take the blame, but he did it all the same. "I guess you might say I got even for all those women who lost their fight after that scum raped them. Maybe I was a little too trigger happy."

The older man paid to enforce the law, slowly looked over at Carly after a confession fell from Preston's lips. He probably didn't buy one thing the young cowboy tried to sell. She looked battered and bruised. Her cheek sported one hell of a shiner and he felt confident that she didn't get it from the two men riding with her.

Ignoring the obvious, he nodded to the driver.

“Get these two buried. There’s nothing to do but get rid of them. They were a waste to their existence.”

Reins slapped against the two horses and the wagon driver started down the road in pursuit of a burial spot. The proper one they deserved right outside of town, away from the cemetery and remains of good, decent men and women.

The sheriff swallowed hard. “Carly, let me buy you dinner, hon.” He had a soft spot for her and, throughout the years, tried to find a reason to spend some measure of time with her. When life allowed for simple pleasures, she enjoyed his company because in it, she found friendship.

“I appreciate it, but no. Please divid e up that bounty and spread the news to the widows. I don’t want to meet them on the street and answer questions.”

He nodded and then turned back to the men. “How about you boys? Are you headed to the saloon or can I buy you a hot meal?”

She looked down at the ground fully expecting her heart to break in a few pieces, but shocked by what she heard.

“I think I’m going to head on home for the night.” Preston didn’t look at her.

She saw the look he caught from his buddy. “Now *that* I’m just not believing.” He didn’t smile. He was too tired to try. He shrugged and then

tilted his hat to Carly. "I'll be seeing you soon."

She tried to give Slim a half-hearted smile, but couldn't muster one. Instead, she watched until his back went through the swaying doors of the saloon and then turned back to the two left with her.

"I'll be getting on home, too, then." She instinctively patted Preston's arm. "Thank you again for everything." She'd never said thank you for what specifically, but assumed he knew. He'd have to know. He saved her purity. Preserved it, really. Maybe he did it for ulterior motives. Maybe he did it for her. Maybe even for him or perhaps just because he knew that by protecting and saving her honor, she would be forever bound to him.

He held her horse and gazed into her eyes. Once she clucked to her animal and pulled away, she didn't turn back around to see his expression. She just rode straight out of town and headed home. It was a long trail back because she analyzed the man she left behind and why he laid his life on the line to keep another man's hands off her. The reasons she came up with were enough to place a smile on her lips even after all that had happened. It was also enough to scare the living hell out of her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

She heard the pounding of hooves and knew a lone rider approached before she saw him. She kept digging out the ground, determined to make the place look like something. Weeds were dug up along with a few stones here and there.

"Howdy, Miss Corbaine." He tilted his hat. Rugged and handsome, she could melt looking into those emerald green eyes.

"Miss Corbaine?" She smiled as she ran the back of her hand over her forehead, wiping off the appearance of hard labor. "I think we've been through enough damage in life that the least you can do is call me Carly. Besides, on the drive, you didn't have a problem staying on a first-name basis."

"And heaven knows, your name has been on my lips more than once since we rode back home." He grinned and hopped down off his horse.

He took the time to tie off the animal at the hitching post while she gave some thought to his

words laden with motive and provocative meaning. She knew her skin blushed and appreciated that he pretended not to notice.

“I wanted to stop off and see if you were okay.”

“Cause you were in the area, I suppose?” She shot him a beseeching look and continued to work with stubborn dirt, trying to move hell and high water all at the same time. Her lips worked against a smile.

“Nope. I can’t lie to you. I made a special trip.” He kicked the soil she’d only just moved out of the way.

She stopped hoeing and glared at him. “Well, you shouldn’t have.” She threw down the tool and moved quickly toward the house. “But since you’re here, do you want something to drink?”

“Sure.” He stepped onto her porch and probably expected an invite inside. He didn’t get one.

In a matter of seconds, she reappeared with two tin cups in hand. Cold coffee was what she offered. Bitter but smooth, she knew he liked it that way. She paid attention on the cattle drives.

He took a gulp of black liquid and sat down on the porch steps.

“Planning on staying awhile?” She dared him with lips ready to challenge him by words loaded with caution.

"I don't know. I might be." He looked up at her and leaned back against the porch.

Realizing he intended to stay awhile longer than she deemed comfortable, she swallowed hard and stood opposite where he sat. She leaned up against one of the posts that held the entire porch in place. A smaller area, there wasn't a lot of space between them on the steps.

He took his own sweet time scanning over her before he spoke again. He seemed to have a lot on his mind. "Did you rest at all last night?" He showed concern.

She saw it there and it made her feel awkward. "Probably not as well as you did." She huffed out her jealousy and he caught it.

Did he ever.

"Well, my bed felt better than the cold ground but I have to admit, I could have slept better." He winked and then took another sip of bitter.

Maybe she made the coffee that way just hoping he'd stop by so she could offer him a cup and then he'd just choke on it. She politely smiled before tilting her chin up. Sweet was something he wasn't going to taste. She didn't have time to offer him a dose of it. Still, unexplainable relief flooded over her. He went home. Even without her there to see him walk into the saloon in search of a woman's company, he still rode home.

Suddenly, she was more aware of the way she



looked. A wisp of hair fell down in her face when she took a seat next to him. She started to swipe it away like she would've regardless of who watched, but he beat her to it.

A large hand moved closer and, between two fingers and a thumb, he pushed the strand back on top of her head. He unclasped the pin there and repositioned the hair underneath. He took his own sweet time and the act alone tested sexy and proved provocative as fucking hell. She noticed.

Her breath caught in her throat. She was stilled by the act itself, but lost in ruby red streaked green eyes. He was tired. *Exhausted*. She saw it all over his face and it stained his cheeks pale while hallow eyes showcased more proof.

He withdrew his hand slowly and leaned his head back on the wood behind him once more. "I came out here to check on you." He repeated his reason for being there, probably sure he needed one or two more.

"Yes, you said that." She watched him confirm his excuses for riding out of his way.

His head jerked up in a forward movement and he instinctively moved closer. His palm touched her cheek. "And to make sure that Carmack didn't hurt you." His jaw set with a madness brewing just beneath the surface. "He didn't hurt you anywhere. *Did he?*" Worry spread across his brow as he stressed the urgency he felt in needing to

know from her. Wanting to be assured she wasn't touched in a way he would forbid if he was able to control it.

She stood quickly and walked away, back to the hoe waiting for her to regain a grip. "I'm fine. Just wipe that concern right off your face. I am not a fragile doll that belongs in a fancy shop on a high shelf somewhere." She started to dig at the earth once again, but before she could get a pace going, he moved in behind her.

He brought his hands around her waist in a slow movement guaranteed to stop time. Strong arms with bulging muscles took the care to carefully guide manly hands to cover her tiny little fingers. Removing the scoop from her hands, she heard her own breath hitch in her chest and just knew the thumping sound could also be heard. Her heart flew away with her in a mad attempt to flee only there wasn't really a place for it to run or encourage her to.

They stood there, locked in an embrace. Time slowly moved forward with the hoe at her feet and his arms tightly around her waist. He moved closer. Her back resting against his chest, it was all too comfortable and strangely familiar. She knew she seduced trouble, but didn't know how to stop it or send it away.

"I know what you're going through. I want to help you." His voice kept a monotone and

remained steady. "The sheriff told me what happened to your family." Slow to speak, his caution revealed what he knew.

Her body was rigid as if frozen in time. She stared straight ahead at the barn. The place where her brothers hid her from the enemy, the barn where they lost their young lives. The men who came to claim the riches they thought they'd find there were still there waiting in the shadows and they'd always remain. She stayed forever frightened by them even though she knew they only existed now in her imagination. In the element of nightmares that never went away.

His arms wrapped her tighter. His chin rested on her shoulder. "I want to take care of you." He moved closer with a whisper.

Too close. Closer than a man should unless he had bedding intentions and this one did. But she wasn't sure she wanted to have them, too or at least, if she did, she didn't want to think about acting on them. *Not yet.*

She suddenly felt safe. For the first time in a very long time, she felt secure. She didn't want to move from his arms, but at the same time she didn't want his pity. She moved out away from him and turned on him with fire in her eyes. "I don't want you to feel sorry for me." She set her jaw and watched as his eyes settled on the rise and fall of her chest.

“You think I feel sorry for you?” he snapped the words and then clenched his teeth with a moan and growl or maybe just something in between. “Baby, I feel something for you, but sorry and pity don’t come to mind.” He moved a step closer.

She backed the hell up.

He reached for her. A strong man with a gentle touch, he didn’t push, but he intended to have. It was written all over his face. Intentions were in his arms when he held her. Moisture indicated lust and it waited on his lips. She didn’t dare look down. There wasn’t any question what she’d find. *A man ready and waiting.* Yes, with her name already written on his lips.

At first, panic threatened but with fearlessness, she quickly reminded herself to regain control. *Swallow hard. Breathe deep.* She mentally tried to determine what to do. She didn’t know. Winging it didn’t seem like the best option, although it might have provided the only one.

She moved to the side and walked fast to the porch, snatching their tin cups on the way in. “Mr. Evans, I have work to do around here. It piles up on me when I’m out on those damn drives. Slim’s men brought my cattle in and I have a fence to mend so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll start to work. Thank you for stopping by.” She tripped over words, choked on syllables and nervously made it

obvious that he'd gotten to her.

\* \* \* \*

Her quivering small hands trailed over a skirt. That's when he noticed the change in her. It was the first time he'd ever caught her in a dress. She looked like a woman. Soft and fragile, she looked more than ready for a man's care, never mind his undivided attention.

Preston moved up one step and paused for effect before taking the next one. He knew lust was all over his face, but for love or mercy, he couldn't do a damn thing about it. He took the other step and walked over to where she stood. He all but backed her inside the house and then simply shut the door behind them. He eased it up with intendment ensuring her he had an objective and acting on it seemed all but promised.

The look on her face told a strong tale. She wanted him, but not on his terms. She would put up a fight because the fight lived within her. It dominated and controlled her fears, hopes and even what few dreams she had left.

"Go ahead." His eyes dared her. "Scream. No one will hear you." Only slightly amused, he teased and provoked her.

"Get out." Her voice sounded firm.

For a second, he almost believed that she

wanted him out. "Like hell I will." His palm settled beside her head and his body closed the distance between them.

Her voice went up an octave along with her brow, "I want you—"

"I know you do." He grinned with the knowledge that he cut off her slow words at just the right time.

Her face blushed with the realization that slow to speak changed the meaning she went after. She tried again. "Fuck you, Preston."

"Oh that...*you will do*. I promise. I'll have you branded by sunset." His gaze danced over her.

"I want you out." The words weren't forceful enough. He didn't bother to tell her.

"The hell you say." His mouth moved closer. "And hell will be where I'm headed if I don't taste you." His lips angled over hers and feathery kisses were planted. One peck first. Then another and then another. Light and needy, he searched for the sign to proceed.

She stood still. Acceptance was one thing, but participation, entirely different.

Then the nipping began and he knew he had her. He sucked in a breath and went from pecks to light bites to a full fledge battle of tongues. Deep, throaty calls were made. Manly in every way, he growled with acquirement knowing it also encouraged her and she met his kiss with a wild

passion he finally unlocked. Entirely unexpected and utterly delicious, he sucked in her life as his own and fully unleashed the woman she'd never previously been.

His body molded to hers like it had waited a lifetime to hold her and only her. One hand gripped a slender hip and the other held her hand high above her head. "Oh holy hell." He pulled back from her and looked down between them. His erection stout with ambition brought alarming recognition that he lost all control around her.

Swallowing hard, he watched as fear inched across her face. "I'm sorry. Forgive me." He'd moved too fast. An apology wasn't something he wanted to give. Showing disrespect for a woman who didn't know anything about an intimate lock didn't seem appropriate either, especially since he wanted to introduce her to a secure fit she'd never forget.

She tucked the loose strands of hair he messed up behind her ear and shivered.

He caught the tremor and moved closer. Again, he took care of the runaway strands. Tucking them gently into pins again, he stared at her for a long moment before he decided what he wanted to do. "To hell with this." Maybe he should've apologized for the urgency, but for some reason, it didn't occur to him.

Her eyes widened with acknowledgement. It

was obvious what he planned to do. She was stilled by the actions he took to start them off once his hands moved through her tangled hair, weaving with them nothing but pure desire.

“Don’t,” she warned him, but her body moved closer, defiant and determined to betray her common sense.

