

BRANDED BY ANGER

A man with a serious expression is sitting in a field of dry grass. He is wearing a black cowboy hat, a black leather jacket that is open to show his bare chest, and blue jeans with a large, ornate silver belt buckle. Behind him, two horses are standing in a hazy, golden-brown landscape under a warm, low sun. The overall mood is gritty and Western.

DESTINY
BLAINE

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Branded by Anger
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BRANDED BY ANGER

BY

DESTINY BLAINE

DEDICATION

For the woman who loves a cowboy – or two.

NOTE TO THE READER

Branded is a novella series published by eXtasy Books and written by Destiny Blaine. The trilogy begins with Branded by Sunset where readers are introduced to Carly Corbaine and Preston Evans. The couple will find their happy ending and their explosive ending is coming soon!

PREFACE

Preston Evans sat alone at the bar. Days came and went. Weeks passed him by and his feet never once carried him inside the saloon until he needed a distraction. The urgency of remembering something other than the quiet of the dark night took him back to a place where he never planned to return.

It must have been the insanity growing inside of him. The atmosphere ripped with the wind blowing up the cold winter and he wanted warmth, comfort. Her memory danced everywhere, but he knew where he'd find the part he missed most—in a woman's arms.

Rose approached him cautiously with a glass in one hand and a bottle swinging at her side. "Old habits die hard, don't they, Preston?" Smug and confident, the whore never aged. She rarely looked tired and she always smelled like warm honeydew.

He looked at her longer than he cared to admit. His gaze drifted down her long neck, but held at her throat. She watched him from under her long,

dark eyelashes and he snapped his head up before she said something to further encourage him. He wasn't there for Rose. He wanted to remember Carly and Rose would help him whether she liked it or not.

"What you really want to know is which addiction still exists in a dead man walking," Preston replied, keeping his palms flat against the bar. He pushed away from the wood and gladly accepted the glass and bottle of whiskey. Once he placed both on the ledge, he reached for her.

A smile curved her lips when his right arm hooked around her and he yanked her hard against his chest. His voice dropped but his eyes did not. "So what do you think, Rose? Do I still have a hard one for whores or am I here for a stout drink?"

"I think you had it right the first time. You look like death and as far as I can see, you won't be among the living again until you get the lovely Miss Carly back in your bed."

His lips parted and perhaps wanted to form words, but were far too parched. The thirst consumed him and the only thing he wanted was something to smooth and quench the dryness in his throat. He poured a glass and indulged in a first swallow. The stench of whiskey burning its way down provided a remedy, but it didn't provide a quick fix, never mind a true cure.

CHAPTER ONE

The clopping sound of a horse's hooves announced a visitor. Somewhat startled by unexpected company, Carly rushed outside and stood on her small porch.

"This is a surprise." She stepped off the stoop without expression. Carefully, her gaze drifted over the woman overdressed for a Sunday ride. She tried to focus on her face, even with the sun deliberately holding her at bay. Her fingers covered her brow and she waited for an explanation. Town tramps seldom made a house call to their perceived competition.

Rose slid her leg off her sidesaddle, and without a word, held out her white-laced covered hands. She nodded her head off to the side and shrugged. In Rose's world, she probably found a lot of attention with the gesture.

"You've got to be kidding," Carly grumbled, turning to walk back to the porch. "I imagine you were able to get up there on your own and you

can get down by yourself if you want off that blasted mule you're pretending is a horse."

Rose batted her eyelashes. "Everyone in town says you act like a man so the least you could do is help a lady who is unable to do the same." Rose looked around for a stoop, something to help assist in a freefall from the beast, no doubt.

Carly shook her head. "Unless you plan on visiting for awhile, why not stay up there on the damn creature you rode in here on and just call it a day?"

The known town whore took off her gloves. "I plan on talking some sense into you. That's what I rode out here to do and from what I understand, it won't be an easy task because you're anything but sensible." She continued to take in her surroundings. She must have found it difficult to look at Carly. She quickly added more, "So if I have to spend the night out here in this...this forbidden prairie, then that's precisely what I'll do."

"Why are you here, Rose? I don't have time to translate your meaningless gibberish. Just tell me what you want and why the hell you're here and let's get this over with so you can ride on back to town before the nippy air gives you pneumonia." Carly stood a little taller before she pulled her coat closer together. Her fingers worked to pull out the strands of champagne hair trapped under her

collar.

"I saw Preston," she exclaimed, raising an eyebrow. Maybe she wanted her carefully selected words to sting her. Rose always had a motive.

"Now, get me down off this damn horse." She chopped out the last few syllables. It was safe to assume the woman planned on sticking around for more than a minute.

The sound of his name sent shivers across her shoulder blades and made her stomach rumble. Her chest tightened. "Damn you." She stomped down the porch steps and reached up to help the wench off the poor animal that had the chore of carrying a washed up whore into the prairie. Once Rose's dainty little feet hit the solid earth beneath her, Carly turned her back to her. "So you came all the way out here to tell me you fucked the man I once called a husband?"

"Are you going to invite me in or should I assume you don't have the good manners to do it?" She took a step closer to the cabin and the wind in the air helped carry her there. At least, it appeared to offer assistance since Rose moved a little faster after the breeze provided a natural lift for the layers of petticoat material.

She wasn't in the mood for small talk or company, but she went inside and Rose stayed right on her heels. "Looks like you're hell bent on coming inside so make yourself at home. I just

made some coffee."

The unexpected guest headed straight to the small table in the center of the room and sat down with a huff. Carly stormed by her and quickly slammed the door behind them. "I know you gals only have saloon doors to swing, but out here in the country, we keep our homes secured."

A smirk formed across her guest's face. "*So it would* bother you if I fucked Preston silly?"

"I'm sure you did. Now what do you want? Do you want my blessing? Fine, take it. Do you want me to ask you how he is? Fine, I'll ask. How's he doing? Grand, I hope. Do you want to rub it in my face that you were in his arms? Okay, so you rubbed." Nervously, she moved her palms in a circular, if not ridiculous fashion, before she walked by her. She made her way to a chopping block where she found the coffee and tin cups. After pouring the black liquid into the cup, she placed it in her visitor's cold hands.

"Thank you," Rose said.

Carly glowered. It wouldn't kill her to sit across from Rose. Then again, if the whore decided to reveal too many intimate details about her time with Preston, it wouldn't be real smart to sit too close. She might have to kill her. If she didn't, she would at least throw a punch. She chose a spot across the room before she dared to glare daggers in the woman's direction.

"Oh for pity sake. Sit the hell down. I didn't have him in my bed. I know for a fact none of the others did either. We all tried," she paused and then added, "For the sport of it, of course."

"Of course." *Like hell.* Unexplainable relief washed over her and she helped herself to a hot cup of coffee. She felt more at ease and confident she wouldn't choke on it. Taking the chair across from Rose, she said, "So if you're not here to gloat, why are you here?"

"I don't really have an answer. Maybe it's because as a woman, I felt like it might be worth a mention to let you know that the man you're avoiding is a man left to deal with the pain all by himself. Someone should let you know how he is suffering. There will only be so much of it that he'll endure on his own before he'll come to us one night with bedding a woman on his mind. Perhaps then you'll want him back, but then it will be too late."

"I don't want Preston Evans and best I can tell, he doesn't have much use for me anymore either. Besides, you can't win something or someone that never belonged to you in the first place."

Rose's eyes darkened. "I did see him last night. He came to the saloon," she paused, allowing her revelation time to sink in. "He need someone and I'm willing to bet you're the only one he'll take even if he doesn't plan to keep you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Spirited words fell from Carly's lips.

"You're the one that seems to think he doesn't desire you anymore, but from where I'm standing, I have to say that after I saw him, I don't think he even realizes he's lost you. It's just his damn pride getting in the way and from what I can see, the two of you are well suited with your own consequences." Rose's gaze held Carly's and then she added, "Pride and stubbornness won't keep *your bed warm*, but it might just help him decide to heat his up a bit."

"If you think you know him so well, then why don't you tell him your observations and see how far it gets you?" Thinking about Preston hurt Carly in a way she never thought possible and her words snapped a bit when she fired them at the woman seated across from her.

Rose stood. "Let me ask you something."

The way the woman stated the words, Carly just knew the subject would change and with the sudden shift of winds, would come a question she didn't particularly want to hear. Reluctantly, she nodded. "Go ahead. You can ask anything you want." She sure as hell didn't have to answer.

"Why do you want to stay out here in the middle of no-man's land when the worst of storms are brewing up? What are you doing? Trying to hide? Hoping against hope the deep mounds of

snow will bury you under? You know you can't survive for more than a couple of days if the weather gets as bad as some of the farmers say it will. Don't you have someone to mind the land for a few days so you can ride on into town where you are at least around some company? This is no place for a woman, even one like you."

"What do you know about tending to a farm? You're just a—"

"Whore?" Rose smirked. "I'd rather be any cowboy's whore than a woman trying to figure out how to get just one man back in my bed. I'd rather be *me* than *you* any day because I know what it is to love someone and not have that love reciprocated. I know what it is to let someone go and find out they'll never return and, darling, this is from one woman to another..." She paused, "He will not ride out here and risk rejection."

Carly looked down at her hands. "You're talking about Preston?"

"Yes. Who else would come out here for you?"

"I mean, you were talking about yourself and loving Preston?" Rising, she braced her palms against the table. It was intimidating and she didn't mean to take the sudden approach, but it may have served a better purpose. Rose looked ready to spill her truths.

"I'll always have a special place in my heart for him, but I am what I am and he wanted a mother

for his children. A whore can't turn into a mother in this town and as you know, he only had eyes for another. I let him go, but I didn't let him go for some woman to run him crazy."

"You think that's what I did? Have you forgotten what he did to me?" Carly's eyes burned with the anger remembering brought with it. Instinctively, and only for a second, she closed her eyes to block out the memory. It didn't work and, in fact, her mind's eye defied her by bringing the whole image back into a clearer focus. She thought back to the night she shot Slim and her mood soured by the second. Maybe killing a man did that sort of thing to a woman.

"You're to blame, too. You walked out. In the time that it took for him to push you out, the door already slammed behind you and I do know that he waited and watched for you the following day."

"I seriously doubt it. I don't think Preston wanted to see me while he buried his brother. It would have been inappropriate for me to show up, especially since I was the one who put Slim in the cold ground."

"You had a reason for what you did. I would've done the same thing if I'd been in your shoes, not that I would ever want to walk in your boots, but you know, for what it's worth and all. I would've been glad to pull the trigger again and again if it

had been me instead of you.”

Rose shrugged off her simple remarks of kindness and pulled at the door latch. “I’m going to put it to you in terms you can understand. There are cowboys you lay down beside for one or two nights and there are those you rope in for life just because you know if you do, you’ll have one that is worth hanging onto through the good times and the hard ones. Let Preston go, and he’ll find someone else, but he’ll never be happy. I saw it in his expression last night.”

Carly looked around the tidy cabin. She instantly missed Preston. Then again, she always missed him. The trouble was, as Rose so eloquently stated, her own pride and stubbornness kept getting in the way and, as the whore also noted, neither provide much warmth at night. She should know, because she hadn’t slept in her bed since the day she left Preston’s. It seemed a little easier to sleep on the dirt floor—and her hardened heart did ease when she stayed more preoccupied with the cold ground underneath her. It took her mind off the man who no longer wanted to wrap her in the safety of his arms.

CHAPTER TWO

Rose said she wouldn't make it through the winter storms and two days later, Carly almost believed it. Not only did her bones ache from the continual chill, but her nose remained cold for hours on end. She sniffed back a few urges to feel sorry for herself and defiantly held in the tears. No doubt, if she cried now, she'd freeze to death once the frozen tears stuck to her cheeks.