Quick fingers moved back over the clips and pins holding her hair up in a tidy order. He unclipped one and pulled out another until her long locks flowed down her back. Her face was encased by the locks twirling around framing it. “Damnation, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

She swallowed hard. “Preston, please...”

A smirk formed on his lips. “Baby, you don’t have to beg. I will. I promise you I will.” He licked his lower lip and moved toward her once more, slanting his hunger over hers and devouring every drop of it. Moist kisses were returned and he was left starving for more as her body moved into his melding to him with the very desire he wanted to pump and pour into her.

*She’s a virgin.* The words rang, but he ignored them only with a fair warning spoken. “I can’t stop here. I *have to* have. I need you. Want you.” His mouth moved, tight with greed as his jaw tensed with the words falling into her parted lips. His palm covered her breast. He caressed and



squeezed, petitioning for more. Clothing brought barriers. Thick material he needed to shed only separated and prevented.

“Oh, Preston.”

Her breathless words granted permission and, when she turned her head away from his lips, he went right to work. The heated moments continued, but with a vast pursuit that he hoped she didn't stop. The fascination of falling for her driving the moment and urging him on with heat and longing dividing the energy fairly between them.

His mouth planted kisses right above the lining of her dress and a growl of animalistic intentions drew her closer. His fingers stroked one nipple through the dress, covering her while his other palm settled against her ass, drawing her closer. Allowing her to feel his manhood erect with desire. Persisting forward with demand while commanding all the more, he pushed lightly once, but after the first time, the rougher play began.

Her mouth fell open wide along with her eyes. She moved into him. Once with a force so strong, he pulled his head up and groaned on impact. He didn't say anything, but knew she'd move into him again.

She did.

Holding her, drawing her as close as he could without disrobing, he pressed into her with a

grinding motion and that's where it all ended.

Her body suddenly changed. She refused to move and didn't respond. He had no other choice, but to back away. Slowly, he shifted his body. His head dropped. "I know I should feel ashamed. I know *I should*...but I'm not." He looked at her and met eyes that were ready to tear at his heart. Never mind the sharpened claws she knew how to use when necessary. He didn't want to face those unless they brought due pleasure.

She walked away from him slowly toward a small table and chairs in the center of the large cabin. "I want you to go." It sounded like a low whisper, an uncertain request. The tears formed in the corners of her eyes grouping together to warn of the pending flood.

Preston looked down at his feet. "I can't."

Her face was beet red when she turned around to face him. "I'm not asking you again. I want you to go and I never want you to come back here!" she screamed at him with an uncontrollable fury building for no apparent reason.

He walked over to the table and sat down. "I'm not moving. I didn't plan to leave immediately when I took time to ride out here and damn you, woman, I am not leaving anytime soon. Not now and maybe not even today."

"The hell you aren't!" She slammed her fists down on the table. "Get out!" She pointed back

toward the door.

"Where the fuck is this anger coming from?" He was worried. It didn't make sense. Distraught, maybe, but mad as hell? *Come on.*

"I'm not asking again," she lowered her voice. He was suddenly thankful for small blessings.

The door swung open and Preston's mouth spread into an easy smile. "Well, I'll be damned. Talk about the worst timing."

Slim rushed in with a gun drawn. He looked at both of them with wild eyes. "Shit man. I thought there was a problem with all the yelling going on!"

"Lover's quarrel," Preston informed him lightly before shooting a wink over in her direction. A playful tone was present and he didn't try to hide it. Not for a second.

"Lovers hell." She put her hands on her hips and nervously pushed her hair back.

The men looked at the clips and pins strewn about next to the door and swapped grins and smirks.

After holstering the gun, he took a deep breath only to release it with words. "So I guess it's a safe bet that she's not hell bent on marrying you?" Slim put his hands in his pockets, knowing he just gave it all away. "Then that will leave you free to have me, Carly." He teased but his eyes undressed her in their own little misbehaving way.

She damn near choked on thin air. "Marriage? Hell no."

"Hell, yes." Preston stood and went over to the pitcher and poured her a cup full of water. He turned to face off with the one who always brought with him a little bit of hell and the fury of being in the pits of it. "Slim, I promise you that I can do this without your help."

Her face quickly lost its color. "Make *him* leave please." She pointed at the man responsible for her temporary loss of self control.

Slim crossed his arms and looked around the cabin. "Nice place you got here. Done real well for yourself by the looks of things, Carly. *All things considered.*" He intentionally ignored her request and nodded back at Preston. "He's got a nice place, too, but damn if he's not on the other side of town. He lives too far to come to a rescue if you ever should need one. Not saying that you would, of course."

"I won't," she spewed angry words at both men.

Preston looked down at his depleted stores. Thank goodness he wasn't pacing around in front of them with a raging hard-on. He motioned to his buddy with just a slight tilt of his head.

"Well I was just in the..." He put on an act, but intended to follow Preston's cue.

"The hell you were. No one ever comes out this

way. You were out here to see how long it was going to take for your side-kick here to bed me and win the bet you two boys have.”

They both exchanged glares before a regretful smile turned up the corner of Slim’s lips. “No, ma’am, that bet was lost by all. Now, it’s just time to move on. Settle down. Get married. Have a few kids. You know, let some man make an honest woman out of you.”

Her eyes narrowed with a brow thickened by wrinkles, forcing the skin to give. “The hell you say! I am not a whore that can be bought, paid for and then properly bedded!” she shouted out her animosities. Maybe even her fears.

The men seemed to agree. Both men nodded before the more experienced of the two finished. “You’re right. You’ve got that something extra special. And you can’t be bought and paid for...yet.” He shot his friend a knowing look, probably a little envious that he would end up with a virgin bride to take to his bed. Understanding the prize he’d win if he was able to find Carly a tad more affable. Maybe even a bit more approachable.

She obviously caught the *yet* suggestion. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Her white-hot anger was raging with madwoman fury.

The third wheel and definitely an unwanted guest, he headed for the porch, never taking the

time to turn around and say his goodbyes. He probably knew a wave wouldn't wait there. Maybe a hard kick in the ass, but not a farewell. No one seemed real happy to see him in the first place. He was smart enough to figure it all out.

She followed him out to the porch. "I said—"

"I heard what you asked. Woman, have some damn sense. This Gold Rush brought in men of the worst kind. Cowboys who don't care to take your home if you'll move aside and those same boys don't mind to end up in your bed. They don't care whether or not you want them there. It's going to get worse, too."

Preston now stood behind her. She followed Slim outside and down the steps. He mounted his horse and, while the animal fought against the bit, he adjusted his body weight to the saddle. "All I'm saying is that you two got something. Give Preston what he wants and you may keep it. Refuse him out of stubbornness and you may find yourself at that whorehouse in town with few options left." He tilted his hat, indicating he was ready to ride.

He locked eyes with the man he called a friend and then dismissed her. "Oh and in case you're wondering, I didn't come out here to check up on you. I came out here to let you know the townspeople faced some trouble while we were away."

Preston walked down off the porch and led the other man's horse to the side. He left her seething. She couldn't stand it when any man left her out of conversations and being dismissed certainly didn't work on her piece of ground.

"What's up?" He searched the eyes of the one who was there to warn even though he loved to tease too.

"Two of the women had company while their men were away. Tommy's wife and Jesse's sister. They're in pretty bad shape. One is so out of it now that she doesn't realize her home was burned to the ground or worse that her husband isn't coming home." His face fell solemn. "They ran a number on her. She's in a bad place. Doc says at least three of them had her, maybe more."

Preston felt his fist form into tight balls of anger. "Don't know who they are?"

"No ideas yet. Some men in town are trying to ask questions and demand, if you know what I mean, answers. They're coming up empty handed, but the women in town are fearful."

"Trouble is the one out here won't be." He looked back at the cabin.

"Until we know who we're dealing with here, why don't you get her into town or take her back to your place. She's a sitting bull out here."

"Sitting bull?" He laughed as his eyes searched for her. "You got that part right."

"I'm serious. The whole town knows she owns the property the longest distance from town. It's also a well known fact that the woman on the land is the prettiest woman west of Dodge City."

"Is that right?" Preston rubbed his chin and that's when he couldn't resist asking. "What do you think?" For some reason, he wanted to know.

"I think you need to stay here with her or move her out until the men who raped those women are caught...and if you don't, there are many men around who are up for the task."

"I mean what *do you think* about her being the prettiest woman west—"

"Damn you. That's some fucking question to ask me. You know she is. And I'm here to tell you, if she *don't want you*, she can reform me." His cowboy drawl spat sincerity and then he clucked to his horse and hit it on the rump with his cowboy hat. "Carly, take care of him!" He left behind his words and laughter in a cloud of dust stirred by the animal's pounding hooves.



## CHAPTER FIVE

When Preston looked up, he didn't see her. With a hoe on the ground and the door to the cabin open, he knew where to find her. He walked over slowly and peered inside. He didn't see her so he focused on the barn. The tall, heavy doors were open where they'd previously been closed.

Slowly, he walked into the barn dimly lit only by the sunlight shining inside. He felt tall in his six foot four frame and yet small all at the same time. The massive barn appeared vacant. The lower level provided storage for hay in one corner and makeshift stalls along the opposite wall. The loft looked unused, but a ladder led to the open space. His gaze marched up each wooden peg to the top, but his body didn't follow behind. Still, that's where he found her.

Full of the underlying pain that existed in her soul, her tone held great sadness from tremendous loss. "There were five of us. I had four brothers." Her legs dangled down over the edge of the loft.

She held onto a wooden board that hit her at chest level. “My mother and father thought they were the luckiest people in the world. Imagine that. They had all they wanted. All they ever wanted right here with their family. Momma was partial to me because I was the only girl, but she loved the boys. She adored each of them for their own special qualities.”

He looked up at her, but didn’t move closer. He recognized her fragile state just by being there in the loft. He removed his hat and continued to stare up at her. His heart beat on its own new tempo and he imagined he’d get used to the feeling whenever she was around.

Her pale face showed the agony felt in revelations, but she needed to tell her story to him. She’d kept it inside for far too long and that much he knew from talking to the sheriff. Few people knew about her hell and those who did, evidently didn’t talk about it much.

“I don’t know how many people rode out here that day. How many men came to take everything we’d worked for, but there were more than I thought at first. I remember Pa and Luke were working in the fields and my other brothers were feeding the animals. I was outside drawing water. *I saw them ride up first.* I heard the beating of hooves and knew. They rode hard and fast with a purpose so vile that I just had a feeling...” Her

voice trailed off.

He wanted to go up the ladder and hold her, but he didn't budge. There wasn't a lot he could do for a woman with a history so painful that she had to let it go or else forever suffer because of it. He needed to listen, even if it meant standing in the same spot all afternoon in order to do it.

"The first man who grabbed me had rotten teeth. I still remember the smell of him. Whiskey and bad breath against my skin." She shuddered.

He followed suit and then his rage began to build. If the man touched her, he'd hunt him down and gut him like a wild animal. He would tear out his soul and cut out his heart just because of it and he would take pleasure in doing it. He tried to focus beyond his own anger and listen so maybe he could figure out a way to save her.

"I remember Mother coming out onto the porch and screaming for my father and brothers. Her blood curling agony echoed for what seemed like hours as the men bullied her with me. They tossed me from one man's shoulder to the next. They didn't hurt me. I don't think they intended to rape me at the time. They just wanted my mother to fear it." Her eyes darkened with the memories each word spoken brought back with a cruel confirmation.

"Her cries brought with it commotion. Two of the cowboys grabbed her by the hair of the head

and pulled her inside. I think, know that's not right, I know...yes, I've always known...they raped her." She stopped and then slowly continued. "Luke rode in first with my father right behind him. Mother never saw her first born shot, but he took two bullets to the head and Pa took two to the heart. Not that those two in the chest mattered. The shots fired killed him, but watching Luke fall first was the true death of him."

Preston moved an inch.

She warned him, "Don't come up here."

He nodded and stopped in his tracks.

She struggled with words. "My other brothers hid me up here. They raked a weighted amount of hay over my body until I thought it became a part of me. Then they climbed back down. What I think happened next was that one of them heard or maybe even saw the men coming for them. They were unarmed. I remembered hearing one of my brother's scream out to Mother that I rode into town for help. They wanted the outlaws to think I left. The three of them were hung right there where you stand."

Preston looked up at the beam stretching across the top of the barn. There were three obvious places, nooks really, where they could've easily been secured against a noose. He shuddered to think of the constant reminder she often faced in that barn.