Carly didn't like to part ways with her animals and what few worldly items she possessed, she didn't want to leave behind so she made plans to weather the storm. As the cold breeze seeped through the open cracks the logs provided, she knew she'd made an error in judgment. The storm blowing in whipped around in all different directions, making it difficult to feel it out even if she did decide to make a dash for town. For all she knew, she'd ride right into the eye of the winter weather waiting.

A sudden knock came heavy and fast. A fist

pounded out the announcement of company, almost with an element of desperation. Whoever stood on the other side of the door apparently wanted a fast welcome.

Carly felt the danger and her veins nearly clotted with ice. Fear found its way into her blood stream and she reached under her wooden table for a gun.

"Carly! Hurry now! Open up. It's Robert Barkley."

A familiar voice stopped her from cocking the gun. Carly tossed the pistol on the center of the table and rushed to the door. "Robert? What on earth?"

The young man rushed in with wild dark eyes. Robert, barely out of his teenage years, brushed off the fallen snow from his heavy coat while his lips quivered away. She noticed how the blue stained them with the bitter cold remaining present in his physical appearance.

"What in heaven's grace are you doing here?" Carly quickly ushered him to the fireplace. "You shouldn't be out in this weather. Your folks will worry to death over you."

His chattering teeth were uncontrollable and he nodded. "They sent me out here for you."

"They did, did they?" She grinned as she thought about the older couple. "I just bet you had something to say in the matter."

He nodded. "Yes, Miss..." he stopped himself before he could finish and moved closer to the fire.

Folks around town had a genuine problem. No one seemed comfortable addressing her as Mrs. Evans since the town knew Preston tossed her, more or less, out on her ass. Even more people had a problem calling her Miss Corbaine, since it teetered along disrespectful.

"Here, sit down. I'll get you some soup." She moved the rocking chair closer to the fire and once he sat down, quickly tossed a multi-colored quilt on his lap. She moved across the cabin, calling out over her shoulder. "Best I remember, you don't like coffee, but it's too bad, my friend, you're going to have to drink some in order to warm up. Either that or whiskey and I'm not sure your mother would like the alternative choice."

He nodded. His teeth continued to clank together.

"Well, which is it?" she asked, placing her palm to her hip and waiting for his parched lips to move in some sort of rhythmic answer.

"I'll take the whiskey and, Miss Corbaine?" He dared to fully address her with his response, "I'm twenty-one years old. I stopped caring what my mother thought a few years back and for your information, I made the decision to ride out here for reasons that didn't quite suit my mother or father."

Carly swallowed tightly. She watched the rocking chair the young Mr. Barkley occupied and finally peered up at the cowboy sitting there. Sure enough, and true to an element of surprise, where she expected to see the boy he'd once been, she found instead—a very handsome man. The kind she knew better than to notice much less appreciate. Hell. *Just what I need.* She almost said it, rather than simply imprison the words to a solitary and very lonely thought.

Carly spent the next couple of hours waiting on Robert hand and foot. He didn't complain and she suspected he enjoyed it to the fullest. "So tell me why you came all the way out here in the dead of winter." She took the whiskey glass from his hands and their fingertips touched for a slight moment. She quickly moved away from him.

"I came out here to make sure you're all right."

"As you can see, I'm perfectly..." A sudden breeze opened the door and both of their heads jerked upright. She dashed for the table, retrieving a hidden gun and he drew his pistol from the holster. No one waited on the porch for them, but the dark night outside called with a snow threatening to pull out all the stops just after daybreak.

She shivered, tossing the gun back to the table and then quickly slammed the door, this time

taking a moment to secure it with the makeshift timber, which served as a lock. "You're quick to the draw."

"I am when there's something worth drawing for, you'd better believe it." He shot her a rather unpardonable smirk.

She knew the pun he threw out into the open was one laden full of intentions. Swallowing hard, she faced Robert. "I think we'd better set some ground rules here."

He held up his hand to stop her. "None needed. The main concern I have is getting us through the night and taking out just before this snow hits and cripples us and the horses we want to ride out on so don't worry your pretty little head none, I'm not gonna take advantage."

Carly studied him then. She liked what she saw, if she admitted it, but she quickly reminded herself the young man in her cabin wasn't her husband. After talking to Rose, she believed she might still stand a chance with Preston and if she did, Robert Barkley couldn't stand in the way. Even if he provided a diversion, if Preston wanted her back, just for a night, she wanted to be there when he decided he was ready.

"All right then," he said quietly. "I'll fetch some wood and check on the horses. We're going to bed down here for the night and then ride into town at daybreak." His spine must've beckoned him to

stand a little taller and when he did, he towered over her with the strength of a man. Handsome and damn near rebel looking, the cowboy's sandy curls invited a woman's touch.

She resisted the urge to run her hand through his natural locks because to do so would prove she found him attractive—and she definitely thought better of it even though the ache in her fingertips nearly drove her to him. “I can’t go,” she finally snapped. “I can’t leave my home just when winter sets in because I’ll lose some cattle and I’ll—”

“You’ll die in this storm, Miss Corbaine, and if you don’t go with me, then I’ll ride into town and come back with Mr. Evans. One or both of us won’t make it the second time because we’re going to have only a few hours to make a run for town as it is now. I’d be much obliged if you’d try and listen to me.” He tilted his head, pulled up his collar and then slid behind the door, barely opening it. “I’ll be back to tend to things in a few minutes. You can go ahead and miss me if you’d like.”

She smiled behind the closed door. Thank goodness for a few friends. Robert Barkley would at least provide some good company. His companionship would serve her well on a night destined to bring on the shivery low temperatures of winter.

Carly woke up to footsteps. She stared out the window and quickly sat up when she realized she wasn't on the floor. She went to sleep on the ground, just like always. It bothered her that he'd moved her. As soon as she stirred, moaned and grumbled, Robert appeared.

"Good morning. I just saddled the horses. I decided not to ride until after sunrise so you could get some extra sleep."

"What the hell am I doing in my bed?" she snapped.

"Most folks sleep in them, you know."

"No, I didn't," she quipped sarcastically.

"You can frown all you like but I figured it out, Miss Corbaine." He nodded toward the cup in his hand and placed it quickly in hers. "You don't stay in your bed because you want to sleep light in case you have some visitors sneak up on you when it's dark outside. I wanted you comfortable so I slept in the chair there next to the door watching over you. It looks like you made out just fine. You slept all night like a little newborn baby." He grinned and then turned around to walk back outside on the porch.

"You moved me!"

"Yes, ma'am, I did," he replied, placing his hand on the door.

"Touched me?"

His grin served the purpose he apparently

wanted it to suit. "I did, but don't worry about it because it didn't put me out." The corners of his heart-shaped mouth turned up with mischief.

She snarled, "I imagine it didn't."

"No, ma'am, not in the least," he chuckled before stepping outside on the porch, the heavy door closing behind him with a loud thud.

Carly sipped her coffee and pulled back the coverlet on the bed. She stood and went over to the window. The horses were strapped down with leather saddlebags and blankets.

Robert looked up long enough to wave and then finished securing the saddles. He walked back inside. "We really need to ride, Miss—"

"Okay, Robert," her words cut him off quickly, "I like my name Carly so why don't you knock it off with the Miss Corbaine bit? It's going to be a snowy day so we need to get out of here, you're right enough about the fact, but I don't want to listen to you call out my maiden name all the way back to town. We both know you'd rather say my first name out loud so you might as well say it. In fact, if I was in a gambling mood, I dare say, you'd just about prefer to scream it out in a fit or two of passion and that's where we may have a problem."

His curious eyes stared back at her and then he smiled. Words weren't needed in order to heat the moment, the blue hot passion stirring there

already lingered. Carly recognized trouble when she saw it, all six foot three inches of it.

They ran straight into a maddening blizzard. It made the ride back into town more difficult than expected. Robert led the way and Carly tried to closely follow without riding right up on him, which proved difficult in the weather. Half the time, she had trouble seeing ahead of her because the cold wind forced her eyes shut.

Riding horseback when the ground was covered in ice and snow presented its own set of risky elements, but Robert seemed to understand the road they were on was one less traveled. Clear and present dangers held obvious warnings. If one fell down, the other would have to ride for help and if they did, they'd likely come back to a corpse given the current conditions. The temperatures continued to drop as fast as the drifting snow and if the ice dangling from tree limbs were further indication, the situation worsened as they rode closer to town.

"Hang on!" He yelled over his back. "Carly! Hang on! We're almost there!"

"I hope so because I don't know how much longer I really can stay with you here! I need more than a man's empty promises about right now!" She flirted with danger because fear consumed her. She'd never been so cold in her life and she

wished she'd listened to Rose. The whore tried to get her to leave with her the day she paid her a visit but no, she wanted to prove the woman right—*I'm just stubborn and stupid*. She quickly criticized herself. Maybe the ignorance stood out more than her bull-headed nature.

The lead horse slipped but didn't fall. "Get back!" Robert warned, but it proved unnecessary. Thankfully, he didn't go down. If he had, Robert could've been injured and now wasn't a good time for accidents, as if there were perfect times to be more prone to one.

Even though they were almost there, Carly knew she faced the weather's cruel branch and she started to slip in and out of sleep. She felt cold, disoriented and very, very numb.

* * * *

"What the hell were you thinking?" Rose's voice filled the room.

Robert cleared his throat. "With this storm coming on, Rose, I couldn't just leave her there like a sitting duck. A woman needs to be taken care of in conditions like this and if her husband didn't want to do it, then I felt up for the task."

Carly rolled over. She felt the mattress beneath her and very warm. The cold must've cradled her into a sleep because it was nearly nightfall when

they'd reached the saloon. Now, the sunshine filled the cozy room with a bright announcement of a new day. Outside, it glistened across the snow and ice and from sleepy eyes, Carly saw the snow-filled streets of the town below. She knew where she was then. She'd been carried into a whore's room and now she must've been lying in a whore's bed.

"Grief," she moaned. "I wonder how many times Preston's been here before." A passing thought, but there nonetheless, she mumbled the words before she fell into a restless sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Rose took the time to dress Carly up like a plaything. She had on petticoats and a corset that seemed tight enough to teach a woman to appreciate air, maybe even savor it. Carly swore when she was finally out of the damn thing, she would never take breathing for granted again.

She looked out the window and imagined what it would feel like to work in the saloon. She casually wondered what it would be like to never know a man's love like she'd once known the love Preston willingly gave her. Of course, his love had been brutally stripped away with just as much passion as he once gave it.

Rose walked into the room. "Well, look at you just as pretty as a picture."

She felt her skin blush when the whore nodded her approval. She felt womanly and yes, beautiful. "Rose, I want to ask you something."

The worldly woman reached for a brush and ran it through her hair once more before she

tossed it on the bed. "I'm probably not going to answer you, but go ahead."

"Why would you bother with me? I mean, why would you care if I stayed out there in the middle of this storm or not?"

Rose tossed her dazzling red locks over her shoulder. "You need to have a good time, too. Just because your man leaves you hanging out to dry up like an old maid doesn't mean you can't have some fun." Rose shot her a knowing look. "Besides, I may just put you to work."

"That's what I thought you wanted to do," Carly teased.

"Darlin, if I put you on my time, nobody else here would work. Now remember, the way you're dressed because, even though you are dressed like a lady, you are in a known whorehouse. No one here will know you're staying in the hotel as a guest unless you tell them."

She was so damned naive and it irked her own nerves. "What do you mean?"

Rose took a deep breath and said, "Be sure if you tell someone you're staying here, you take the time to elaborate because I don't need you running home with your head between your thighs." She snickered and then shut the door behind her.

Carly heard the deafening noise of a waiting crowd. The loud piano rang out the pending

sounds of a brewing party. Turning back to the looking glass, she decided she looked pretty one minute and the next, decided with her lone unanimous vote, she indeed looked ridiculous.