“My family. Gone in a blink of an eye.” She swallowed hard.

He felt her pain and while he knew why, he didn’t acknowledge it. The recognition of what went on there was more than a man with his own written histories could bear.

The final words spoken took the longest to mumble out. “Mother’s limp body was found days later out on a trail somewhere. I never asked about the precise whereabouts. I kind of figured it just didn’t matter. She was gone and that’s all I needed to know.”

He slowly walked over to the ladder and climbed the pegs carefully. He was ready for her to snap and tell him to get down so he was prepared to back down if needed but he wanted to offer her comfort.

When he reached the top, he saw her tears. The ones he couldn’t spot from below. Her face was moist with them as they flowed with the aftermath of what death brought. Death by the cruelest of men with the hardest of hearts. Delayed reactions to the consequences left behind, stained her cheeks and all he wanted to do was take care of her. Not just right then, but forever.

He started to sit down beside her, but instead pulled her into his arms. Slowly and gently, he maneuvered her down the ladder with him. Her head tight against his chest, he held her close and

took pains to deliver her back to solid ground safely. Then he carried her, cradling her against her fears and a life full of the devastation murder brings, back to the cabin.

Walking with her in his arms, he stroked her back with a caress of a man capable of showing deep concern, a man who only wanted to care more if he was granted permission to try. He moved across the porch and into the open room before taking a turn to the right. He saw the room off to the side and gathered by the looks of things, she occupied it now.

Moving her onto the bed, he propped her head up with a few pillows. Then he moved to the smallest of dainty little feet. She watched him as he tugged her boots off and then covered her up with a blanket. He pulled a chair up to the bedside and stared down on her.

Brushing her hair away from her forehead, he whispered a promise into her brow, "I will never let you down and I will never leave you. That is, if you'll just let me stay." He kissed her where his words left his vow. "You're tired and you need to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up." He stood to leave the room.

He closed the front door to the cabin and then latched it. There wasn't really a need to lock it, but he thought she would feel more secure. Then he peered back in when he thought he heard her call

to him. "Did you say something?"

Her eyes glassed over with more tears threatening to spill. "I said, then don't walk away now just when you promise not to leave." Her words fell from dry lips and she coughed a bit before swallowing back the sorrow that continued to cling to still vocal chords. "I want you to stay with me." A lone tear worked its way over her high cheekbone and fell onto the pillow under her head.

"I want you to sleep." He slowly moved back toward her and sat down beside her. "I'll be right here when you wake up." His hand moved over her forehead. "You've been so brave and you're just tired. You need to rest and know that I'll sit right here watching over you until you wake up."

"I know you will." She slowly turned her head and looked over at him with need and lust fueling the gaze. She patted the spot next to her in the big, empty bed. "But I want you in my bed and not in the chair beside it." The lust-ridden wave he wanted to find when she finally invited him wasn't there, but profound need proved enough.

She sure as hell wouldn't have to ask him twice.

Before he moved too far away from her, she pushed back the bed covers and watched him with a new eagerness beginning. "Will you undress me?" She swallowed hard and, when he didn't respond immediately, added a "please, will you?"

It was enough for a man to lose himself in an instant and enough to drive him to the brink of insanity all at the same time.

Suddenly, he felt as nervous as a man in a whore's bed for the first time, only this woman was pure and he would act as her teacher. His cock rose with the realization. The understanding made him anxiety ridden. He would be the only man to ever touch her. He'd be damned if she invited him to her bed and then he'd move over for another. This woman would belong to him, only him. That truth pounded out an unfamiliar rhythm and he didn't quite know how to respond to it. He sat down on the bed and his hand moved to the side zipper of her skirt. He unzipped. Quicker than maybe she liked, but not entirely fast enough for him.

She flinched.

He pulled the blouse out from under the waistline and helped her out of it by rolling it over her firm, full breasts and then her neck. "Holy hell, woman." He stared down at her beauty and just lost it with words of everlasting promise. "I'm going to make an honest woman out of you or else I can't do this." He swallowed, but it sounded out like gulped fear.

His eyes locked with hers and she nodded. A smile formed across her lips, though weakly shaped, with the knowledge his words brought. It



only empowered them both.

Overwrought fingers drifted down the valley in between two swollen mounds and he dropped his head to her stomach. Her hand ran through his coal black hair and his body became wracked with a need so profoundly painful that he almost swore it off because of the ache alone.

“You’re going to be the death of me.” He knew he told her the truth. Without her, there wasn’t anything left or at least, there wasn’t a life worth living.

Her skin smelled like rain and vanilla mixed and together it formed a most wonderful fragrance of pure woman. His hand drifted down the front of the skirt, over the material and the substantial layers of fabric there. He watched his own fingers move and became hard with warm-blooded need, manly aspirations.

“Mercy hell, woman. Sweet mercy hell,” he whispered into her belly and pushed the skirt down, taking with it any undergarments underneath. The only obstacle now was the corset holding her at bay, something he’d been a little surprised to find. His hands gently moved in behind her and unlaced the pretty garment keeping her from him.

Slender arms went around his neck and when the corset fell to the wayside, he immediately felt her tense. It didn’t bother her when her lower half

was bare and naked, but embarrassment took her for a moment when her breasts were fully exposed.

He moved her arms away from his shoulders one at a time. "You're lovely." His mouth watered with visual contact. "More beautiful than I ever imagined."

She blushed and with it came back the fire and spunk. Her fragile moments all but passing them by and, in a blink of an eye, she became the aggressor. Her palms moved over his cheeks and she pulled him closer, lying back once more into the comfort of the bed beneath them. She kissed him with rising passion and fire under her tongue. She deliberately left him in shambles, and ruined him right then for any other.

"You'll never want...or need another man," he promised her a lifetime. "But you'll always stay hungry because I'll make sure you crave me from morning till night." He slid down her stomach like he was more comfortable with her body than she had the right to believe. He buried himself in her skin, his tongue leading him to a most delicious spot. The one place he never visited on any other woman. The one savory experience he always saved for the woman he planned to marry.

Hungry lips stopped short of a ravenous meal. He stood at the end of the bed and stripped off in record time. He wasn't even sure he took the time

to unbutton, he just kicked off his boots and ripped off clothing quickly and knelt before her as naked as the day he was born.

Her eyes opened wider before she stared at his swollen cock. "Holy hell." She swallowed hard. "You *put that inside of me?*" She pointed with amusement, only he had a feeling she was anything, but excited about the possibilities.

"You'd better believe it." He knew that wasn't what she wanted to hear, given her obvious inexperience, but he also knew in time she'd learn to appreciate what he could do with it. The pleasure he'd bring to her when they had it in full use promised an everlasting enjoyment for both.

He grabbed her ankles and tugged her down lower on the bed. He brought her legs over his shoulders. "I've waited for so long to do this."

Her eyes closed at first and then flew wide open as her hips rose instinctively. "I don't think so. We're not going to do something that is considered..."

His mouth covered her center completely with a darting tongue moving in and out of her core with a true purpose...to tame her for another ride. One that delivered them both to the edge of bliss and then carried them over together, but first, *this was necessary* for both of them. He'd hungered for it since his first sexual experience, but never found a woman he wanted to share everything with.

Now he had her. Now, he knew love and lust and true carnal want.

Dire need surged through his skin and heated his tongue with every delicious swipe. "Oh baby. My sweet, sweet woman." He spoke the words into her skin and he sank his tongue into her sweet, sweet flavor.

\* \* \* \*

Her head swam. Every heated breath or word spoken drifted upward, working its way into her heart before consuming her soul. Her white knuckles tore at the bed sheets, ripping with the clawing motion made it impossible for her to ignore what his skillful abilities proved. She angled herself over him, couldn't resist watching him devour her with a greedy need so spectacular that it truly made her hungry, too. She yearned for something yet she didn't know what.

Her sexual expertise, at best, blemished by the lack of knowledge and he was a man who needed, wanted a sexual creature in his bed. He was starving for her. It was apparent in the way he touched her and never mind the way his tongue searched while his mouth sipped out every inch of her pussy. Her hands gripped tighter and she writhed and flinched under him.

"Take your release, baby, just let go."

She heard the words, but wasn't sure at all what they meant. It had been years since she'd been around women and even then, no one ever described their experiences with men. This was something Preston most likely knew. Some women feared if she knew too much about sex, she'd take away the very men they held in their arms. She probably could have. Thank heavens she didn't.

Her hips rose and fell because he helped her. His fingers moved across her hips and soon he held her ass with both palms, which allowed him to bury his face into her with conviction. His tongue raked through her, over her, into her with a new deliverance each and every time he stroked. "Oh sweet mercy. You have to let me taste all of you." He towered over her with wanton eyes full of acceptance.

She threw her head back on the pillow. "I'm not sure what you mean!" She credited her sexual frustration with the words he was glad to hear. If his wicked grin provided proof.

He smiled. "Talk to me, baby. Tell me what you need to know. I'll explain everything."

He kissed her again in the one place hot heat burned with such an exquisite fire that she swore openly. "Hell and damnation." She moaned and pressed her body closer to his lips. His thumb massaged her clit and he watched as true pleasure

evoked a heat wave without much pressure.

“That feels good doesn’t it?”

He knew it did if her moans were any indication, but what her mouth didn’t allow her to voice, her body defined without a problem. “Hell yes!” She looked at him with more need than a woman should be forced to experience without pure satisfaction closely following it.

“You want me to keep you sane?” He teased her with another stroke over her clit. “Or do you want something more...something you can’t quite explain?”

“I need something more. Yes! I need...want you.” Her tone reached desperation now. *Needy*. She hurt *for it*. For him.

\* \* \* \*

He was in heaven.

She was going through hell. Well, at least he could think so.

He grinned because he thought she at least knew there was a climax in there somewhere, but his smile turned wicked because of the thoughts behind it. “You know you can come with my tongue just as easily as my dick?”

She didn’t seem remotely interested in what he had to say. Maybe she really didn’t know what it meant to have a release so powerful that it defined

the reason for sex altogether.

Her eyes locked with his. He moved over her once again. A breath away, he was right outside her body with a tongue willing to explore, but he wanted her to know. Wanted her to enjoy the full delivery and know what to expect next. Literally know what it meant to ride out the experience.

“Baby, watch me.” His eyes pleaded with her. He kissed back up her belly and, before she could catch a breath falling quickly out of tempo, he devoured first one breast and then the other before retreating once more to the exposed sex of his hot-blooded woman.

Eyes followed him and she held his stare. His hand worked over her mound again and again, his thumb caressed her clit. He moved his mouth over her and drank the juice of pureness, the sweet taste of an unspent woman.

Swallowing hard, he watched her writhe under his touch. “You are going to feel pleasure. Nothing but pleasure sweep over you. It’s going to be like this, only better. You have to let it take you. That’s what I want you to do.”

She was wet with desire inside and out. Her body felt drenched with sweat and her intimate space was a pool of pleasure waiting to happen. His tongue swiped once. His thumb moved clockwise. His teeth bit down, nibbling at a clit swollen to perfection and that’s really about all it

took.

Her screams were vile. Unlawful, at best. "Preston! Damn you! Damn you! Don't stop! Oh mercy hell! Mercy help... Please help me... No, no, don't help me...don't you....stop!"

Her hips rotated in a fast beat higher and higher into an accepting mouth turned up at the corners. Free flowing juices poured between his lips and he sucked, savored, enjoyed until her little body was relieved of the pressure he helped her build.

He always knew he would love delivering oral pleasure. It was a reward he savored for the time being and he was hard with need now that he'd given it. He indulged in the purity of it as he carried her to a first orgasm. Enough satisfaction existed in that fact alone for a man to come all on his own, but he needed her now and he would have her.

Her eyes flooded with emotion. "Damn if I don't love you now." She said it in a teasing way, but he already believed in his heart that she did.

"If you don't, then you will." He held himself at bay, just outside her entrance as he threatened to cross over and break the seal she'd forever kept in place. Instead, he knew she needed to find some measure of arousal again and that was his specialty. His hand went to work on her breasts, completely consumed with one mission possible



and one outcome probable. He wanted to make her beg for it. Ache with a need so profoundly warped that she'd promise marriage if he'd just fuck her. He wanted her to request the sex. Demand it.

He moved his cock on the outside of her vagina again and again. So often that he was ready to explode just watching her body reach for him. His mouth played havoc on her nipples nibbling at the sides before tasting the little nubs his teeth easily prepared for his divine feasting pleasure.