She paced around the hotel room and then allowed herself a rare indulgence and giggled, trying to force herself to sound a little flirtatious. Without an audience to hear her, she tried it again. It had been ages since she'd spent the night in a hotel room and she had Rose to thank for the generosity. There were new faces in town and strangers everywhere. She liked the idea of going to sleep in a place where she could feel safe with a locked door to hide behind.

The party below beckoned her and she longed to go downstairs. She wanted to be in the crowd with the lustful eyes of several cowboys watching her. Many would recognize her. Those who knew her understood she'd be there because of winter setting in and some would even know Robert saved her from the vilest of storms. He'd likely become the town's young hero.

Carly stepped onto the landing and looked down on the people already in the throes of a wild celebration. The old piano in the corner didn't have a true musician pounding out a tune, but he played his selection loud and provided enough tunes to liven up those there to drink in life.

She saw recognizable faces, cowboys she'd rode

with on the open range. Several of them knew her well because of the weeks they'd all spent on cattle drives. Some of them had wives, but preferred whores.

Swallowing back short-lived anxiety, she glided down the stairs, concentrating as she put one foot in front of the other. Some of the locals tilted their hat in her direction. A few threw out comments about her new attire. Several asked if she'd changed professions and she laughed with them when they offered a smile or a tilted mug in her direction.

A woman who spent years guarding her purity, Carly gave it up to a man who no longer wanted her. Some probably wouldn't blame her if she made the sudden career switch. After all, why not? She'd slept under blankets of stars with some very attractive cowboys. She knew most of them by name so establishing a clientele and stepping out as a new whore for hire might prove profitable.

She should have changed professions just from need alone. Preston took her into the realms of ecstasy for days and hours on end and then, in an instant, every promise he'd made to her, he broke just as fast. After the anger left her, the scars remained. Her body burned with need. It broke into bits and pieces one minute and hungered like nothing she'd ever experienced, the very next.

A cowboy at the bottom of the stairs glared at her with the unrestricted and raw lust of a man ready to breed. That same ache she felt in her skin, she saw in his eyes. Tanned handsome and marked by the sun, he probably saw his forties early by the appearance of leathery skin, but he had the kindest eyes.

"Ma'am." He tilted his hat in her direction.

She nodded and felt her cheeks heat with shocking embarrassment, mainly because of the thoughts spiraling through her mind. Damnation if she didn't go back to her room right then, she might just drag him back there next time she did. Instead, she walked closer to the bar. She needed a drink.

Flirting with the gentleman standing across the room, everywhere he moved, he kept her in his sights. Carly decided he was easy enough to look at and maybe it wouldn't hurt to consider a night alone with him. They continued to challenge possibilities with lustful stares. At one point, she even flirted openly, providing a wink and then a come-and-get-it swipe of tongue, moistening her lips and tempting an approach. She took the glass of whiskey the barkeep offered and moved her lips over the rim. Without sipping, she batted her eyelashes playfully and then looked over to the entryway.

That's when she saw *him*.

He walked into the saloon carefully, almost in slow motion. His rugged good looks and towering strength carried him in like a man who entered with the intent to command attention. And did he ever get it.

Preston approached her, lust and anger lingering in his eyes. If she had any doubts whatsoever of what he wanted, she only had to revisit the past and remember. Perhaps he wanted what most men longed for when they avenged a death...public revenge.

The moment he entered, there wasn't any question about it. He came there for a woman. He walked in there because *his woman* was in *that saloon*. He glared at the man who held Carly in a heated trance. He gritted teeth and the sneer probably did enough to warn him off because the man not only looked away from Carly, but smirked at Preston.

She watched both men curiously. They looked ready for a gunfight one minute and eager for a card game, the next. She turned around, refusing to face him. Her ability to ignore him only lasted for a split grain in time.

No one missed Preston's rapid strides across the room. The piano player stopped playing. The barkeep froze in place. Whores watched and those who knew him, trembled. Each step he made landed with a definite agenda. The man had

something on his mind, something much heavier between his thighs.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded to know as his gaze locked on hers.

"I'm here with someone," she lied.

"Not likely. Try again."

"You don't know!" she fired back. "Robert Barkley." She should've left the young man out of it. She didn't owe Preston any excuses or explanations.

She swallowed hard and thought about the past nights she'd spent alone. Out there on the open prairie, she didn't have anyone to breathe sweet nothings in her ear. Without someone to tell her how pretty she looked and no one to make false promises, she'd missed the ability to want and need the strength of an able cowboy. Now, every muscle tightened because she understood lust. It pooled between her legs.

Damn him. Damn him to hell and back again for leaving her filled with necessities...the kind only a man could fulfill. Before Preston, she didn't need or want. She didn't have a must-have desire for what a man's body could supply. Now she did—and because of him, she'd have an unquenchable thirst. *It was his fault.*

"I don't see Barkley here. Where is he?" He looked around the room. "Barkley, hell. His momma isn't going to let him out of her sight."

Her jaw set and she turned away from him before she reached for the bottle of whiskey the bartender put in her grasp. She poured herself a drink and he took it from her immediately.

“Damn you. Answer me with a bit of honesty, why don’t you?” His gaze settled on her chest. Soft burgundy velvet covered most of her body, but the cleavage of womanly gifts proudly escaped, drawing a man’s naked eye, if he wanted to enjoy a peek.

“Fine,” Carly bit out. Her eyes watered. If not from the anger, then the memory of a love lost. “I’m here with Rose. I’m trying out the profession.” She looked around the room and turned up her whiskey glass. “You know, seeing and being seen.”

Preston grabbed the whiskey off the bar and two glasses. “I’ll settle up later.” He never looked at the bartender as he moved by her.

She’d just let out a sigh and propped her elbow on the wooden ledge when his hand grabbed her wrist. He pulled her through the maze of people and up the flight of stairs.

“You want to see and be seen? Great, sugar. I’ll let you see and you’ll damn sure draw some attention.” He called out behind him and didn’t miss a beat, “And if you aren’t careful, I’ll fuck you so hard, you’ll damn sure be heard, too.” He wanted everyone to hear him—loud and clear.

The possessive tone he took warned off bystanders by making it known to the room—his wife remained *his woman*, in every sense of the word.

“The hell I will!” she yelled, pulling away from him in an effort to escape. It didn’t matter. He caught her, halting her efforts. She wasn’t as strong and she was definitely smaller than Preston. He set the glasses and bottle down long enough to toss her over his shoulder and then retrieve them again once he had her thrown securely over his back.

“Put me down now! I don’t belong to you!” She struck his back with fists fired by passion and resentment, but fueled by nothing more than a forgotten kind of love—the sort that tries a woman’s patience. It threatened to burn a woman’s shown hand quicker than any other.

Men watched. Some from out of town started to move in their direction, but were quickly stopped by the locals. Their story unfolded horrifying tales most likely explained as a lover’s quarrel or differences that needed to be resolved in private ways.

Preston moved down the hall quickly. “Which one?” He looked at the rooms and then set her down. “Damn you! Which one? I’ll bust in every single—”

“Have it your way. It’s that one,” she said,

pointing two doors down. He grabbed her forearm and pulled her with him. She took tiny steps and tried to keep up without ripping her borrowed dress. Preston led her deeper into the whorehouse into a room she didn't want to be in, at least not with the likes of him.

CHAPTER FOUR

He jerked her to him and didn't waste time. "Come here." He held her tight against his chest with nothing but raw passion apparently on his mind and true desire on his lips. The throaty call proved dominant. Just two words spoken from a man starved for a little tongue action.

"Go fuck yourself!" she screamed, backing away from him. His touch seared her soul, broke her heart.

"No. I've done that and the truth is, I'm not as good at it as you are and I imagine I won't improve with age."

She gulped, watching him robbed her of the heartfelt anger she often experienced. And it also deepened it.

He dropped his holster on the bedside table and then sat down on the bed. "So how much do you charge?" He eyed her curiously and should've prepared for the upcoming battle. If he had to bring out the guns, she might as well bring them

out too...blazing.

"From you? Ha! You wouldn't touch me if you were the only man here."

He never flinched. "Pay attention, sugar. *I am* the only man here and we're negotiating terms. Now, do you want to be paid for a fuck or everything?"

Her lower lip went out. She quickly bit down on it and drew blood in an instant. "Damn you. If I charged, it would be more than you could ever afford."

"I doubt it." He kicked his boots off and then scooted his butt across the bed until his back was at the headboard. "I said, how much?" Savage implications fell before he forced an evil but ratifying smirk.

Carly swallowed hard. He looked good enough to eat. Good enough to swallow whole and she could do it because she'd all but done it before. That's when it came back to her in a rush. *Slim*. The thought of him made her want to hurl. The words that cut her heart out soon followed. *He was my brother damn you. My only brother*. Now, Preston was in her bed ready to fuck her and she'd be damned if he'd get his chance.

"I want you out." Her tears almost choked the life out of her and so what if he could see the pain which only rubbed more salt in what was once an

open heart. Preston left it shattered, forever broken and permanently wounded. "Out, I said," she whispered the request once more.

"Baby, you know that's not going to happen."

He stared at her with intense hunger and she saw his lips moisten from across the room, perhaps she even heard his stomach growl too because he was famished—starved indeed. What she didn't see, she heard clearly in a voice oozing with a basic need she understood.

She opened the door and pointed to the hallway. "I said out!" She stood there until she felt like her knees buckled under her. A couple of times her arm gave and she had to force her hand to rise again just to point with more intensity and more determination. "Out!"

Preston left the bed and slowly pursued her, making time matter. He didn't get in any particular hurry. She wanted to run but if she did, he'd catch her in the hall.

She ran anyway.

And, well, he did, too. Without any problem, he snatched her wrist, looped his arm around her waist, and pulled her inside the room again, slamming the door. He pinned her to it with his hand firmly against her stomach. "One more move and I'll fuck you where I stop you. I swear it. I'll bend you over that banister and let the whole

damn town see that you still belong to me."

"I belong to anyone but you!" She spat the words in his face and watched for a reaction. "I didn't wait for you to decide if you wanted me. I took who was there for the taking," she lied. Damn did she ever spew her fibs.

"Careful, Carly. Remember who you're talking to here because I know you. I'm sure you'd like for me to think you've had another man, but woman, it took you long enough to have me, you haven't been with another—I'd know it. This body is only meant for my fingers." His hands propelled over her with a rough agenda. One he hadn't used with her before.

The tears came and then fell in droves. "Get the hell away from me! You lost your rights to me when you told me to go home and never come back!"

The pad of his thumb ran over her lower lip and he concentrated on her mouth, dismissing the moisture staining her cheeks. "I miss you." His words held sincerity but his eyes remained distant. They were dark, somewhat empty, cold, revealing bitterness and heartache with equal deliverance.

"Let me taste you. Just let me...please let me hold you," he muttered, moving closer then taking the kiss he wanted.

His lips claimed hers with gentleness, but their

lust took a hungry turn. Manly hands swept over her and he held her hands clasped against his thick thighs. When he released her, his fingertips tousled her hair and then weaved through the tangled mass created for and by him.

At first she turned him away, but not by words. She fought against the kiss, first looking to the left and catching his tongue at her right ear. Resistance failed and she stretched her neck, pursed her lips. It was no use. His mouth covered her neck and waited for acceptance. She shifted to the right and without a breath to spare, recognized the battle he wouldn't let her win.

"Please, Preston, oh please..."

"I will, baby. Oh my sweet, sweet baby. Hell's fury, you know I will."

Her neck snapped back into a forward position and her hands flew to his chest as she shoved him away. "Don't. Damn you! Don't you dare take my words and turn this into me wanting you and needing you."

His jaw twitched. "Fine. I'll do something better. Since you say you don't need me...that is what you're saying, right? Then why can't you prove it, huh?"