"You want me, baby?" He tried to talk dirty to her, but it wasn't like she understood true want yet. Sure, after she had him, she would know it and her appetite for sex would only grow. After he took the one thing any woman had to covet as a prize, guard as a treasure, she'd know want. She'd lust for it in ways he probably couldn't imagine. After all, she'd been without sex and she was a fully embodied woman. Her oral pleasure and reaction to it told quite a tale.

Moans left her lips. Groans slipped out, beckoning him for more than his touch could quench. A hungry growl filled the room.

"Tell me, baby. Tell me all about it." He stroked himself against her thigh, right below where he planned to travel. Her body opened up for the exploration. She wanted the journey to begin. Needed him to take her there.

Her mouth fell open, but words would not form, could not because she wouldn't allow them the opportunity. She raised her hips to meet him. "You're the one that has experience! Now, do it! Whatever you're selling, I'm buying, damn you, so wipe that pure wicked grin off your face and help me out here!" she screamed with the need, wrapping her tightly against him.

A hard cock positioned for entry grazed a little forward. Just the tip entered *and barely*. She bit down hard on her lower lip and brought his lips closer to hers. One look told him before she moved that she was going to guide the first introduction of body against body.

The seal was going to break when she wanted it broken and not one second sooner.

He nodded. "You want it. Take it when you can handle it." He hoped like hell he wasn't going to have to wait for it, but taunted her all the more.

"I can manage. I promise," she teased back, but didn't move right then.

Her eyes darkened and that alone damn near undid him. A bead of sweat dropped from his forehead. His palms were on either side of her, mashing against the bed, embedded with his palm imprint deep into the mattress. Damnation, he would collapse onto her if she didn't move her blasted hips.

Preston watched in wonder as she had more

than a few seconds of raw, unadulterated fun. Her hand wrapped around his neck with a firm grip. A light kiss here or there. A gentle clutch or firmer tug, she controlled every movement. She moved her mouth closer to his and then looked deep, so fucking far down, into his eyes.

He swore out loud. "Damn you for stealing your way into my heart...into my fucking arms."

Her smile told him all he needed to know. She was ready to wrap around him with a tighter grip than any man deserved to feel. He'd never been with a virgin before, but friends spoke fondly about the experience. Real men with honorable wives often smiled even wider, allowing their grins to tell the age-old tale of private moments. Those unspoken joys because they had the privilege of knowledge and became the only one permitted to savor it.

Her hips rose just slightly, still holding him at bay. The tip entered and the shaft soon followed. *All of it.* Her body welcomed and handled him without a problem, but the moans and groans that escaped her lungs told a different story.

"Move please!" she cried out with the first stroke, the one that assured her he was in fact, in.

Not that she needed validation because her cries confirmed for her. *For him.* As soon as the whimper left her lips, he was afraid to move. Unwilling to hurt her, his gaze dropped down to

her heavenly assets and he focused on the best breasts he'd ever seen exposed. "Damn you. Mercy hell, woman, you're tight. So fucking tight!" His body was wet from perspiration, but still he fought against the inner strength building, the manhood working against him, tugging him forward. He wanted her comfortable. He wanted her so fucking wet and he damn well wanted her to move and...fast!

Their bodies were slow to start and, by the time he moved his hips, she naturally provided moist enthusiasm, ready with the need his hard erection inspired. He stroked her once and thought he'd died and gone to heaven, but by the time he'd moved into her a few more times, he knew she all but led him into the pits of hell. Too sinful to be heavenly, she was so fucking sexy that he knew he'd die if he didn't have her in his bed often. Hell, even frequent trips to the bedroom wouldn't suffice. He wanted a forever with her and he damn sure wanted it now that he plunged into the depths of a passionate woman no other man would ever know.

"Damn you! I'm not a china doll!" She rose up to meet him.

His hungry growl was enough to scare off the more experienced of women. But not *his woman*. She was in the throes of carnal heat and the hotter she was to handle, the more satisfaction they'd

reap.

\* \* \* \*

His eyes were starving to hold her in a stare full of longing, but the need driving them shut him off away from her more often than not. "Pleasure. Fucking great pleasure." His cock slid in and out and in and out with a defined tempo that had her reeling from the thought of the act itself.

"I'm having sex." She grinned as she watched him move over her.

"Damn. Not now!" He bent down to kiss her.

She pulled away, looking over his shoulder at the finest tuned ass she'd ever seen. She wanted to watch him move into her. Everything about him turned her on and his body did things to a woman that would make any gal fall head over heels in love. Even her and she barely believed in the concept. Until now. His mouth moved to her ear and she shuddered against his words.

"Like this don't you, baby?" He smirked. He leaned up long enough for her to get the idea of what he meant. He thrust into her once. Twice. Three times more. Then, back to her ear his mouth went with more words from the wise. "Want to know how I'll love you best?" He growled the words into her skin.

She laughed out when she heard it. "That's just

damn right wicked.”

“And it turns you the hell on.” He moved his palms to the sides of her hips and looked down on himself as he continued to punish her with a cock willing to exercise the right to remain the first and only one she’d ever have or want. He didn’t deserve the pleasure. He couldn’t contemplate the pain that she could bring to him if he ever let her get away. “Turn over.”

Her eyes bugged. “What?”

“You heard me. Turn the fuck over.”

Dominance ruled when he had his women in bed. There was little doubt she’d heard all about him from one of the shopkeeper’s daughters. If she planned to keep up, she probably needed to listen.

“No way in hell.” She closed her eyes, set her jaw and refused to budge. It didn’t work.

He withdrew and flipped her over.

She scratched her way up the bed, crawling to get away from him. “Hell no. You are not putting that...that thing...your dick...in my ass!”

“I know that much, baby. I’m not going to *yet*.” He smiled behind the words.

“But I am going to fuck you from behind and you’re going to love me all the more.” He forgot about the pain factor. Dismissed the idea that she might not stretch with the new change in position, but he still wanted to try. It promised another first

moment for him. Another fun exploration of full pleasure promises.

His dick slid past one spot and hit the other with long thrusts and hard strokes. He grabbed her firm little ass and rubbed it so hard it almost burned his palms. "Oh fuck yeah." He plunged deeper.

She bucked under him and he gripped her hips tighter with hands refusing to let her move away. "Hold still, baby."

He slid out and in. Again, in and out movements were setting a pace he guided and controlled. Slow and hot, dripping with the kind of sexy heat he'd never had with anyone. Not an experienced whore and certainly not any other woman he'd considered a fuck buddy because there were few who ever went to his bed that didn't receive payment for being there. "Don't move, Carly." He drove harder. Deeper. "That's it, baby. That's my girl."

"Can't stop. I'm..."

She was there. Poor thing probably didn't know what she was, but he had a word or two for it. All of the desire she felt before with his tongue stroking her, now hit a whole new dimension and he felt it in the hot heat spilling from her pussy.

"Oh God. Please! Harder!" She threw her hips up and he fought just to keep himself buried.

She had no idea what she was asking for and he

would've moved heaven and earth to slam into her, but if he did, he'd rip her apart and pay for it later. "Damn you. Do not move."

He tried to pin her against him before he pounded into her. She continued to jerk in his arms and he was losing all control.

\* \* \* \*

His pace picked up and the familiar sounds she remembered hearing in the saloons and in some of the hotels she'd stayed in after cattle drives rang throughout her cabin.

The thump, thump, thump of the headboard pounded harder and faster and soon they both screamed out in delightful pleasure. It took them, and their voices to a higher pitch and a different octave altogether before releasing them into a slow grinding motion that stopped time and their moves all at once.

"Mercy hell, woman." His spent cock diminished in size when he withdrew. She

noticed, even found herself stretching her neck to see him as he positioned his dick away from her. His fingers still drifted all over her. "I can't...won't... get enough."

"Sleep. I need sleep." She curled up in his arms. "Promise me you'll stay here until I wake up?"

Preston kissed her on the forehead. "I'm not



going anywhere except maybe out to the barn to put my horse there for the night." He chuckled. "And that's only if he's as lucky as I've been."

She rolled over on her side and slid her hips back against him. "I don't know what to say. That was...incredible." She let out a sigh and felt his body grow stiff. She laid there for a few minutes before she turned to face him. She was comforted by what she saw there, the way he looked at her told a lot of loving tales. She danced around for information anyway. "You totally destroyed me. You know that don't you? You did it on purpose."

"Damn straight I did." He laughed and then kissed her on the forehead before softly brushing the hair away from her cheek. "Baby, the only thing I've done is made an honest woman out of you."

Her gaze met his again. "You mean it?"

"Damn right I do and just so I'm clear and you understand every little meaning behind the scratchy details, *you are mine*. Anything you want, you can have, but the one thing you'll never have again is another man in your bed." He closed his eyes as if he'd spoken with enough finality for her to take it as a warning or as a promise.

"So I don't get a say in this?" she teased.

"Your body already gave you a say and it's been decided. Now, just make up your mind to like the idea." He moved over her again and

looked down on her. "Do I need to remind you of why you'll love me for a lifetime?"

"Love?"

"Yeah love. L-o-v-e. Get used to it. *Fast.*" His gaze fell to her chest and he kissed her nipple before moaning out with satisfaction.

"You don't love me, Preston."

"The fucking hell I don't. I've loved you for a long time out on those lonesome cattle drives and now, you can love me right back." He bit down hard on his lower lip. "Don't ruin a good thing by saying something stupid, something like maybe you don't love me or want to love me."

Her lips turned up at the corners. "If you really love me, then I know when you decided to fall for me."

"You think so do you?" He winked and then closed his eyes. "I seriously doubt it." His fingertips caressed her bare shoulder.

"No. I do. It was when Carmack had his hands over me. After that first simple kiss, you were driven to a crazy madness I'd never seen in a man's eyes before. That's when you knew."

"Damn woman, your smile could stop the maddening rush for gold in the west." He pinched one nipple and licked the other. "And when did you decide you loved me?" He didn't look at her when he asked the question.

"I decided when you saved me in front of the

sheriff that no man would ever put his life on the line for a woman unless he was a man worth having." She rolled over him and straddled his middle. "Of course, I have to tell you, I loved you more after I saw...felt what you could do with that tongue of yours."

"You did, did ya?" He smirked. "Need it again already, huh?"

"Yeah. I did and yes, I do." She moved into place and soon she rode on top, guiding them into a new realm of possibilities. She discovered new freedoms as a woman with sexual needs and greedy cravings. She was as provocative as any man found in the north or south. She was horny and she didn't care if she stayed that way for a lifetime as long as he stayed around to satisfy her in every way.

"Oh, baby. You're going to make me the happiest man on this earth." He pulled her to him as she collapsed on his chest after he thrust into her a few times. "Good Lord, woman. I've never known anything like this."

Only a few strokes were needed after her rapid approach and sudden stimulation gained her his praise and admiration. "Damn if you aren't good on top, too." He laughed as he stroked her head. "Now, get some sleep, baby. I'll need you ready to ride tomorrow."

"I just bet you will." A gentle smile formed

across her lips and the cowgirl within settled into a deep slumber.

## CHAPTER SIX

“Wake up, little woman! It’s time to rise and shine! We’ve come back to play, honey. It’s long overdue.” The pounding fists into the door alarmed them both. “Miss Corbaine! Miss Corbaine!” The man’s voice on the other side of the door was familiar. Her eyes were wild with fear. Suddenly, death filled the air and loomed close.

Preston was half dressed by the time a light peck on the window startled her further. The tap, tap sound made her jerk into defense mode.

“Don’t open that door!” she called to him right before he unlatched it.

His eyes locked on hers as he watched the lumber give some with another round of fists. There must’ve been several men on the other side, pounding out a rising anger.

“We know you’re in there, Miss Corbaine! Who do you have in there with you, sugar? If you got somebody in there with you, better tell him he’s a

dead man if he took what I wanted to taste first.”

She swallowed hard. *Sugar*. It was the very word that Carmack used to describe her. One other man had called her sugar and he was the one human that she always knew would come back for her. The one who couldn't tear his eyes away from her mother and the very man she remembered leading her mother inside the day her family died. Her stomach knotted into a pain like no other.

Carly was dressed in record time. She marched into the kitchen and reached under the wooden table. She pulled out a loaded gun and then started to simultaneously grab and tug guns from all around the cabin. Tossing them on anything she could find. “Don't open that door!” she called to him again.

Preston watched her with bewilderment. “I'm not afraid to take them.”

“You open that door and you'll find a bloodbath waiting for both of us. Preston, I'm so sorry. I never meant to get you involved with any of this.” Her eyes flooded with the guilt that would eat at her for a lifetime if he didn't survive this fight. Losing this battle wasn't an option.

The pounding fists continued. “We know you're in there, Miss Corbaine, and we know you have company. Did you let somebody else get the first stab at that guarded little pussy?”

Preston grabbed several of the guns as she pulled them out of secure hiding places. One went to the waistband of his pants. Another two in his boots.

“Careful! They’re all loaded,” she warned.

“You think I don’t know that? Hell, woman, I know you better than you know yourself. If you’re going to have guns all around this place, I know they’re damn sure ready to fire.”

He cleared his throat and moved his back up against the door before motioning her down behind a chopping block. “This is Preston Evans! You men need to mount up and ride on out of here.”

“Well, well, well. Mr. Evans,” there was a hint of amusement in the voice and it was also somewhat recognizable, “fancy finding you out here. Now you *of all people* should know that’s just not going to happen. Now, if you want to hand over the woman, then we’re ready to cut a deal. You can leave here like you never saw us and we’ll let you ride, but we came here for her and we intend *to have her*.” Laughter drifted in and consumed the house.

Another voice added more, “Yeah, we’re going to have every inch of her.”

She watched him with pleading eyes. She wanted to do the right thing and she would if he would allow it, but that wasn’t an option. “I want

you to get out of here and save yourself." She told him what he expected to hear again and again.

"The *fuck* I will. I'm not leaving you. I already told you. I love you. I plan to be with you until we're too old to hide guns anywhere because we'll forget where we stashed them." He flashed a worried smile. "Now stay down. *Please.*" He winked in a lame effort to try to ease her worries. "And try to listen to me. Follow my lead."

"I'm a better shot than you." She walked over to the window and broke it out with the butt of her gun.

"That was the little lady's idea, gents. Now, as you can see, she's not ready to roll over and play dead for you much less spread out for ya. In fact, I'd say you waited just about as long as it takes for pure raw ass hatred to kick in. She's ready to fight for her land and her right to protect it and I swear to you, I'm right here with her."

"Evans! This ain't your fight!" a man screamed out a warning, heavy laden with threats if by tone alone. "You're making a mistake and it's going to cost you everything you own. That's a promise. Now back the hell out of this. Last warning. She ain't worth it."

"The hell she's not. This woman is my wife!" His tone said that, in every sense of the word, he believed it.

The outside world seemed to fall completely



quiet. Stilled by the announcement.

His words of endearment were far more than she ever expected. She watched him from the corner of her eye. The strength of a man who stood ready to fight for honor, defend her home and make her secure was better than anything she ever imagined...except maybe for the sex he introduced hours earlier.

"Wife? Hell *that woman* is no man's wife. Who are you trying to fool, Evans?"

His jaw set. He hated for her to see him like this, but it was now or never. She'd seen him square off with inner demons before, but never in such a way that it drew beads of sweat against fiery hot skin. His face was red hot with anger and he could feel it from the inside out and outside in.

"I'm not telling you boys again. Get the hell off her land!" he yelled.

"*Her* land?" One of the men laughed and soon the others joined in. "I thought you were the happy newlyweds. Seems she's woman enough to wear the pants right off ya!"

She started to say something, but Preston brought his finger to his lips. "Count the men by the laughter." When the voices subsided, he drew them in again. "Yeah, that's right. It's *her* land. It became that way when you boys killed off all of her family. Call me what you want, but I'm a *kept cowboy*."

She shot him a daring look.

He held up his hand to stall words. The kind that started battles he wasn't ready to begin.

The laughter almost shook the porch. Two men were on the stoop. One to the side of her window. The other probably somewhere close to his. By the sounds of various voices in the mix, they were facing another four or five on the ground.

For several minutes they went back and forth. Silence, threats and then more of the same. Vocal battles of promising wounds to deliver termination for some, stories to tell for others.

Her blood boiled. She didn't wait for a cue, but instead reached her hand out quickly, pulled the trigger and retrieved. Preston did the same.

Growls of agony filled the room from outside. "Fuck! Damn you! I'll fuck the bitch's cunt dry for that, you son-of-a-bitch!" An angry man swore and cursed with his obscene remarks flying over his shoulder as he limped off the porch.

She shot him in the ass twice and watched him fall. "Not with your body, you won't!"

Preston shot her a look. "You just have to be a smartass, don't you, baby?" He beamed with pride.

"Boys!" Preston's promises continued to fly. "I'll pick you off one by one tonight if that's how it needs to go down."

Carly shot from the angle where she stood. She

cocked the gun and fired again, watching without remorse as a man grabbed his chest and fell to his knees. "You will, pay hell."

A loud voice flew rage back at them. "Damn you, Preston! You won't win here! I'll fucking cut your balls off and hand them over to your lovely wife for that one. You aren't going to pick off my best men one at a time because the only thing you're going to do today is die now that you won't settle on a deal! You're a dumb bastard that thinks with his cock rather than a sensible brain!" The threats from the vocal one continued. "Ask your tight ass woman how her brothers hung from the barn. Ask her how it felt to watch them swing!"

He looked over at Carly.

The words ripped at her skin and she quickly dabbed at tears already flowing freely.

"Don't let them do this to you. Don't. This is what they want. They need you shaken. Don't listen. Focus on me," he reassured her as much as possible. Pressing forward with a plan of his own, determination pushed him to bold moves and one she would've greatly opposed had she only known. He opened the door, fired four shots and stepped back inside securing the door behind him.

"You crazy dumbass! You'll get yourself killed!" She spat the words in his direction.

"I have more to live for than dropping dead."

He looked her body over and, without so much as a care, he rubbed the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip. "Damn, baby, you're smoking hot with a gun in your hand." He laughed before he moved to the bedroom and a back window. He quickly broke out one of the glass panes there.

A surprise kick to the front door caught them off guard and, before either of them knew what happened, a gun was to her head and they were calling him out. "Preston, come out of there with your hands high or else your lady friend is a dead little bitch."

Fear washed over him and he didn't have time to think. He didn't want to leave the house. He knew that much, but his options ran short of good ones. If he tried to leave and gain the upper hand, they'd all hold up there and take their turns running their hands and lips all over her.

"I'm not going to tell you again! Put your hands up and get out here now." The same voice calling the shots barked an order. He must have been under a false misconception that he was in command.

"Don't do it, Preston! Run!" She cried out. "Please, save yourself!"

He heard the slap crash hard against her face. The hard hit of an arrogant man who thought no more of a woman than the horse he rode in on sent a sudden chill into the air. His nerve endings were

on alert, standing at attention. Ready to kill without remorse, but without the time to do it slowly, which he would have preferred.

He looked around the room for a few more hiding places. He knew she had them and he found them quickly. Under the bed, in the dresser, in the nightstand, the woman packed guns everywhere he turned. He smiled to himself with the thought. In more ways one, the woman was the whole *package*. *His woman. His tight little woman.*

He hated to put her in danger, but needed to know how many men were still on their feet. They'd shot a couple of them, but the wounded or dead couldn't be determined. The men outside weren't giving away their body count. Not that they had an accurate one to begin with. "Carly, how many, baby?" he spat the words fast.

She supplied an answer with a rapid tongue. "Three!" Another slap came down on her.

He felt confident he could take them if he barged in fast. Two pistols in hand and a woman who thought faster on her feet than on her back, if that was even remotely possible, put odds in their favor.

With few options and, as much as he hated to do it, he climbed out of the bedroom window and tiptoed around to the side of the house where he met the wrong end of the gun. He didn't wait to

threaten or to receive the threat. He fired both of the guns in his hands. *Pop! Pop! Pop!* And then rolled to the ground.

One man ran to the porch to check on his friend and, while Preston could've dropped him then and there, it left Carly vulnerable and indeed, he should've thought of it when he left her inside at the hands of a monster.

"Help!" Her screams rang through the area. "Preston, please! No! Help!"

He rushed through the back bedroom window and into the main area of the cabin where one dumbass motherfucker prepared to do the unthinkable. He put his gun to the man's ass cheeks. "Move!" Preston kicked the door shut with his foot.

She squirmed away from him, unharmed, but certainly alarmed and quickly latched the door to secure it against further intruders just for the moment. She grabbed a gun and immediately took pleasure in shooting off any ability he would ever have to rape another again. "He's the one!" she screamed through her tears. "He raped my mother and Jesse's sister just the other day! He told me!" Her hands trembled and she dropped the gun after she fired it.

She squinted back the tears as the fallen and wounded man held onto what was left of his life. "You fucking bitch. You look like that mother of

yours.” He sneered through teeth and blood soaked lips. “I bet you taste as good as she did.” He turned his focus back to the one man who stopped his fun. His words were slow to fall and barely above a whisper. “Does she taste just like vanilla sugar?”

\* \* \* \*

He crooked his head and Carly could see the man’s death just looming inches from her. She started to step in, but decided there was no way she could stop what had already been put in motion. Preston wasn’t a killer, but he would kill. She wasn’t a gunslinger, but she’d fired the first shot, the one that dropped him to his knees in the first place. The others lay dead or dying just outside and their fates were met because of her guns firing the fatal shots.

Circumstances changed people. She was living proof. In an instant, everyone could kill when they wanted to live. The battle of right and wrong could be won or lost just by one chosen word over the other.

She stood behind him. The man who saved her once more, protected her from finishing the job she started. “Don’t do this. It’s more of a problem for him to walk around without his abilities than to kill him in cold blood. We’ve got to stop the

killing before we live with it on a daily basis. If we decide to live by the gun, then we'll die by it." She spoke the age-old adage her mother and father lived by.

The man in the floor groveled for his death. "Don't listen to her. Kill me or I'll come back for her and I'll do it with your name on my lips. I'll put my mouth and hands all over that sweet little pussy just like I did her momma..."

There were some things one man just never said to another one, at least not if they wanted to live. Fact was, the man that lay dying on her cabin floor, didn't want to live without the one tool he used to abuse women. His purpose for living slipped away when he lost the one thing he felt like made life tolerable.

Preston stepped closer, pulled the trigger and dropped him. Sometimes it was just a relief to put a man out of his misery, especially one just hell bent on sharing some of it.

Two survivors fled on horseback that day. Two men who would forever have a little vengeance held in reserve. Carly and Preston weren't dumb. They were going to live with the knowledge that they needed to look over their shoulders. They had to take precautions and find a way to prepare. With everything they'd been through, they were strong enough to thrive in the face of adversity.

Carly knew that once again, she'd find



challenges in the unwanted faces of uninvited visitors, or just the ghosts from both. And her guns would be ready. Aiming to fire and firing to kill when those who resurfaced came to call.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It took several days for them to clean up her place so they decided to stay at his. The whole town was buzzing with the news. Carly Corbaine and Preston Evans were getting married. She was in town, walking past the saloon, when the first of her troubles began.

A little rose-haired gal by the name, befitting enough, of Rose approached her. "You're going to marry my Preston?" she challenged her as she stood in front of her. The woman was quite pretty. Her cheeks and lips were painted pink and her hair was perfect. Her nails were clean and clipped to perfection and she smelled like honeydew.

"I guess you might say I already did." She looked the woman up and down and then moved passed her.

"You think you got what it takes to keep him at home then?" She smirked with knowledge forming across her lips and two more gals came out of the saloon to stand behind her.

Carly watched them carefully as she let them sum her up. She knew that's what they were doing. Trying to figure out what kind of woman took the best piece of ass off the market. She knew that was her husband's reputation. She heard the rumors and she damn sure knew from experience. He'd shown her again and again exactly what he could do to please. And he'd yet to prove anything to the contrary.

Rose stood with her hand on her hip and one of the others chimed in. "If she don't, she'll know where to find him." They all laughed at the woman's quick wit.

The whore added politely, "Since we always try to look after our own, if your husband ever goes missing on you, then check upstairs. We're the three he sees most and we're the first three doors on the left." She smirked before turning to go back inside. She allowed the other women to go in first.

Insecurity set in and Carly looked down at her body. Sure, she had great boobs. If she wanted to bet, she'd just bet hers were fuller and more appealing to a man's eyes than the three who challenged her on the street. She looked down the dirt road and spotted the one she wanted to defend. Not that she needed to do it, but she wanted to.