"I don't," she exclaimed. Then, an unexpected moan slipped from her lips. His fingers parted her folds.

One hand pushed aside her panties and the

other cupped under her vagina, his fingers dipped inside her pussy and he thrust them deep. "Then tell me something, baby. What the fuck are you doing so damn wet if you don't want me?" He gritted his teeth, and growled like hell. If carnal intentions existed before, they defined the man now.

Carly held her head up in proud defiance. She needed him. She wanted him—more than she'd ever wanted anything in her life, but she wasn't going to have him for more than a moment. She saw it in his eyes and what she didn't see, she sensed. It surged through his kiss even though his lips held delicious familiarity, but strangely enough, empty of what she missed most.

Preston wanted her. His body needed her for sinful pleasures but his heart seemed out of reach. If she could find her way back to the Preston she once knew, she'd never ask for anything more. What shocked her most was the way she reacted to him in much the same way regardless of the love missing between them. All because of his kiss, she learned more about where they were headed and it was definitely a far cry away from where they'd once been and the love they once shared.

With her elbow, she forced her way past him toward the bed. Her back to him, she called out

over her shoulder. "Then if I'm so ready for you, what the hell are you doing all the way over there. Get me out of this dress." She moved her long blonde hair to the side of her neck and waited. She didn't stay in her clothes long.

He released the zipper and soon the corset was untied and all of her belongings were in a pile designated as hers. His clothing was strewn about in another loose stack. Seemingly, the cloth told individual tales of separated lives.

She refused to think much about it. There were other things to contemplate. Perhaps a few negotiations to be made and one that she was certain she wouldn't bargain with regardless of what transpired. This was a meeting of bodies. A meeting of souls mating on their own. Their hearts and their love would never be a question. It was dead. It died with Slim and as far as Carly was concerned, it must've been buried with him, too.

Preston's lips and limbs were trained, skilled almost, and whenever he'd touched her before, he'd always used a slow hand, but that was a long time ago. Things changed. He acted angry because he wanted her, mad as hell for reacting to her with want and lust rather than pure contempt.

With her back to him, she let him guide them because she didn't want to turn around and face off with him again. She needed him inside of her, but she didn't want to see what his face threatened

and exposed.

Preston's arms moved around her slender waist and he held her belly with two clammy palms flat against her smooth skin. He kissed her nape and nibbled her lobe, losing himself in the moment for a short period of time. He stopped abruptly, and pushed her down to the bed.

With her cheek mashed against the mattress, she waited. It seemed like a dream that she was with him like this. No, reality didn't offer a mesmerizing fantasy. This quickly turned into a nightmare. The love for Preston had been so strong that she could allow them one night, but as the tear fell to the sheet beneath her skin, she knew if he took her like this, he would be dead to her forever.

He braced himself over her. "Look at me."

"You wanted to fuck, so fuck. I don't have to watch you while we do it."

"Like hell you don't," he growled, touching her shoulder.

Once his hand caressed her skin, she felt a lingering burn from a never-smoldering fire. Shrugging him off, she managed to warn with a simple "Don't," before adding, "just get this over with."

A chuckle fell from his mouth. "That's the way you want it, huh? Rough, is it?" He grabbed her around the waist and slid her down the bed.

For a minute, she imagined him taking her as she expected – hard and fast. Instead, he rolled her over, and pinned her arms above her head.

“What now Preston?” she bit out. “Can’t you fuck me without looking at me?”

“Mercy hell, woman, you fight me for no apparent purpose.”

“I fight you with a vengeance. *I do not want you!*” She screamed back at him. The pain in his eyes lifted her soul rather than crushed her. She saw that he still cared and she knew it hurt him to hear that she might not. Rather than keep her thoughts to herself, she spilled the truth as she perceived it. “What’s wrong, Preston, you can send me away, but when I let you know that you destroyed any feelings I might have for you, it’s all you can do to fight back tears. Well, *come on, baby,*” she used what sarcasm she could muster, “We both know what this is, we both need *it*, and that’s why we’re here. So be a man, Preston. Finish the job or I’ll go down there and find a cowboy who will.” Each word fell easily, but every syllable stung her before it reached the man on top of her.

A taunting smile tilted his lips and his head dropped down to her chest. “You aren’t rushing me, Carly. I may hate that I still want you, but I do all the same. I will take my time having you because like it or not, you’re my wife and acting like it will be all but required.” He muttered the

final words and she hated how he addressed her.

He didn't allow her time to retaliate with words of her own stored anger. Instead, he worked at pleasing her, just like a man should do for the woman he still claimed for a wife. She convinced herself it was his duty if he had the audacity to still claim her for his own.

His tongue circled her pointed nipple and he brought it in between his teeth before he released it with a lingering lick. His hooded eyes proved he had further intentions and it happened to be the objectives that changed the course they were on before robbing them of any intimacy they might find.

She rolled over to the side and quickly off the bed. Grabbing her clothes and holding her ridiculous dress in front of her, the tears came fast and hard. "Get out of here."

"No," he stated firmly.

There wasn't a snowstorm in hell or the prairie for that matter, that would stop or quiet the heat they would find in one another. Carly knew Preston. The problem he had in just fucking her into another world held obvious—he remembered her past. He was afraid if he forced her, she would never forgive him and the problem they both faced, the barrier they couldn't break through was the one allowing them both to hate themselves and each other for being so drawn to one another.

Preston sat on the edge of the bed. "Damnation, woman. Can't you lay down your guns and knives just for one night?" His knees fell apart, but he didn't look down on himself to see just how much he tempted her.

She swallowed hard. Fighting desire didn't come easy whenever Preston came around. It had been the same way before she ever surrendered the first time and hell's fury, it continued regardless of the pain they'd caused each other. "I want you to—"

"Go. Yeah, so you've said. I heard you, but understand me when I tell you, I have no reason to leave. Maybe you're stuck with me." He casually looked at himself, and then shot her a devious grin. "And I have no desire to leave here before having you as my own again."

"You had plenty of reasons to kick me out though, didn't you?" It was hard to forgive and forget.

"What do you want me to say? I'm sorry? Is that what it takes to get you in my arms *tonight*?" His voice shook with a hint of sincerity.

"I don't want anything from you," she informed.

"You push me away but your body brings me back. I'm going to ask you once and only once, what do you want? What do you *really* want? I'm a lot of things, but I will not rape you, even

though I don't think I would be taking something without it already being prepped and prepared since you've proved it in more ways than one."

"You disgust me." She didn't answer his direct question.

He noticed.

She quickly moved to the settee as if she planned to sit down, but he jumped up and moved her back to the bed. He pushed her deliberately down, forcing her to look up at him. "Then fine, I disgust you. Maybe it's true but even so, you want me."

He lay down beside of her. His hand covered her mound, cupping over it with a playful rub before his middle finger moved past the slit and dipped in for an invited bath wringing with the lust her body refused to deny.

"That's what I thought. You are truly revolted by me. I see that now." Another finger joined the first. With a swifter movement, he fucked her with steady fingers and an open mouth. His jaws closed and opened slightly each time he moved into her.

Knees fell apart. She refused to look at him but he stared and waited. Defiance finally moved her gaze back to his.

Damn if he wasn't going to fuck her now. She was drenched with a need so profound that only a night with him would quench the passion burning, no raging, from within.

CHAPTER FIVE

She put up a fight until his fingers danced inside of her like they were searching for comfort and the way she responded to him didn't slight him in the least. Her body willingly offered up quite the consolation prize. He'd missed the feel of her slick heat warming his hand and diving into her space with just a little bit of restrained pressure only made his dick harder.

Her hips met his manual stimulation and finger fucking with an ultimate show of genuine appreciation. He carefully took her to the brink of what he wanted her to think would start the orgasmic end and then he withdrew and simply stared into her waves of tear-stained eyes. They threatened to spill, but damn her, she didn't let them fall when he most wanted to see them.

She held onto his forearm and pulled him closer. He tried to kiss her once, twice, hell it was probably three or four times, but each time she turned away. She only wanted his hand, not his

lips. So he punished her with what he allowed her to ride out and what he refused to stimulate further.

His fingers stroked inside of her with a force strong enough to cross over the intimate barriers that would hold most virgins at bay, but his woman wasn't innocent. No, he stripped her of it months ago and it was why he knew without question that she would always belong to him. Her eyes closed when his hand moved rapidly into her. He almost let her take the climax riding in for her, but he stopped and withdrew all over again. "Tell me where you want me."

She shook her head and swallowed hard.

"That's okay, baby, we can do this all night." His fingers worked under her casually, skirting around the small opening of another intimate threshold, but the tips only dipped once. She squirmed and he moved up against her. His cock hard against her thigh, his lips went to her ear. "I will not fuck you unless you beg me for it." He sneered then. "I'm not the one demonstrating need here, Carly."

His guess was, she probably knew better than to believe him. He had the best of intentions when he made the promise because he'd worked her into a heated storm, and following through on sexual gratification seemed more inviting.

Again, he kept his hand positioned under her

pussy, tempting her with a fingertip one minute and a cock the next, but neither invaded nor claimed.

"Damn you!" She rose up to grind against his palm.

He smirked. "Damn me? Oh yeah, you've done that...to a hell I can never leave." He took the shaft of his cock in his hand and fisted it tight against her vagina.

Quick as a whip, she locked her legs behind his back and grabbed his forearms all in one swift move. "Fuck me. Now!"

He shifted his weight and ground against her, biting his bottom lip harder with each thrust. "It's my pleasure, and you'll enjoy it just as much." He knew he pissed her off. Damnation, if he didn't try. He kept her in his focus, but she shut her eyes.

Reaching for her, he held her lower jaw and her mouth fell open. "Damn you, Carly, look at me!" His hips moved and while her body responded to his, moving up and down, allowing his dick to move her toward the rawest of climaxes, she continued to block him out. "Last chance." He warned her and she still refused to look at him so he would make her wait.

"Harder!" she screamed.

He knew she would ask at the appropriate time. He withdrew from her, but his tongue dipped into the mouth he licked right open. Oh but he wanted

her sweet, delicious kiss. She tried to escape the pain kissing him must've brought, but he only found more determination.

"Kiss me back, Carly," he mumbled the words into her open lips, practically speaking to her tongue.

Her mouth closed tightly and when it did, he grabbed her around the neck and made damn sure she knew she wasn't going anywhere. "Kiss me now!" He was forceful because he wanted the lip-lock she owed him. The one that he earned when he taught her how to be a woman, the one kiss she alone could give him to ensure him that everything he held back wasn't for nothing.

The love he still felt for her kept him from other women so she owed him a kiss and he damn sure wanted her to know she'd been forever kissed by him. After a few attempts to move his lips with hers, he was a breath away from trying again. With his dick waiting for entry once more, he moved his jaw, bit his lower lip and thrust into her. "You'll kiss me or I'll torture you with what you want, but I'll refuse you when it matters most." He continued the chatter and false promises. "I won't let you have it all—you won't get a climax from me unless...." He moved into her once and then out again.

Both were exhausted. It didn't matter. He continued the game. Her knees parted more as she

spread wider for him each time he entered her. He gripped her chin again, the pad of his thumb instinctively moved over her bottom lip and his harrowing truth fell from a mouth he would've been better served to place over her nipple. "I've missed you. Sweet mercy hell, I've missed this."

His lips gently landed against hers again. This time, hers parted and accepted. When they did, she found the greatest of rewards, the gifts of heavenly strokes compensating them both for the time wasted while allowing them pleasures of the night. The velvety satisfaction would end when a new day rose with harder challenges riding in with the dawn of a new morn. The lingering problems under the sky and full sun would toss them into the past again. This time, with a renewed spirit their bodies restored.