He had a worried expression on his face. Maybe he saw the women talking to her. She turned her

back and started to walk the other way. Then stopped dead in her tracks. No, she wasn't a coward and running from big-mouthed whores wasn't going to become a practice. If they did it once, they'd do it again. Women were like that.

She glanced back at him again. This time, he stood in the middle of the street, taking the time to talk to someone she didn't recognize. Seems she had time to go inside and set the record straight with one or two women who needed it.

She slid inside the swinging doors of the saloon and walked right over to the piano. One of the whores, the one that kept her mouth shut, was draped over the top of the piano. The one that spouted off banged out some ratty-ass tune and Rose was already dragging one poor drunk up the stairs.

Rage and anger washed over her as if a tide came in and claimed her soul. She couldn't stop it or fight it, but she decided then and there that she damn sure wasn't going to put up with town whores who felt like they could stop her on the street with a warning. That was a mistake. Now she had time to make one of her own.

She slammed the top cover down on the hands of the woman playing the keyboard and glared up the stairs at Rose as the gal screeched in pain. "Woman, get your ass down here, too! I know you'll want to hear what I have to say."

Before her words tumbled out, she felt his presence, but she didn't give a damn. They started this foolishness and she would say her peace if it killed them all. His boots moved him closer, but words alone stopped him in his tracks.

"Preston, don't you say a damn word. Not *one fucking word*." She held up her hand.

Rose leaned over the banister. "Now, that's a pretty sight to behold. A woman who can get you to shut up. You know, he's quite the talker." The woman he spent the most time with swayed down the steps, her hips gliding against the banister. "But you do know that already, don't you?" She smirked and held her head only higher.

The gal who barely escaped having her hands become a permanent part of the piano stood and eyed Preston with pure lust in her eyes. "You get better looking every time I see you, darlin'."

He didn't look at her.

Smart man. Wiser than most, if Carly had to guess. She smiled sweetly at the women and then looked back at him. She ran her fingertips over the butt of her gun and then shot her husband a wink. The one that took her virginity, the one man she decided she wanted to fully trust. Now, the whores in front of her threatened all of it. She wasn't going to hear of it and damn sure wasn't going to let them come in between the relationship and life she planned to build with Preston.

“Go ahead tell him. Oh, that’s right. You don’t want to because you never know when he might be a paying customer again. Well then, I will.” She looked back at him and began. “These...*ladies* approached me on the street.” She had a problem calling the whores ladies, but for whatever reason decided it was as polite as she would ever be to them.

He walked up to the bar and ordered a whiskey. “Did they now?” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, then I guess you’d best say your mind so you can get it off that weighted chest of yours.” He couldn’t resist undressing her right in front of the other women looking on.

Rose sneered at him. She was the one in his bed most and Carly knew it. Hell, Rose was in most of the town’s bed and half the time, the wives were paying her to leave their men alone. She wanted Rose to know she’d never act like one of *those* wives. Besides, she had a feeling that Preston, if he wanted Rose, would never be denied so the best she could do was warn her once and move the hell on.

“Since I don’t feel good about calling you ladies, I’ll just call you whores. You all earned your titles.” She stomped over to the bar and slapped her hand down on the wood for effect before swinging her hip out and standing with more confidence.

"Now, you whores listen up and listen good." She glared at her husband with raw hunger and then flashed the women a grin loaded with caution. "I've never been one to beat around the bush. Rose, I've known you for some time, or at least, about you. You've known who I am and I suppose at times, my husband was in your bed when I already wanted him in mine. He didn't know that fact or else he would've been."

Preston stood and nodded at the bartender. "She gets out of hand some, but let her have her say and we'll be on our way." He seemed more amused than put out.

The bartender nodded his head in agreement.

The wiser woman cocked her head and twirled a lone stray hair. "If that's so, dear, then I imagine you would've pulled him out onto the open range and fucked him silly but that didn't happen, did it?" She was razor sharp with comebacks and come-ons. There wasn't any doubt about it.

The cowboy in question shot her a blank stare. It was a gape full of resentment. A loathing that began with self-hatred for ever sharing a whore's bed. Carly knew all about that because her oldest brother once told of his trips to the whorehouses and how the only thing their warm bodies did was satisfy a basic need. That was pretty much it.

She pointed at each of them with a cautionary finger. "I'm not going to walk down these streets

and have your comments smack me around just irritating the hell out of me. I'm not going to wonder when my husband comes in here if he is coming in for a drink or if he's here for a slow screw. It's not going to happen."

The women laughed in unison. "Then, darling, you best not come into town because I know your man and believe me, if the three of us didn't keep him satisfied, the so-called town virgin won't begin to know how or where to begin."

She felt the blazing glory of revenge boiling in her blood. "You bitches don't know what you're up against. Consider yourself warned because if I ever so much as have reason to question his whereabouts, and if I come looking, then I promise you I'll aim to shoot and shoot to kill." She nodded her head and then walked out of the saloon. He was right behind her.

"Feel better?" he taunted "That was uncalled for."

"No..." She took a deep breath and then decided what was really bothering her. "Ah hell. I can at least go knock the shit out of Rose for stopping me on the streets in the first place." She pushed by him and he quickly grabbed her.

"No. You've said more than enough. I don't know why you had to open that pretty little mouth of yours, but you did and enough was said."



“Like hell.” She moved her wrist back and forth until his grip was pretty much non-existent. “Let me go!” she raised her voice.

It pissed him off.

Just when she got away, he reached out, caught her waist and picked her up with one arm. He held her tight on his shoulder with one hand embarrassingly placed in between her legs and the other on her ass. He strode down the street with her in arms, speaking to each person he passed. He just took his time and even carried on a lengthy conversation with one of Slim’s men before continuing toward their wagon.

“You set me down *now*. Damn you, Preston. I’ll beat your ass if you don’t put me down.” She pounded first one fist into his back and then another. “I mean it. You will not carry me through town like this. You’re making me look bad!”

Her face was hot. She could feel it as she spoke to Mr. and Mrs. Barkley on the way to the other side of town. They were one of the most influential couples in town and she was simply appalled that they had to view her ass before they turned around to speak to her. “Damn you. Put me down. You’re making me look pathetic.” His actions drove her to tears.

Preston smirked. “No. Mrs. Evans, when you waltzed your pretty little ass into the saloon, you were able to look that way all on your own.” After

he passed another small crowd of snickering men, he picked up a strong pace until he reached his wagon. There he didn't help her into the front, but instead tossed her in the back. Right along with a few burlap sacks.

"Ouch! Damn you!" She gritted her teeth while he pretended not to notice.

He climbed in behind his team of horses and took the time to knead the reins through his hands.

Slim rode up to the wagon with a smirk on his face. "Well, I heard you two got hitched. I wondered just how long before I'd see you carrying her over your shoulder like that."

He tilted his hat to Carly who struggled to sit up on her bottom with her knees drawn up to her chest.

"How you doing lovely one? Everything going great for you two love birds?"

She nodded, but swiped away a tear. She was truly embarrassed and never mind the fact that her feelings were hurt. Hatred for false pride crept over her. Worse still, Preston was right. A married woman had little to do to talk to whores in their husband's past, but she felt provoked. He should've stopped to consider that before he tossed her over his back.

"Preston, congratulations. I hear you were able to convince her to become your wife."

He looked straight ahead. "You might say that congratulations are in order, but not for me. You need to tell every single man on the street that I saved them from her wrath."

She knew he heard the sigh fall from her lips and what came next. Her heavy hand swatted him across the top of his head and, unfortunately, he slumped forward too late.

"Ouch." He glanced over at his friend with mischief dancing in his eyes. "But I have to tell you, she sure keeps life interesting."

"That I'm willing to bet is the truth." The one known as every woman's man eyed her carefully and she saw the lust oozing from his eyes. She quickly looked away to avoid it. After all, if Slim was in town, he was drinking and if he was drinking, he was likely drunk. She'd overlook it. Otherwise, someone would kill him and her husband needed a few friends left alive.

"Well, Slim, I have to get the little woman home. As you can see, we have some things to work out."

He tipped his hat in her direction again. "I bet you can't wait to do just that. You take care of her now." He smiled again, flashing a small wink once more in her direction. Before she knew it, the wagon was in motion and they were headed back out of town, but Slim didn't move from where they left him. His gaze seemed to follow them

with deliberate interest.

Carly was asleep by the time they arrived at Preston's place. He lived in a large white house outside of town. The only thing she really knew about him was that he was the product of family money, but like his buddy Slim, his family didn't live nearby.

Carly sat up to see where they were and then laid back down rubbing her eyes and setting her jaw into a finely polished pout. She still felt the fury burning in her veins and decided that looking up at the stars sounded more refreshing than going inside with a stubborn mule. She stayed perfectly still while he worked to unload the wagon and, when she didn't move, he did it for her. He tossed her over his shoulder and looked over at one of the ranch hands that came out to meet them. "Take care of the horses and I'll take care of this one."

His hand stayed planted on her ass and she was too tired to kick and hit. She lazily kept her hands over his back and let him have his thrill. He could rub her ass all he wanted, it sure as fighting hell wouldn't help him now, but it didn't feel half bad so why fight a good thing?

As soon as the door slammed behind them, she tried to get down. He only held her closer to him. Taking one step at a time initially, he soon took two and then three as he rushed her up the stairs

and into his bedroom. He kicked open the door and then threw her on the bed.

“Don’t you ever. *I mean ever* embarrass me like that again. Do you understand me?” He was stripping his shirt off as he scolded her.

She laughed. “And now we fuck? You are kidding right?”

“The hell I am. That’s exactly what we’re going to do.” He reached for her, but wasn’t fast enough.

She jumped up from the bed and headed down the hall. He caught her at the top of the steps with a mouth hell bent on seducing her. Never mind hands and hips.

“Fight me and I swear I’ll wear your ass out. That’s what’s wrong with you. You’ve never been considerate of anyone but yourself. You’re going to start acting like a lady. A woman who will eventually mother my children and, if you’re going to be the mother of my sons and daughters, you will not be seen in a whorehouse or a saloon. *Understand?*”

This was the side of him she knew existed. The one part of his personality that she knew she’d never escape in a fit of rage. She’d witnessed the way he interrogated farmers when thieving went on throughout Stockton and Sacramento. She’d watched him knock men down when they were guilty of something that deserved a beating. What bothered her most was that he never did anything

without a darn good reason, which likely meant she was dead wrong for going inside the saloon. She felt tears forming in her eyes.

“Who are you and what have you done with the man I know?” she shouted into his face with venom spraying from lips ready to fire him up with a good cursing.

He led her back to the bedroom, kicking and squealing.

At one point, she sat down on her bottom and he pulled her by both wrists.

“This is fucking ridiculous! Get up off your ass or you’ll have splinters in it.”

She let him drag her anyway. “If I do, then I promise you’ll pay with a gunshot to yours!”

“You’re as stubborn as any old farmer, woman.” He was damn near out of breath when he reached the room where he planned to bed her properly...again and again. At least until he wore her will down some.

Once there, he locked the door and stuffed the key down the front of his pants. A wicked, carnal smile took a permanent home on his lips. “Now, baby. Come and get it.”

“When hell has higher flames!” she screamed out and then lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling with tight lips promising they weren’t going anywhere near his body. Her arms crossed over her chest.

"They're getting ready to blaze taller and a whole lot hotter. That, I promise." He stared at her once before turning his back to her. "I know what this is about."

"No you don't," she snapped.

"Yes, I do because I know Rose."

"You have no idea what I'm upset about!" She rolled over and stared at the wall.

"You think you don't please me because you are still learning about yourself. About me. About us." His voice lowered. "And you're jealous." Satisfaction seemed to work its way into the room.

"You son of a..." She stopped herself in her tracks and decided to play it smart. "How would you feel?" She rolled over and stared at him. "Hmm? How about I go into town and find a man who looks like he can supply an interested woman with a good roll in the hay. Then I'll come back and wait and see if he tells you all about it. How about that? Would that work for you?" She was seething.

He watched her, but didn't move. Shock and amusement prevented it.

"Jealousy hell." She huffed.

"Damn straight I am and I sure as hell know you are so go on, do it. I'll just kill the unlucky bastard. And I'll make it the slowest death imaginable."

She glared harder at the wall.

He pulled her arm, helping her roll over to face him. "If you were insecure, I wish you would have just asked me. There's nothing I won't tell you." His voice was tender and his eyes were full of appreciation and love.

"I can't ask you everything." She locked her arms tighter and tugged away from his grip once more. "Besides, you don't know what it is that I'm irked about."

"So you want to act like a child and just avoid talking about it?" He wasn't surprised.

"I know I don't do everything the whores do for you and they probably know it, too. That's why they stopped me in the street." She let out a long sigh. "They couldn't wait to tell me you'd be back in their beds."

His eyes hazed over. "Holy hell. I knew that's what this was about." He chuckled before he dropped his pants. "Want me to show you how easy it is?"

"Ooh! I do not." She turned back over again, this time with her face in the pillow.

"Fine. Then pout." He pulled his pants back up and sat back down on the bed.

After a few minutes passed, she finally sat up behind him and peered around at him. "Do you like it?"

\* \* \* \*



He couldn't believe what she asked him. He also couldn't believe the true innocence that allowed her to question him in the most provocative of tones. "Do I like having a woman's lips around my cock?"

His breath almost caught in his windpipe thinking about her tiny little mouth kneading him into a frenzy of desire. His dick didn't just find new life, but it brought major pain because he knew she would arouse him to a state of confusion that words would never describe.

She swallowed watching, making sure to observe as the dick in question rose up to gain her undivided attention. "Well? Do you?"

"Damn it, woman, what kind of question is that? Do you like it when I go down there," he pointed to her pussy, "and stay until you dare me to stop?"

She smiled and he knew the blush of skin was enough of an answer.

"Sure you do. That's why I've spent a lot of time there." He snickered. It couldn't be helped.

"So you love it?"

"I'll like it fine when you're ready." He let out a long breath with his growing frustration obvious, but mischief ready to torture her just for the fun and games of it. "You know what, I'm tired. What you did tonight pissed me off and I'm just going

to go into town for the night." He started to get up off the bed, but was already laughing before he finished spewing out his so-called threats.

"Like hell." She pulled him back down by his shoulders and gave him an upside down kiss before shoving him away. "Get up and get out of your clothes. Now." She shot him a grin full of promises and it was one delivered with intent to win him over in an instant.

Not that she needed any help. He was hungry, needy and ready. Expectations soared high.

"Baby, you know you won't ask twice. Never twice and especially not now." His gaze drifted over her as he tugged the rest of his clothes off, watching as she graced him with the same pleasures. Only she was out of hers before he could blink. Not that his eyes ever moved from her.

He lay down on the bed and struck a funky pose, but she ignored him. She slowly walked around the bed. She was on the hunt. He became her prey and he liked it.

She stood beside the bed and dropped to her knees. "Come here." Her forefinger motioned him closer. Urged him to get ready for more than a few oral surprises.

"Holy hell." He didn't waste time doing it. His legs moved around her and she situated her body between his open knees. Legs readily fell to the

side. Precum tipped off a dick perfect for sucking. "You're sure you want to do this?" He motioned her closer and drew her in for a tight, loving kiss.

"You think you love me now, wait until you love what I can do even better." She spoke with confidence, but the fact was...she was right.

He knew it the second she lightly pulled at him with lips eager and a tongue willing. There wasn't an inch of flesh her hot little mouth didn't cover or her lips didn't devour. If she didn't know what she was doing, he sure as hell couldn't tell. A twinge of jealousy crossed his mind. He fought it back. He knew better. The woman was all his. Every talent she had was held in reserve only for him and every sweet gift she gave him was all the sweeter because of it.

He sank back against the bed and let his legs drape down over the mattress. Her hands were everywhere and he was in heaven. For a small moment in time, her incredible lips worked their magic. And then everything went dark. Pitch, coal black and without a warning.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Let me go! Damn you! Let me go!” Her eyes pierced the man who held her and her small frame prevented her from winning the fight. She looked down on her husband. The man who promised to love her and protect her. The man who obviously didn’t have a clue who his friends were, or the fact that they were now in their room invading a most private moment.

A blunt object was in Slim’s hands and a smile washed across his face. “He was always such a dumb fuck when it came to women.” He glared back at her and the cowboy who held her told her to sit still or she’d only make it worse for herself.

“Man, what I’d give to have those lips on me now. But don’t worry, doll. They will find their way home. Soon, very soon. They’ll wrap me tight with promises of tomorrow.” His eyes focused on her breasts. “That is if I ever leave your tits long enough to let you have me.” He laughed loudly.

“Preston! Oh God! Preston! Answer me!” She

struggled against the weight of an arm bound tightly around her waist. "Damn you, Slim!" She cried and screamed, fought with every inch of stamina she had.

The one man her husband trusted walked around the bed slowly. "I don't think he's going to come around any time soon and, by the time he does, sugar, you'll already be mine. Once you're ruined by my seed, that man there isn't going to want you." He rubbed the pad of his thumb over his bottom lip. "Cause he only wanted the pure for himself."

"I'd rather die first!" Tears streamed down her face and she spat the words in his direction once she could clearly see him in front of her. It was difficult because the man who yanked her head back held her to the floor while Slim must have knocked Preston out cold. She felt dizzy and still spun from the unexpected. Never mind the fact that none of this made any sense to her at all.

"Careful, love, you may get that chance." He moved over to her with a hand extended. He touched her cheek with a gentle stroke, but only long enough to reach a decision. The same hand that ran over her face turned vile after the first stroke. She flinched when she saw him raise it and screamed as it came down with a force that couldn't be reckoned with or controlled.

After the initial blow knocked her to the bed,

the scream that left her lungs the first time, couldn't be found again. Not even if she tried. She watched in horror as the man she thought was Preston's friend instructed his gunman to wait outside the bedroom. Then he walked him to the door, giving him instructions in a low pitch.

When he returned to the bed, he wore a wicked smile proud like a badge. "It's a damn shame I had to learn about you all those years ago. *Carly Corbaine*. The name haunted me from the time I was a boy. *Carly Corbaine*. The one witness left behind." When he said her name, the syllables were slowly formed and painfully said.

"The one that my father told me would never live to see her twentieth birthday. But you did." He reached out and touched her hair. "You lived indeed."

A distorted growl measured by anger and malice filled up her senses. She could see it on his face. Hear it in his voice. Smell it in the air. Taste the fear it brought and almost touch it. She was motionless. She couldn't think because her head hurt too bad to try and form thoughts. Rational ones or even a solitary thought that would produce some measure of comfort, made her fearful more than angry. Right now, she needed the anger. Her head nodded off to the side. She watched as Preston's naked body was slowly moved from the bed. Dragged off and tossed

aside.

She stretched her fingers and reached for him, but he only slid past. His skin rubbing by her as Slim pulled him off the mattress like he'd never been there in the first place.

"The day I rode out to your ranch and found him there was the day I was sent to kill you. I knew my father would eventually order it. After all, it was the only reason I ever came to California. He sent me here to finish the job he wanted done years ago. The one he didn't finish. I was supposed to remove the one reminder that your mother ever existed on this earth."

Carly listened carefully as he told her of failed plans without saying so much in words. He planned to kill her. That part was obvious, but before he did, he intended to rape her. She felt certain of it because she saw the thirst in his eyes and knew it had been a long time in the works.

She'd been on cattle drives with him. Slept under the stars within his grasp and yet when he'd reached for her in the past, she'd never fallen for him. Now, he would have her. He felt entitlement. He'd paid his dues and kept an eye on her. He felt he deserved compensation.

She swallowed hard and whispered out what she could manage to say, "You'll have to kill me before you'll ever rape me."

The one with all the experience wanted her to

know it was something he planned to arrange. He walked over to the corner of the room and stood by the window, looking out. "You think I want to rape you?" A grunt fell short of a stifled growl. He laughed before he finished. "A woman that sucks a man's dick with as much endured pleasure as you showed is anything but a woman who can even dare call rape." He sat down in the chair and took off his boots. "No, sugar. You can't rape a woman who volunteers to give her body to a ready man."

She rolled over away from the sight of him. Her breathing labored. Uncontrollable and painful with every sip of air she took and even more so when she held it as long as she could before releasing it. A tear ran slowly down her cheek, an indicative reminder of just how slow the night ahead would unfold.

She knew better than to say anything because she knew she would fuck him. The situation, she already fully understood. She realized without a doubt that she would give him anything he wanted even though her life would end soon after the act itself was over. If he found her agreeable, then he would let the one man she loved, live. He was going to make a deal with her. He would honor it because he took bargains and deals seriously. Just not lives. Insignificance didn't matter to a man like him.



He wanted Preston to live with whatever he decided to do to her. Then he'd want him to live with the self-hatred he would force him to carry simply because he didn't save her. Yes, she read him and his eyes made it easy.

She stared at the headboard. Earlier, she'd craved hearing the sound of it banging up against the wall. It was all she could think about while she was down on her knees in front of the only man who ever sexually compensated her. The only one she ever allowed herself to love. Now, she would be there again, but this time the betrayal would lead to the unthinkable. The unforgivable. Preston would blame himself and it would destroy them. If, and it was a big uncertainty, she lived to tell about it.

She turned to watch the familiar intruder. Staring daggers felt better than looking at something that would only serve as a reminder later. In time, the wood banging against the wall would only serve one purpose and its tempo would beat out a sound of pure treason. Unfaithfulness to a husband that would never know why trickery was used to place her in the hands of deception's grasp. Unintentional dealings with an unlawful soul who was always in place to finish what his father started. End it where it all began...with her.

The irony hit her. When her family was killed,

she heard them ride up. Saw them coming for them. She understood that danger rode in with the cowboys that delivered it right to their door. Now, years later, the discovery that she'd almost always lived with a killer watching, made her loathe the man even more. She watched him watch her. His eyes drooped with an eerie look of smug satisfaction and his first button was loosened by a slow hand.

"You want to tell me you'd never do such a thing, don't you? You, the prissy little virgin who never knew a man's touch until..." He stopped himself, pursed his lips and then continued. "Go on, lie to me." Another button fell away from the safety of closure.

His voice raised an octave, but he didn't yell. He just made firm remarks with all of the confidence in the west. "Tell me that you'd never agree to suck my dick. Tell me how you'd never fuck me the way Preston here got it from you. Tell me every lie your little body wants you to tell and then do one better than that, hold yourself to the truth. Because if you do," his tone turned bitter, "you may just cost Preston his life."

In that moment, her blood ran cold. The chill from her body was in the air and she felt it bring a calm and unexplainable mix of acceptance and pain. Ready to submit, she met a ready stare, but her denial pressed forward. "You don't want to do

this." An evil smirk told a tale she didn't want to see, but words were far worse than a vivid story unfolding.

"Sugar, I've craved you to the point of tasting you on my lips. You have no idea what I want." Another button and another. The shirt fell.

"Why?" She swiped a hair from her face in an attempt to remove the evidence of tears, too. "Why would you do this to *us*?" The *us* became the apparent problem since she could see his whole body tremble with the pain of hearing her align herself in the power of two.

A deafening chuckle rang throughout the room. "Us?" He moved closer. "Don't be foolish, woman. This never had anything at all to do with Preston. Only you."

"It does now." If she thought that would stop a killer, then she was mistaken. Dead wrong.

"It has to do with a whole lot more than you or I will ever understand." He moved closer and stepped out of his pants. He stood in front of her naked with full intentions becoming obvious.

She moved away from him and pulled the coverlet with her. "Stop and think about this. I'll give you what you want," she took her time with forced speech, trying to think of the best bargaining tool to use. It proved difficult. She was at such a disadvantage. No one was there to help her and with no one coming to quickly save her,

the conversation had to stay in play. "Tell me what it is you want and I'll do it. Just leave him be. *Let him live.*"

Slim's dirty gaze crept over her and a longing tongue swiped at the corner of his mouth. "*Let Preston live.*" He slowly repeated the words back to her in mockery. "You have no idea *the hell it is for us* every single time we leave someone behind. Someone alive to tell their story to the next person who comes along. No, I don't think you're in the position to tell me what to do or to ask me for favors."

"Then you'll never know what it's like to have me in your arms because I want you or choose to stay there." She glared at him with challenging looks. "And I know you. A woman always knows. You've wanted to see me want you. You've wanted to *feel me* want you." She worked what little she could to her advantage and the fact that he'd shown signs of a man longing for a woman for the past few years tilted in her favor. How she'd use it, she wasn't sure.

He slid over next to her body. "You think you know me? *You* know nothing. You have no idea the kind of man I am or how quickly I can become someone else entirely." His voice dropped softer, but not as soft as something he had originally intended to put to good use.