* * * *

She wanted to leave first. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him. Just staring at him in the dimly lit room made her heart turn flips and upset her beyond any rational understanding. Everything about him, made her nerve endings stand at attention and her heart broke into slivers of unacceptable pain. It was then that she decided, she had to either love him forever or leave him. The later won out since he didn't seem like a man

who would eat crow.

The words he once spat in her face came rushing back with a vengeance. *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.*

Reliving the past and the pain it brought back tempted her tears and as she dressed, she wept until she withered away inside. Crying, she decided, didn't become her and it certainly didn't help mend a wounded heart.

Carly made her way to the door, stepping over the petticoats and dress still piled in the floor. Guilt washed over her. She could at least return the clothes to the whore who loaned them with good intentions behind the generous gesture. Gathering them up proved a costly mistake. He shifted and then called to her before she made it out of the room.

His voice broke through the animosity lingering in the air. "So this is the way it's going to be? You really think you can love me and leave me? Just like that? It's really simple for you, huh?"

Swiping away the moist evidence of weakness with the back of her hand, she quickly brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. Boldly, she turned to face off with him. "Preston, you give yourself way too much credit."

He sat up only on one elbow.

A thin sheet covered him, but barely, At the waist she saw proof positive there would be plenty there for a repeater if she wanted it. The imprint pushed its way through the sheet.

He noticed too. More precisely, he saw her gaze drop.

"Far more than you should, in fact," she advised.

"Do I now?" His voice didn't provide frisky entertainment. No, it held the same contempt she'd heard from him the night his brother died—at her hand. Her shoulders squared off as a defense mechanism of sorts and rather than run from him, she walked over to stand by the bed. "Yes, more than you realize because what went on here last night was anything but loving—fucking maybe—but loving? No, Preston, don't ever fool yourself into thinking you had me from the start. You didn't. I needed a man and you were there, but believe me when I tell you that it won't happen again." She saw the pain creep across his face and weaken him to the quick.

"I won't expect it then."

His reply only burned hell's fury higher. "Good," she replied as she turned away from him, "because I will look to another when I find myself in need of a man with similar gifts and a rock hard iron can surely fulfill me with the same pleasures of the skin."

* * * *

"The hell you will," he exclaimed, grabbing her. Thanks to her prissy little remark, she wouldn't find a clean escape. When she yelped, he instinctively released the grip he had only because he didn't want to hurt her, but she made a dash for the door again and left him with little cause to worry about bringing her pain. In fact, as hard as he was, he might just give her a little something extra to scream about, if she pushed him, and she might. The woman knew how to race a man's pulse.

Her set eyes dared him. "Let me go. Preston, this isn't some kind of sick foreplay. I have to ride out to the ranch to check on things and —"

"I'll do it for you," he said softly, bringing her body against his chest and watching the strand of hair fall from her head. He caressed her cheek. He raised his hand to secure it like he typically would have done, but stopped himself about the same time she caught his wrist.

Wiggling free of him and the aggravation of a ready cock pressed up against her breeches, she cursed him. "Damn you! Damn you to hell and stay there this time!" She marched around the room, clearly distraught. Her fiery eyes no longer brought only the sea of blue but hot-red fire

radiated from them.

"I'm sure you'd like it a lot if I went there, but, baby, make no mistake, every night you aren't with me, I walk through the flames of it. I know the hell of heartache, I promise you." He made the confession. Lord help him, he spilled his truths.

"You asked me to leave! Your brother almost raped me and you told *me* to leave because I protected myself!"

"You shot and killed him, Carly!" He fired right back. Maybe they needed to talk about this. Maybe it was time to understand. See her side of things, not that he really believed she could put a different slant on things, but they needed to spat out a few harsh words and thrash around again if it helped. Regardless of the outcome, it was time to put this behind them.

He struggled to put his denim pants on—a man had a time with tight denim when his cock was hard and, while his size quickly diminished with the pending argument, it took a lot for normalcy to return. Maybe he gave himself too much credit. He glanced down again and doubted it.

He looked back up at her and saw the anger. Yep, she was ready for the fight. He understood it would one day come down to this. Maybe it was why he'd dismissed her so easily before. Truth told, he didn't want to fight Carly, he wanted to love her.

Her breasts heaved under the white blouse that he always loved to see her in simply because it showcased the unblemished contour of a perfect woman. The one woman he would love until she either put him in a shallow grave right along with his brother or they both decided they couldn't live without the other one. He sat down on the bed and tugged on his boots. "Damn it, woman. Doesn't a life mean anything to you?" He said it with exasperation.

"I don't know, Preston, you tell me. After all, you seem to think I'm capable of murder without a cause. Ask yourself a few things though. Why, was it a big secret to keep it from me that you and Slim were brothers? Hmm?" Her scorn took on a very vengeful look and her words took them to a whole new level. "In fact, we have a lot of unanswered questions, Preston. See, I believe your father knew you were sleeping with the only woman who walked this earth that reminded him of the love he lost when he killed my mother."

"That's not the whole truth and if you'll just listen—"

"I promise you, I've heard all I ever want to hear from you and I swear to you, if you ever come near me again, I'll kill you and put you out of the misery you seem to carry around on your back."

He glared at her for the longest time as he tried

to escape her painful threat. She didn't mean it, surely to heaven and back down to earth again she didn't mean it. Still, the beautiful blue pupils he loved to see in the heat of passion, once again took on the ice blue chill he feared. She possessed killer eyes and for all he knew—murderous instincts, too.

"You don't mean that and you damn well know it." He stood, walked over to her and found he was looking down the barrel of a gun ready to shoot out her point in one direction or another. With his hands in the air, he taunted her. "So you'd kill me like you killed Slim. Maybe I should be asking you the same questions you wanted me to answer. Maybe you knew I was Slim's brother and you might have even known that I was cut from the same cloth as the man who killed your family. Let's just say you're the one who set out for revenge and who knows, maybe you're trying to claim it." He moved closer and closer, inch by calculated inch.

"Don't you move one step closer or I'll..." Her hand trembled and her eyes watered.

He grabbed the gun quickly and tossed it on the mattress before yanking her toward him again. "Or you'll what?" His lips slanted over hers. "You'll kill me or love me?"

Always ready to take advantage of a man caught with his pants down, Carly hit him square

with the force and will of a man's punch behind the swing. "Damn you, woman!"

She gathered up her things and ran for the door.

Her hand was on the knob when he literally tore it away from turning it toward the freedom waiting beyond their borrowed room. Her golden hair swirled around her shoulders and he pushed her back to the bed, kicking and screaming.

"Get away from me! Now! I want to go! I hate you!" She cried as she sang out the pitiful words, as if telling him a lie would make it true if she screamed it loud enough. So she tried again. "I said I hate you!"

He nodded. "You have a right to despise me, but the fact is, you hate as much as you love me and those reins crossing up in the middle is what's tearing your heart out."

She set her jaw.

When he spoke again, the lust dripped from his lips. "Don't think about the hurt you feel. Just kiss me." He lowered his mouth to hers.

"When hell freezes over," she whispered.

"Damnation, is it chilly here," he said, right before he took the first kiss of the many he wanted.

CHAPTER SIX

They were at this sacred place. A place where she'd visited again and again in her mind and yet he tried to take her there all over again without cause or reason and most definitely without worrying about the consequences to follow. The end results bothered her most. His hand slipped under her blouse in just a short fraction of time but nonetheless, it froze the moment.

"Stop," she cried.

"Not a chance." Wild fingertips moved to her back in a stroking sensation before he let out a moan. "Hells fury, I'd kill a man for so much as contemplating the stroke of one hand over you."

His words were deliberately spoken into her ear and she shuddered against them. "You don't own me, Preston."

His eyes were haunted when he drew back to gaze into hers. The imprints of dimples formed without a second to spare and his hand quickly dropped down her waist and across her thigh.

One finger pressed through her slacks with just the right amount of pressure to drive home a point. "I damn sure have the papers for this and I don't share."

Wiggling free right then wouldn't have been an option, but a hard knock against the door guaranteed an interruption. Maybe she felt instant relief—maybe not. She reached behind her and turned the knob before greeting their visitor.

Robert Barkley stood in the hallway of the saloon with his hat in his hand. "Good morning, ma'am."

"Robert, for goodness sakes," She pulled him inside the door quickly and slammed it behind him without a second thought, "your momma will beat your hide off if she hears you're here at the saloon."

His eyes immediately focused on the tangled mess of bed sheets. "Now what did I tell you yesterday?"

He didn't offer, but she quickly remembered. He wanted her to think he didn't care what his mother said. He'd become a man, after all.

He nodded at Preston who casually sat on the settee with his arm up over the back and his legs spread apart. "Morning Preston."

"Morning, Robert. How's the weather?"

"The weather?"

"I'm assuming it's the reason you came up here

this morning to see my wife. You know, to tell her how cold it is out there and all." His gaze narrowed on the young man in front of him.

Carly kept her back to Preston and focused with more interest, on the sexy cowboy in front of her. "Has the snow let up?" she asked.

"The weather? Oh yeah, it's exactly the reason I stopped by to see you."

Carly smirked. It formed before she tried to conceal it. He looked damn cute standing there with his cowboy hat dangling from his fingertips.

Robert's gaze went back to the bed again and this time, she saw a glimmer of pain when his focus returned to her. He took the time to extend a man's stare, the kind he wanted her to fully understand. He, too, had bedding a woman on his mind.

The implication didn't leave anything to the imagination. Her wide smile flashed and she immediately pressed one palm over the back of her hair nervously. "I must look a wreck."

Preston stood then. Maybe a man quickly realized when another man tossed around some ideas of fornication—never mind adultery. He definitely noticed when his woman was interested in another man.

"So tell me, Robert, since you're here and all," he studied the younger cowboy, summed up the competition and continued, "how's the weather?"

You surely didn't leave your momma's breakfast table to ride over here to the saloon with plans of taking my wife here back to the prairie." He nodded toward the window. "I can see for myself, it's hardly a fine day for riding. It sure as hell doesn't look like the weather will hold long enough for her to go back out there."

Robert looked at Carly through gentle eyes. She swallowed. The man, young or not, had a gentle spirit. Something she wanted to believe Preston had too, but she knew better. Bitterness and heartache turned him into someone she didn't want him to be and because of it, maybe they'd never find a simple resolution or a way to fix things between them.

Robert shifted his weight nervously. "I thought I might offer to ride out and check on things for you, *Miss Corbaine*." He smiled with ease. He knew damn well what he said and how he said it.

Carly almost laughed outright.

"It's Mrs. Evans, in case you forgot the part where I made an honest woman out of her." Preston walked over to the nightstand and retrieved his holster.

She noticed the agitated spring in his step.

"In case you're in doubt, take a good look over here." He turned then and pointed to the bed.

His quick survey took a close visual accounting and it was carnal, she almost felt his gaze undress

her to bare flesh. He growled instinctively, but more for show than anything else.

A few short steps forward and he slapped Robert on the back, "Yes, sir, I know this town has been full of whispers, but in case you aren't real clear on it, let me just say, the making up is the only reason to ever fight with a woman."

Carly fought against another wide smile only because the whole fiasco played out in front of her as downright funny. Preston no more had a claim to her than he did when he walked into the saloon the night before. He certainly wasn't going to stake it now with the young and ever-so-handsome Robert in her room.

Carly placed her palm on Robert's forearm. She watched Preston from her peripheral vision and saw him flinch, but she felt Robert's arm jerk underneath her fingertips. "Thank you for the offer, but I'll ride out later today."

As if on cue, both men chimed in at one time. "The hell you will."

She swallowed hard as she watched the battle for her hand begin. Four words were spoken at precisely the same time and eyes then focused on her. By the time the animosity drifted into the room's center, Preston's face was bright red. It didn't sit well that another man showed concern for his wife. No, he didn't like it at all, not in the least.