She felt compelled to taunt him with that fact

alone. "I know you don't want to kill me." She was wrong.

"I can kill you and then go fuck a whore. I have no soul to forbid it." His gaze moved over her with hatred and lust. A deadly combination and something she wasn't unfamiliar with at all given her mother's fate.

"But you'd rather fuck me first, isn't that right, baby?" Her hand went into his hair and she gently combed it back with a scraping motion, nervous and anxiety ridden. Sick to the quick, but trying to play along until the game ended with his cock buried deep inside her. As long as she could use or force foreplay, he wasn't inside of her. He wasn't becoming a permanent part of her.

He swallowed hard and caught her wrist. Yanking her up to him, he kissed her with fervor, but didn't offer to move his hands under the bed sheet. She resisted the kiss at first, but when his mouth and lips moved faster, she thought better of resistance and brought him closer. "Slim, make a deal with me." She breathed the words into his mouth. "Tell me what I can do to save the only..."

Forceful hands pushed her away and he held her forearms pushing her hard against the bed beneath them. He looked down on her with wild, wide eyes. "You can stop breathing because then *you'll stop loving him.*"

And there it was. Like father like son.

She held her breath as she locked eyes with him once more and she tried to raise her neck up in an attempt to bring him in for another kiss. *If I can keep him entertained, I'm able to stay alive.* She reminded herself of obvious facts. And she wanted to live. She had reasons to live. Several of them.

"I am going to kill you, sugar." He didn't seem to doubt his own words. They simply fell in a matter of fact tone. "Then I will watch Preston from a distance as he tries to make sense of it all. Tries to understand why it all happened. What went wrong. What could have been different. But see, this is about you and me. It was never about *him.*"

A firm hand brought her closer and his voice lowered.

"I allowed you to have him. Encouraged it even, but not because of the reasons you might think. He was supposed to tame you and then I would be the one to break you."

He talked about her and to her like she was nothing more than another one of his animals. A mare to be ridden by the stud he truly thought he'd become if his cock was able to stroke her with cause. Maybe even a little misguided conviction.

"You weren't supposed to fuck him and you damn sure weren't supposed to become his *wife.* He was just going to be a distraction. Who the hell

knew that he would be able to convince you to fuck with that tight little snatch? No other man came close to getting into your bed. I never thought you'd give it up so freely. But you did."

And he was pissed off over that fact. No question about it. His gaze fell to her chest.

"It was supposed to be all for me." A growl slipped from his lips and it was pure-ass frightening.

She couldn't follow along with a crazy man and she quickly saw that Slim wasn't too far outside of the realms of insanity. She continued to watch his mouth move. "What the hell are you talking about?"

His lips curled and he pulled her closer. Whispering into her lips, he told her everything he wanted her to know and much of what he said, she could've lived without hearing. "Your mother was brought to my father after your brothers were hung high and left to swing in your barn."

Carly shivered with the memory. The same one she was given by one of the men who came to her house after her first night of passion with Preston. All of this was beginning to make sense. Every story he told unfolded with a new explanation.

"The men were supposed to bring her back untouched, but they were only men. Strong men with needs like every other man and your mother...your mother was built like...*you*." He

moved his hand over her breast and then ripped the sheet away from her body.

Wanting eyes covered her now. Eager to finish what he'd yet to start, his words continued to tell her things that daughters shouldn't have to learn about their mothers.

He continued with the darkness of memories guiding him. "I watched his face draw separate conclusions when the men rode up with her. Battered and bruised, she looked like they took turns with her for days. His face showed no emotion. None that he wanted others to see, but it existed. The way he cared for her ran deeper than love and it was more than lust. It was possession. She owned him. She was in his heart and ruled his soul."

She turned away from Slim, but with the news of her mother's final hours, the tears fell, something he wanted to see for himself when his hand drew her back to face him.

"I watched them. I saw everything. I heard her plead with him. Cry for her family. Scream for your safety. Beg to know if you were alive and then I watched my father rape your mother." He seemed pleased with sharing the news. "All because the cunt refused to give herself willingly."

"Shut up." She was so numbed with hurt that she didn't even realize that one of his hands freely roamed over her. She didn't acknowledge his



erection was stiff and waiting, ready to find female accommodation. Only when she shifted her weight, did she take notice and know it meant talk would be considered far too cheap now. Too late to bargain for just a few more minutes of untouched time. He was the one who resisted temptation's call and moved away from her without further contact. He wanted to say more. Wanted to explain everything just so she could understand the makings of a beast.

"My father wanted your mother's love and he offered his to her. Told her she could have him and the life he would give her even though because of her actions she'd become nothing but a whore. Nothing but a woman who was stripped of everything and then passed around like the dirt she wanted to become when she took up with a pioneer. We'd left Dodge City, you know. All because of my father's obsession with your mother."

She swallowed hard. "I don't want to hear this. I'm warning you...don't!" She shook her head, but Slim moved closer.

With a force beyond reason, he held her chin in his hand. "She said she'd rather die and so my father wasted no time in granting her the very wish she asked for. He put a bullet in her head and vowed to never love another. And he has not." He shook with the memory and then lit up

with his truth. "But, baby, I have. Hell fire, have I loved."

"This has nothing to do with me!" Carly spat the words into Slim's face.

"It has everything to do with you because I will not be my father's son. I will not walk in his footsteps. Do you understand me?" He shook her by thin shoulders and then grabbed her hard against his chest. His hand went to her back and he stroked. "I am not going to miss out on this, doll," his voice softened with every touch.

Everything he said made twisted sense. Preston was a diversion. She wasn't supposed to fall in love with him. He wasn't supposed to want her for keeps. Now, she was being offered the same deal her mother once had only with slight variations. "Oh holy hell." The realization struck her all at one time.

Even with a cock fully matured and ready to act, Slim stood and slowly walked over to his pants. He pulled a gun from his holster and then approached the man on the floor.

Her husband was unarmed. Unaware. Naked and out cold. He was the man Slim called a friend. The man she loved. "Don't do this. Please. Please don't."

"It's your choice." His eyes showed no emotion. No sorrow.

"You want me." Recognition was in her voice

and fear ran up her spine.

“Just as my father wanted your mother. Maybe more because I’ve bargained with him with my own life at times just to keep you alive.” His jaw set against that pain.

The happiness and security she felt with Preston was stripped from her within seconds. What had taken them years to finally realize, Slim took from them without remorse, without warning. “I love him.” She nodded through tears.

A sudden twitch drew his left cheek. “You’ll have nothing to love but a memory.” He cocked the gun.

She closed her eyes and waited for the shots to fire. One for Preston. One for her. The end was near. So close. But the only shot that was fired was the one coming from behind her. Quickly, she reacted. Her head snapped to attention and eyes opened wide. *Rose*.

He held his arm and went down to his knees. “You fucking bitch!” He screamed at the woman behind the gun as he tried to fathom what was going on. He glared back at the bed.

Carly was already on her feet jumping up to grab the gun Slim once held in his hand. “Oh holy hell! How did you know?” She quickly looked back at *Rose*.

“He never could fuck without telling what or who he planned to do next.” She shrugged.

Blood poured from the wound Slim held with his bare hand.

“Move and I’ll kill ya.” Rose kept her gun pointed on him. Then she gave quick orders. “Get some clothes on. The girls went to round up some men from the saloon and believe me, the last thing we need is for a man to get a look at the likes of you. Then we’ll all be out of business.” She offered her a weak smile.

Slim’s sneer fired angry words toward the woman with the rifle. “If you think a damn whore will stop me from getting what I want, then you’re wrong. I’ll see you dead, Rose.”

Preston was beginning to come to and Carly was already at his side. He was disoriented and trying to gain some measure of where he was or what happened.

Rose looked at her target dead on with ice-cold green eyes that were all but floating in a red sea of horror. Her gaze dropped down to the man’s most treasured possession. “If you think a man can stop a woman on a mission, especially one with a good aim, then you’re a man destined to be sent to hell before anyone can stop me from sending you there.” She cocked the gun.

Preston didn’t know how wrong he was to stop her, but he did it all the same. “Rose! No! Don’t do this! Whatever happened here, we can work through it. Whatever it is, we can...” He held the

back of his head and screamed out in agony. "Just lower the damn gun, woman!" Pain obviously shot through his neck where the blunt object inflicted enough cause to knock him out earlier.

The shot that fired didn't come from Rose. It didn't come from the sheriff or the women who fetched the men from town or even the men who came rushing in with them. It was a single shot that dropped a man dead. One shot to the head was all that it took to send a troubled soul back to the place where perhaps he'd been living all along.

Preston turned to look at Carly with true pain releasing when the first tear fell. "Oh holy hell. What have you done?" His stare was empty. His beautiful green eyes turned shaded grey. His arms were extended as he ran to Slim's side.

He looked at Carly with the same crazy madness he had in his eyes when Carmack's hands all but ravaged her in front of him. The stare that bared his soul regardless of the true tales waiting there, took over him once more.

Kneeling over Slim's lifeless body, he let out a scream. "No! Why? Why?" He stared back at Carly, questioning her motive. Unsure of the woman she'd become.

Rose turned her back. Perhaps she already knew the truth. Maybe she didn't want to see what a grown man's eyes had already given away. Sometimes, the truth is known by many but

ignored by all. Rose seemed to have an awful lot of answers. She walked into the hall and closed the door, but the sounds of screams could be heard all over the streets of Stockton.

Maybe the woman so many men knew already understood that what happened there would never end in the same place. The pain would not go away. Its scars would forever remain etched in the lives of those burdened by living in the aftermath. Consequences loomed. With death in the air, the thick familiarity of it churned with promises, not just threats. It reeked with an unbearable comprehension of what secrets the two men shared.

Horrified, Carly slumped to the floor with the smoking gun still in her hand. She watched as her husband pulled the blankets from the bed and held the man's head in his lap, rocking back and forth.

"No! No! No!"

His screams. His cries. It all told a sobering truth. One she never saw. One she could hardly believe even as the truth unfolded before her eyes.

The sheriff rushed in and took control. He took the gun from her hand and helped her up from the floor, pulling her up to protect her though the look on his face seemed to suggest that protection wouldn't be found. Solace wouldn't meet comfort in his arms or be found in the embrace of another.

"I..." She what? Was sorry? Was ashamed? Didn't mean to do it? What? There wasn't anything to say. Her legs moved her closer to the door. Farther away from the one man she only wanted to love. She didn't understand. Didn't he know what fear she'd just faced and all but faced it alone? The man she loved more than her own life, slowly told her what she'd already gathered on her own.

"Don't come back. Don't you *ever* come back! There's nothing left here for you. *Do you understand me?*" His eyes burned with a gut-wrenching anger. Bitterness fueled the hurt and they were, in an instant, destroyed by the consequences of living with too many secrets.

She tried to nod and felt certain that she failed. The sheriff continued to move her into the hall with his hand on her lower back. She stopped just outside the door and then turned to face him again. "He was going to..." She wanted to tell him, but he didn't seem interested in hearing any of it.

He shook his head and held up his hand. "He was my brother, damn you. My *only* brother *and you...*killed him. You're nothing more than a killer yourself and there's nothing here for us now. *Nothing at all.*"

The words stunned her with recognition of a truth they'd never revealed, which only deepened

the wound. Carly's eyes held his glare long enough to never forget it. She wanted to remember the hatred. She wanted to make sure she saw enough of it that it left her branded for life.

Too bitter to forget the scars placed there by another and too cold to remember that the only thing left of a beating heart was one that was shielded by a layer of ice, she took it all in. She wanted that barrier so thick that no other man would ever break through it again.

Yes, she needed to make sure if another cowboy attempted to steal her heart again that she remembered this day. She would recall the heavy price she paid when she let down her guard and decided to love like a woman.

As she left his farm that day, her heart fell dead with sadness. The chances she took to love a man she never really knew at all were rewarded with false promises. Those heavily delivered by someone who swore to never move over for another man. Only he didn't know at the time that he would move...for the man she killed. The one he called *his brother*.



## DISCLAIMER

Branded is a novella series published by eXtasy Books, written by Destiny Blaine. It is a trilogy that will keep readers cheering for Preston and Carly all the way to the end. This couple will find a very happy ending. Join us for Branded by Anger and follow this story through all three novellas and see their explosive ending coming soon!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Destiny Blaine is an erotic romance author who writes in various genres. Visit her website at [www.destinyblaine.com](http://www.destinyblaine.com) for more information.