A few hours later, Preston paced across the front porch of the saloon. Carly watched him from the bar and laughed easily at the jokes Robert told. She found him humorous and best of all, easy to be around. Still, she never lost sight of the man she once thought would forever own the keys to her heart.

Until now.

Rose glared at him and Robert tilted his hat. "I suppose we should ride on out. Preston said we'll head back to your place while the sun is bright and just camp out in the cabin till morning. Now, don't go worrying your pretty little head, we won't go prowling through your things, Miss Corbaine."

"Mrs. Evans." Preston stamped his feet at the door and attempted to shake off the evidence of snowflakes before he barreled across the room. He glared at the man in front of Carly. "Let me remind you once more, her name to you and anyone interested is Mrs. Preston Evans or Carly. Miss implies something I can assure you she's not."

"And what might that be?" Rose moved closer. Her dancing eyes suggested she found a lot of amusement in Preston's behavior.

He ignored her and tugged gently at Carly's wrist. "Come on."

"I..." She started to protest and then stopped short when Robert spoke up.

"Yeah, Preston. I'd love to hear it, too. From where I'm standing, I see a very available woman."

"That's where you're sorely mistaken." He sneered and turned to Carly again. "Up the damn stairs, now."

She resisted him. "If you're going to ride, you need to go now with the sun at your back."

"Sorry darlin' but I'm not ready yet. Get up those stairs or like I warned you last night," he paused, "right here, right now."

Rose threw up her hands and then patted Robert on the back. "Come on, kiddo, I'll find you a whore of your own."

"I don't want a whore and I think *Miss Corbaine* knows it." To add insult to injury, even though Preston stood protectively in front of Carly, Robert deliberately peered around him and licked his top lip before adding one more dig to drive home his point. "Don't you, Carly?"

"Something going on here, I should know about?" Preston asked.

"No, *not yet*." The answer provided didn't leave the lips of the woman who had been asked, but instead the man who wanted to show all of their cards and felt most compelled to put them out on the table for everyone to see.

Preston pointed at Rose. "Entertain him. Don't disturb us." He grabbed Carly's hand. "Upstairs, now." He turned back to Robert. "I'll deal with you later."

A few minutes later, the door slammed.

"You have no right to do this!" she shouted.

"Honey, I earned the right, or have you forgotten who taught you how to be a woman?"

"You didn't teach me shit, Preston Evans." She walked by him and started to make the bed, perhaps in an effort to prove to him she didn't plan on returning there with him anytime soon.

"Is that right? Well I think somewhere along the way, I must've taught you something because you sure know how to give off the wrong impression to men who want in your pants!"

She tossed the pillows up against the wooden headboard and he grabbed her waist from behind. "Get away from me, Preston." She gave a meek warning. Most men would have interpreted it as a no spoken with a hell-yes meaning.

"Too lame, baby."

Yep, Preston translated it just like he should've. She didn't have one inch of enthusiasm in her demands. "I mean it." She wiggled and tried with some measure of forced effort to pretend to fight for release.

"I'm riding out into the worst storm we've ever

seen in these parts with a man who wants to bed my wife. What do you say I just get rid of him while I'm out there? Hmmm....then maybe we can call it even?"

"You remember who he is before you go off and do something foolish like that because the Barkley family has a lot of power in the San Joaquin Valley. I can promise you his father will have no trouble in hanging you from an Apple tree or burying you in the orange groves."

"Is that right?"

"That's right." She placed her hands on his chest and pushed him away. She walked over to the bench seat in front of the dressing table. "I'm going with you."

"The hell you are."

"The hell I am. You left me alone for all of these weeks and I've been just fine. I'm going back home and in fact, Robert can see me there without a problem. My suggestion is that you stay put here. We'll come on back when we're good and ready."

The getting along part damn near undid the hardest of ready cocks—specifically his because she felt him twitch when he finally pressed up against her again. Preston swooped down on her for a heated kiss. After he kissed some sense back into her, she realized provoking Preston served no real purpose.

"Don't fight me, Carly."

"What do you want from me?"

He didn't make her wonder. "I want what we had last night."

"That's it? Just the sex?" she asked.

"That's it—just the sex."

"Then buy a whore—most of them here need the business."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Preston's horse led the way while Carly remained in the middle and Robert brought up the rear. They were quite the trio and if anyone had met them on the snow-covered road, there would've been a lot of rumors to spread in town. Accusations were tossed about. Threats made one minute became spoken reassurances the next. Promises one man might keep while the other benefited if he didn't.

The wind stirred a mess with less than fifteen minutes left to ride so overall, they didn't have a lot of trouble battling their way through the storm. Once they arrived at Carly's cabin, the freezing chill set in with a true rebel yell and the storm brewing promised more of the same.

When Carly jumped off her mount, she slipped and would have fallen to the cold ground, but Robert stepped up and quickly wrapped her in his arms to save her little bottom from a chilling seat.

Preston shot them a wary look.

"Why thank you cowboy." Carly flirted openly. "I love a man who is there when a woman *truly* needs him." The heated glare she gave Preston drove the point home without any problem.

Preston must've felt he knew the place better than Robert so he immediately took control. "Get her inside and start a fire. I'll bed the horses down." He took the reins of all three animals and led them to the barn. No one had to ask Robert twice. Placing his hand at the small of Carly's back, he rushed her up the front stoop on the porch. Her hands were loaded down with saddlebags and blankets and the hand Robert didn't have on her carried a burlap sack with a few items they would need if the weather prevented them from going back into town.

As soon as they were inside the cabin, Robert took his chance. "I'm not going to be the one left out here. Understand?"

Unlike the Robert she knew, more like Preston, in fact, he moved closer.

"We're clear on the law of attraction, aren't we, Carly?"

She felt her lips quiver and didn't know if they shook from the pure excitement and lust driving her or the true nip in the air. "I think you're asking for trouble, Robert." She might as well warn him even though she had the unexplainable cravings of an interested woman. She planned to try out his

lips in a kiss meant for potential lovers. "I think you're asking for trouble, Robert." She might as well warn him even though she had the unexplainable cravings of an interested woman. She planned to try out his lips in a kiss meant for potential lovers.

"You think so, do you?" He quickly lost the load in his arms before grabbing her handful and tossing it to the floor right along with the other sacks and blankets. "Then show me what you've got and make it worth my effort. If I'm getting into hot water, I want to feel a slow burn so I know it's worth my while."

His pearly white teeth stood out in the dark cabin and she saw his tongue dart in and out in a seductive maneuver—sinful and suggestive, he should've been ashamed. The man had a gorgeous smile and probably tasted about as good as he looked. Oh but she planned to find out. Preston Evans or not, she wanted the man in front of her to kiss her now and he had time to slant his lips over hers and just—

He didn't light a lantern. He didn't start the fire, but earth and heaven did as flames ignited hell's fury. He kissed her with the door open. He wanted Preston to catch them. She thought of it after his mouth moved over hers, but she also wondered why on earth she would care.

This man wanted to kiss her. This man wanted

his lips to lock hers in a dance meant to engage something more than revenge or hateful lust. He liked her. The way Preston once did. He wanted her. The way a man should need and want a woman. His hand went to her hair and she trembled under his touch. "He'll kill you. You have to stop this now."

"I'll kill him if he doesn't share," Robert spoke the words into their kiss.

He just continued to make her feel right at home as his tongue danced with a hopeful promise of what he later planned to do—and there wasn't any doubt. The way the man kissed her, he would lead her places that she wanted to follow. If Preston turned his back for a minute, she'd fuck Robert Barkley because he'd already provoked her lust in just the right places.

"Damn you, Robert!" Preston interrupted them in a huff. He came inside with his fist drawn tight and meeting skin first didn't prove a problem. Taking the first swing came easy for a man like Preston.

The cowboys fought with one punch thrown and one caught. It seemed like they just wanted to take turns with each having their own turn about and fair play. Carly tried to step in and stop them, but it didn't matter.

"You know better than to mess with her Barkley!" Preston shouted out his anger.

"You don't own her, Preston!" Another punch and then another. "Now you never will!"

"What do you—" A harder hit came down and caught Robert in the jaw before he finished driving home a more precise point, "know," Preston growled.

The small chairs slid across the dirt floor and stopped at the wooden area where Carly's table tilted over. She eyed the gun underneath and pulled it out. Stepping out to the front porch, she fired into the open prairie and both men halted. They froze with their fists drawn and ready to strike.

"Now! Stop this nonsense before you both end up hurt!"

Preston's green eyes were true to form—full of envy and resentment. "Then he can keep his damn hands, never mind his mouth, off you."

"You can't have it both ways, Preston Evans!" Carly spouted off at the mouth.

Holding the back of his hand to his lip, he tried to keep the blood from running down his chin. "So you want to fuck Barkley, is that it?"

"Maybe." She didn't lie about it.

"Then he can go to hell." He drew his gun and he cocked it. "And I'm just the man to send him there."

She should've lied.

* * * *

The fire in the fireplace cackled and roared with flames so bright, kindling desire would've been possible if the animosity in the cabin wasn't so thick. Carly finally shook off the blanket she'd kept draped over her shoulders. She walked over to the table to gather the dishes up where they'd eaten canned beans earlier.

For the first time in hours, the stares between men subsided. Everyone gave up the fight. Blame it on the whiskey or a woman's ability to contain and maintain full control. She'd kept the glasses entertained with liquor, including her own. Lucky for her, the drink didn't bring out violence, but instead, the intended euphoria and inner warmth.

When Preston drew his gun earlier, Robert showed no fear. She liked him all the more. She loved a man who stood up for something and Robert didn't care to stand his ground. He wanted her and didn't give a horse's ass what Preston thought about it. He also didn't care if Preston acted like an ass in the process – which he did.

Carly watched the men from across the room and heaven help her, she compared them. They both sugarcoated her vision and each in a different way. Preston defined the tall, dark and handsome cowboy. He had coal black hair and mint green eyes, emerald really, but in the firelight, they

looked softer.

Robert, on the other hand, possessed the opposite physical characteristics. Sandy blonde hair, brown eyes and oh so pretty—in fact, she remembered a time when everyone in town called him a pretty boy. All the girls his own age loved him as much the women her age adored Preston.

She moved a rocking chair to the side of the fireplace. The men were playing a card game. They were able to get along one second and then, after one or both of them gave her a wanton glare, they'd avoid speaking altogether. She leaned her head back and, crossed her arms over her chest. Soon, she rocked her way into a deep sleep. She thought about Preston and Robert as she teetered back and forth.

Preston's eyes showed his life's experience and he'd had plenty of it. Between his father and his brother, Preston lived through hell and because of his own ghosts, he'd hid a lot of it fairly well. The whores in town schooled him in love and worldly ways.

The flipside of everything existed in Robert. He'd been spoiled, really. While Preston's background held a family full of criminals, Robert's family proved politically affluent given the times. He'd been educated by a private tutor most of his life and enjoyed the finer things. His parents were wealthy and his mother doted on

him from the time he was born. Town whores hadn't passed him around. In fact—Carly opened her eyes with the sudden realization. "I bet you've never been with a woman."

Preston swallowed hard. "What the hell?" He realized how Robert's answer would weigh in and it apparently scared him to death.

It should.

Robert's skin flushed. "Where'd you get such a foolish idea?"

Preston looked relieved, but he didn't buy it for a minute because Carly saw the lie spill easy enough from the young man's lips so she knew Preston did, too. He was just glad to know Robert wasn't going to fess up and Carly saw the sudden relief surge through Preston's eyes.

"Yeah, and why would you think it's your business to know anyhow?" Preston snapped.

"I don't think it is." She gathered the blankets at her feet and covered herself up. "I'm curious, that's all."

"Then occupy your mind with other thoughts. It's not something you should talk about as a lady in the first place."

Robert smiled at her and before he thought better of it. He, patted her knee. "If you're offering, I promise I won't let you down."

Preston caught his wrist and pushed him away from her. "She's not, you can bet on it."

“Actually, I am.” She stood and tossed her golden hair over her back. “I’m willing to try just about anything out here to keep things interesting.” She glared at the man she decided then and there she no longer loved. She liked sex with him, but he’d broken her heart and, after he shattered her soul, he couldn’t have it back to repair the damages.

“Preston, you already admitted you only wanted me for sex so both of you men decide if that’s it for you and if it is, then I’ll be waiting.” She nodded toward the area where she typically slept on the floor. The only man she ever took to her bed was Preston, but she didn’t want him there again unless she had company to safeguard her heart. Adding another bed partner seemed like the perfect way to secure her position—their comfortably sexual but separate lives. She lost her balance, dizzy from the idea of one delicious experience. She liked Robert—a lot. “I’ll ask you again, have you ever had sex, Robert?”

Preston’s lips literally rolled into his gums. He looked like a defeated man without options. One ready to witness something forbidden, but eager to kill if it didn’t play out the way he wanted—for his pleasure.

No, he really didn’t have any choice now in the matter. If Robert told her he was a virgin, she planned to be his first and nothing, not even

Preston, would stop them because she really, really liked the idea of something so sacred.

"I've never been—" He couldn't finish.

"Didn't think so," she admitted.

"Why not?"

"It's in the way you kiss," she whispered, sipping her liquor before setting it down on a nearby table.

Preston stood. "Finish your whiskey and go to bed." He handed her the glass again. "I'm not listening to this talk from you and you'll wish like hell in the morning you'd kept your mouth shut."

Slurred words fell through stifling promises. "I hope I wake up with something large enough to occupy my lips. I certainly don't want to wake up with apologies falling from my mouth, do you?"

They glared at one another. No one existed in their empty stares, no one familiar anyway. She didn't even know if she saw Preston at all now.

"You want this?" he asked cautiously. He didn't seem to notice when Robert stood to fetch another log for the fire.

"You know it." She licked the rim of her glass, turned it up and shot the whiskey straight down her throat. The burn going down made her think of something erotic for a chaser. She realized what she wanted to follow the whiskey. She saw two men who provided quite the antidote, if only one of them would nod his approval and give his

okay. She had a feeling Robert wouldn't object.

"You're drunk," Preston complained.

She walked over to the bottle on the table and poured herself another drink. She tilted the glass in the direction of her prey. Yes, both men. "Right again." Two on one, and she liked the odds.

"We're not going to take advantage of a drunk woman." Robert looked at Preston with more questions in his eyes than noble intentions.

"He will." She tilted her head and her glass toward Preston. "If you want to lose out, then it's your loss to carry alone."

Robert moved fast. "This isn't what I want."

"If you're going to play in my bed, this is the only way you'll get there," she spewed the words through moist lips.

"With him?" Robert asked.

Preston sneered. "She'll never go to bed without me, count on it, Barkley."

Carly studied him, shocked by his acceptance. She realized why he didn't mind. He told her their relationship was only about sex, nothing more. He meant it.

"I think she's going to see a lot of nights without you, Evans." He faced Carly. "So you think you owe him or something?"

"He's my husband, but he can't be the kind of man I want him to be. He's smart enough to know I want you. I'm going to have you with him or

without him. He might as well join us.” She touched Robert’s face. “Besides, we don’t have anywhere to go tonight and no one is going to leave this cabin in this weather. Let’s make it a good time.”

She’d live to regret it tomorrow – or maybe live to believe it should’ve been this way from the beginning. After all, Preston brought out a lot of things in her and now, everything he’d brought out had every right of existing there between all of them. She desired both men and she wanted them each in different ways. She didn’t regret it because she didn’t owe any individual man anything so she kept her terms understood – she’d never be owned by another in any form or fashion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Carly stared at the ceiling. No one came in to join her—just her fucking luck. The room had started to spin so she'd stretched out on her bed. Before she drifted off to sleep, she'd heard some whispers, a few chuckles and then nothing at all.

Her bare feet hit the ground. She couldn't remember taking her boots off, but apparently someone did it for her. She quickly tiptoed into the other room and stepped over Preston first and then Robert. Both men were sound asleep. She walked over to the door and grabbed a log from the stack there. She gently pushed it into the fireplace and sat down on the floor with her feet close to the fire. She rubbed the cold from her toes and cursed one of the fellows for leaving her in bare feet in this weather. The whole cabin stirred the coolness and even the fire didn't warm her.

She noticed the snoring change behind her. One man still slept, but one was very much awake and she knew which one before she turned around.

Robert pulled his blanket back. He'd made a nice little padded bed there in front of the hot flames. He patted the area beside him, but he didn't look like he fully anticipated the company – then again, he didn't pat twice. Carly slid over to him and lay down beside him. His arm went to her waist and gently cradled her body closer to his own.

"You're going to love me, Carly. You're going to love me because I've already made it my mission to see to it that you do."

She closed her eyes and listened to his delicious promises. She liked hearing the sweetest of nothings even though she knew in her heart the true love she once had there was now dead on arrival for all others—including the man who once showed her how much loving a man could mean.

Robert shifted his weight and when he did, his hand trembled and he nervously caressed his way under her shirt. His fingertips found a nipple and as soon as he felt her, his hard cock pressed against her leg in a grinding fashion.

Virgins—she wasn't one now, but she damn sure felt the excitement of the one beside of her. The least she could do was lead him. She did. Her hands worked him out of his denim in no time flat as his lips kissed some passion into the heat of the moment. He never left her mouth as his fingers moved across her chest in a race to touch one breast and then the other.

"Carly," he whispered, waiting for a go ahead or perhaps hoping to question if the act alone would mean anything more to her than just provided sex. It wouldn't—or at least, she didn't think so.

"What am I to you?"

"You are what you want to be right now." She was philosophical and drunk as a skunk. She moved her arms around his neck and kissed him with tongue, lips and teeth. Nibbling his lower lip one minute and stroking it clean with a quick peck or kiss the next.

Her hand wrapped around his cock and with small pressure applied, she tugged his size into a perfect rhythm while gliding her hand up and down. The up and down movement increased in speed and she felt confident he knew what came next, but as soon as she pushed her own pants down and kicked them from her, his body went rigid.

The aggressive roll of his hips moved more backward, than forward and she knew without a doubt, her virgin man would be in for a real treat. She'd been told by the more experienced how tight and secure she fit around a man's cock, now she'd know how she felt to a man who didn't know the feel of another woman sliding over him.

"Holy fucking bliss," he growled when he slid in and the true delight of a timeless, never mind

priceless, sway began in an effort to locate the right beat. His hard cock moved in and out as he towered over her and sweat beads formed on his forehead within the first two strides.

Preston stirred. Robert's head dropped to her chest and his mouth finally met the mounds he needed to explore.

Carly's head rolled over to look at her husband. She glared into his eyes and suddenly saw the pain existing there. He didn't move—only watched her through tear-stained eyes as another man discovered the right tempo to finish out an undetermined beat.

"Holy fuck, Carly!" He exclaimed, moving his mouth from her breast. His lips captured hers so she could taste him as he came for her. And come he did—in one spurt of energy, his pleasure found him and when he pounded harder, her legs wrapped tighter. He released her lips and reared back, hammering into her pussy, caressing her nipples and savoring the moment.

When Robert's weight shifted, the blanket fell away and the sounds of slapping bodies filled the room but the visual was surreal. She turned her head and watched Preston, lying beside them, waiting for his turn to envelope the woman he now only wanted to love.

Watching him, watch them, Carly knew her heart owned him more now than any other time in

their relationship. She saw the sorrow. He chose to brand her with his anger and in turn, allowed the semen of another man's cock to mark his woman for his own, also. Now, it was too late to make things right again.

* * * *

Robert reluctantly withdrew. His eyes seemed to search hers for some kind of sign. Surely to hell and back he didn't think he'd find love there. Love was earned and at one time, Preston earned it—then, he reminded himself, he destroyed her with it.

His hands were there to finish what a young man didn't have the ability or desire to end. He knew how to find her spot and he realized need, raw hunger when he touched her. Her juices were mixed now with the cum of the man beside of them, but Preston didn't care. If this was what she needed then and there, then it was his fault and he would pay the hefty price of jealousy.

Robert's cock stroking her just killed him. He didn't want to admit it and thought maybe the alcohol clouded what he believed and thought about the entire act. The truth had a way of showing its ugliness and if his hard dick served as an indicator, he'd also been turned on by the act. Even though he felt seduced, he sensed the

betrayal.

When Robert first entered her, he knew it. It shook him from his dreams. His hairs tingled in his scalp and the back of his neck throbbed with a relentless pain. He opened his eyes and saw hers fill with hatred at first and then suddenly, as if he'd called it out into an open command, the love they once shared existed in her soft blue eyes.

Her gaze stayed tame only for a moment because the calm waters rocked the tears as another man poured into the place only he had visited. It broke his heart—but only for a minute—then it hardened his cock.

Damn it all, he felt compelled to fuck her into the night and he didn't give a damn if he had to share. Shockwaves worked over his nerve endings and he decided he didn't care who they'd been together before, this event would change them and once it did, they'd never be the same again. Maybe the booze played tricks, mind games really. Perhaps but even so, if they did, they played hell on his cock because he possessed a perpetual hard on and only kept one goal in mind.

"Hell and damnation, woman," he whispered into her neck, sliding into place. Where she remained virtually still before, she actively participated with his cock driving her. He understood more about her than most men would ever know about a woman.

He rode into her folds with the intent to fuck a liberating ride right into her core with one or two orgasms. Later, if Robert had some element of luck in his favor, he would move aside. He knew the spite and will of red-hot sexy madness and his woman had it bad. She was angry because what she wanted to use as a tactic to swing Preston into a fit of rage, actually did something else altogether.

"You didn't count on this, baby," he said softly, his smile turning up the corners of his mouth as his strokes tapped her pussy with a familiar beat. Damn she felt hot, smoldering around his cock with a fire he shouldn't have set in motion, regardless of the heat rising from the flames.

Robert's hands were on her then and for a moment, just a sweet second in time, Preston almost told him to move the hell on over and wait his turn like a gentleman, but the pleasure he saw in Carly's eyes allowed for a turn of events—acceptance. Preston's jaws fell open and he instructed her to take him. "Let me see you suck his cock."

Her lips moistened from the first drop of Robert's excitement, Preston's thighs bunched and he pounded out his climax with the thump-thump-thumping sound bouncing off the logs. Five sets of three and he finished off with a growl and groan pure masculine and truly tight with

hunger.

"Don't stop damn you!" Carly's body cried out more as her lips sang the provocative little request. Her thighs closed tighter around him and her inner walls remained moist, the wet heat tempting him to ride it out. Instead, he decided to watch. He moved fast.

"Your turn." He smiled. "Don't be greedy now, do a man's job and finish your woman off if you're going to fuck her."

Carly sneered. "Like you did?"

"You know I can, baby, but the question is, can he?"

CHAPTER NINE

Robert was schooled in lust now thanks to their earlier romp so when he knelt between her legs, this time he didn't have the need to rush and yet she couldn't get him to fuck her. "Don't tell me, you didn't know a woman could need a slow screw as much as a man?"

His hands made a triangle shape and covered her opening with a pinching massage almost driving her to the brink of an unexplainable orgasm. Beads of sweat poured from her brow and, in an attempt to wipe them away, she moved the back of her palm over her forehead and, with it, brought back Preston's hand.

"Now, now, baby. Tell him what you like," he muttered the words into her ear before his heavy breathing proved he planned to have more of the same. His hand brushed over her nipples with his flat palm against the risen nub. "Feel me, baby. Taste me."

Her mouth opened like a quiet unlatching of an obedient woman. She tasted his heat first when

the salty mist of a man simply lingered on her taste buds to tempt her of things to come. She liked the diversion he provided because she needed to come and she wasn't beyond begging for it.

She would beg. And scream and hell yeah, she'd get hers too if these two were going to strum her along like a half-played instrument.

Her tongue slid over Preston's tight shaft and then her mouth moved away from him before she made a vile request. "Fuck me now like the man you are or move the hell over for the man he will always be because I need to come now!"

Robert looked hurt, like a wounded man in the midst of a silent battle. When his limber cock entered this time, her legs squeezed him into the throes of a thrashing fuck like no other.

Preston rocked back on his knees to watch. "Oh hell yeah. You gotcha a live one now, Robert, because I know my woman and she is something else when she's hot as the midday sun."

Fisting his cock, he wanted to join in and he joined at just the right moment—in time to stop the screams.

Her hips moved faster in an upward fashion, barely rolling forward in her plotted motions. Robert pumped slower. She locked and fastened her hips only closer as she rose up to meet him in a grinding maneuver. "Harder!" Glaring at

Preston, she wanted to curse him out loud. His cock truly ruined her for another one and it pissed her off like he wanted it to piss her off.

"What's wrong, baby?" he whispered the words.

Stiffly, she swallowed and with a fisted cock in hand, he moved his tip to her lips and the only groan or moan of satisfaction she was allowed to take now was a true cry of relief, but she cried it out with cock in mouth. The only one set to deliver once again.

The loud thuds on the door came early. "Open up or we're going to bust up your little party by breaking down the door."

Carly shook off the fear as suddenly as she heard the voice on the other side of the door. She'd fully anticipated the vengeance of a robbed man when the storm set in because she knew how the outlaws worked. They waited in the shadows for the most appropriate time and then they struck with a vengeance like the wolves they were. The one on the other side of the door proved vile. He spoke with the same voice as Slim, Preston's dead brother, and she knew today might be the day to meet her maker.

Tangled blankets and clothing scattered all over the cabin provided enough evidence for the men at the door. She assumed they'd peeked in to see

what they were up against since they came to call in the middle of the night. She swallowed down fear as she quickly reached for her clothing and stood to dress in record time, the men followed suit without a second to spare.

"It's your proud papa, Preston. Now open up, son, you've done your part."

The man's voice shook with his evil demeanor and Carly never doubted who stood on the other side of the door. Her eyes speared him with a sword she didn't have, but would've gladly used if someone had been around to offer up their own. "You've done your part? How's that work, Preston? Tell me. How can you *do your part* exactly. When is it ever enough for your father?"

"Carly, so help me, I didn't know he'd be here." He reached for her but she smacked him away.

"Maybe you didn't but I did." She went into her room and Robert followed her. From the door, Preston could see her guns slinging. She tossed a few to Robert and immediately shouted to Preston. "You have two choices here today, Preston. Choose a side and hope like hell it's the right one."

He moved by Robert without interference. "You know me better than any other woman. Look into my eyes now because if I stand with you, I'll be damned if I'll have anywhere to go to ever stand against you, but you have to believe

that's where I want to be or else, I might as well walk out there now!"

Carly's eyes narrowed. "Then ask yourself this question Preston, because you'd better be sure you have the right answers for all of it—the kind you can live with in the end. Where will we be if I fire the shot that sends your father to the hell where he belongs? Because I will you know. Hell's flames are already brighter now with the hope of welcoming him sooner rather than later."

The pounding began again. "Preston!" A very loud and authoritative voice screamed behind the hand delivering the hits into the wooden door. "Open up, son. We have some business here to discuss with Miss Corbaine."

Preston swallowed and looked around her cabin. Evidence of a threesome existed everywhere and suddenly the pain of what he shared, sacred ground really, with another man came back to haunt him with the new day's sobriety and his life's sudden call for an accounting.

"If you have any business at all with her, Father, then you need to know you're doing business with a woman who will mother your grandchildren."

"Like hell she will, son. A whore taking up with two cowboys in weather like this ought to tell you something."

"She's no man's whore. She's my wife."

"Is that right? Then what is she to the man who woke up with his cock up against her side?"

Preston's gaze narrowed on Robert. He didn't have time to be jealous of him. He pointed to the back window and then motioned for Carly to move to the bedroom. "Lay down. They'll have more guns than the last crew we met here."

Carly's eyes closed out the memory of the last time she drew her firearms at the cabin. Things were different then. They fought alone and for far more than what they were fighting hard against now – innocent love.

Her voice hitched in her chest. She was just plain tired. Maybe the killing needed to stop. It was time to let sleeping dogs get up and fight in the frozen prairies. It was time to start living or get on with dying – maybe it was time to be branded by anger.

"I'm sorry." She looked past Preston and glanced quickly at Robert. Then she turned around and walked straight out the front door into the bitter fallen snow.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Preston exclaimed, stepping out behind her where he discovered all guns aimed and cocked.

Preston's father spoke first. "Lower those guns away from my son or all of you will die the slowest of deaths. Move them now!"

The twitch in his cheek showed a slight dimple right under his eye and his cheeks swelled with a couple of them as well. "So you don't want my son to die here today? Mighty nice of you to think so highly of him, but I don't guess it ever occurred to you that he might not share the same sentiments?" He slapped Preston on the back and brought him in for a tight embrace, slapping him between the shoulder blades once more as he did. "Son, I'm glad to see you didn't let this whore destroy your mind like her mother did to me." He smirked and then looked back beyond the young couple. "Where's the young man who woke up on the other side of your woman with a hard on pressed up against her and a smile to boot?"

Robert stepped out with his hands high in the air. Several guns found their mark, making him the intended target.

"No!" Carly stood in front of him with her arms spread out across his chest.

"Move, Carly." Robert gripped her shoulders as if he thought she'd move after the simple gesture. He tried to push her off to the side when one of the cowboys snatched her from him. He dragged her from the porch, kicking and screaming.

"Please! Preston! He's just a young man! Stop this!" She begged him with need and love, heartache and pain. She tried with every scream she knew he'd never have the opportunity to voice

again because she realized what these men were there to do. They were going to finish what they started all those years ago and in order to do it, no witnesses would be left behind.

Preston's dad studied him. "You love her?"

The cowboy holding her tightened his grip. He hissed in her ear and his nasty breath made her sick to her stomach.

Preston tried not to look at her but she realized he still cared about her. Either way he answered would be the death of Robert. She tried to take the burden from him, wanted to save him from the sentence of guilt, but it wouldn't save Robert and she recognized his fate before she cried out. "Leave me alone and take me instead! You're going to take me anyway so let them go!"

Preston's father looked a lot like Slim, the man she introduced to an early grave and he had the same arrogance his deceased son once had. He propped his hips against the snow covered railing next to the stoop. "I asked you a question. Do you love her?"

The crippling bitter cold didn't have to freeze them where they stood, they were already locked and held there as prisoners of the heart and mind, soul and spirit. Preston grunted before he agreed. "Yes, I love her."

"Then, son, I'll save you the trouble of having to do this later." He moved the gun from his

holster and slowly lifted it.

She screamed. "No stop!"

He fired the shot. One to the head—one was more than enough to leave Robert as good as dead.

Carly's body shook. "No!" But it was too late, even a dying Robert never heard her despair.

* * * *

The cowboys sat around her kitchen table. Robert bled red puddles into the snow just beyond the door. She quietly watched for a movement she knew wouldn't be there, but she stared outside all the same.

"Sit down here, little woman. We're going to negotiate a price for your body tonight." Preston's father looked at him. "Don't worry, son, I don't want what you've already had unless you think you can sell her to me for a reasonable price."

Preston's jaw worked gently back and forth almost like he considered it. She quickly tried to think of something to say and that's when it hit her. It was the only way she'd ever walk out of her cabin alive. If Preston allowed his father to take her for his own, then he would lead her back to the home where he'd once taken her mother and she would die there unless Preston had time to save her.

CHAPTER TEN

Everyone stood still in snow and time without a word spoken. Four men in the corner played cards and two were passed out on the floor next to the fire. One even snored loudly and on occasion, released other noises Carly didn't dare think about. He must've had some dream and she worried she might have been the source he'd want to find when he woke up unattended.

Preston's father finally finished cleaning his gun and tossed it into the center of the table. He stretched, but when he did, his eyes focused on one center alone. *Carly.*

"My son loved you. I don't know when or where or why it even happened, but the dumb little son-of-a-bitch loved you." His eyes darkened and Preston jumped to his feet, perhaps frightened by what he saw.

"I'm talking about Slim. My son loved you!" he screamed. Those playing cards didn't look up.

"I love *her*, too, dad." He swallowed back the

pain because he knew what he admitted to his father, he also rapidly admitted to her. It changed the course they'd been on just hours before.

"How do you love a whore?" he shot the words back over his shoulder.

"She's not a whore. I forced her to do the very thing I guess you or even Slim would have done with just enough booze flowing through the right veins. We all had plenty of it and I can't blame her for something I caused. I'd already pushed her away and all but led her to do it. If the whiskey didn't offer up the chance, then I did."

He ignored Preston, focused on Carly. "You're built just like she was and look so much like her." His voice painfully noted the obvious and it hurt her to imagine what he must've done to the woman Slim once told her he only wanted to love. "Pretty and fragile but nonetheless a whore just like her momma!" He moved closer to her and his hand quickly cupped her chin. "Are you a whore, Miss Corbaine?"

She swallowed and then she stood a little straighter with her shoulders moving back and squaring off with quick defiance. "I'm Mrs. Preston Evans. I assure you I am no man's whore, not even your son's. What happened here last night was something consenting adults made the decision to try and you had no right to bust in here and kill an innocent man, no right

whatsoever.”

Watching Preston from across the room, she’d halfway hoped he would give her a signal, anything to let her know everything was going to be all right. Only regret lingered in his eyes and with it came a hard dose of truth.

Preston’s father smirked as he turned her face to one side and then the other. “For all I know, you could’ve been her.”

She swallowed. The memory she had of her mother proved the man in front of her recognized the strong resemblance and spoke with enough truth about it. Sure, she looked a lot like her mother. Slim once verified it.

Moving away from her, he studied Preston. “Why don’t you tell her the truth, son, so I don’t have to do it?”

He shifted his body weight and Carly held her breath because whatever news Mr. Evans wanted his son to deliver, she felt confident, she didn’t want to hear it—not in the least.

“Tell her!”

Carly flinched.

Preston looked outside and then down at the dirt floor.

“Preston?” she asked. “What’s he talking about?”

“He was right.”

“What do you mean?” Carly’s eyes searched

Preston's.

"Earlier, he was right."

Carly noticed the true smirk of a vile man light up the room more than the moonlight or firelight ever would. He seemed well pleased. "I don't understand," she whispered.

"Because you don't want to understand," the older man exclaimed, approaching his son and in doing so, allowing the irony of it all to come into better focus. "To understand, you see, makes you an accomplice."

"What are you talking about?" she asked again, glancing outside before returning her focus to Preston.

His father continued. "If you pretend you had no part in any of this, then you can just walk away. Your hands aren't dirty or stained by the blood. Your mother was like that. She had the ability to turn the other cheek."

Carly tried to clear her throat before she spoke. "You want me to take the blame because you lifted a gun and pulled the trigger killing a twenty-one year old man? You want to blame me for that?"

"I want you to see, Miss Corbaine, that we are all victims of our own choices and whether we like it or not, often others become casualties of the decisions we've somehow made for them as much as ourselves."

Preston stepped in front of his father. "He's right. He saved me the trouble."

"You're not a coldblooded killer, Preston!"

"No, but I'm obsessive as hell and when I told you that you belonged to me, I meant you belong to me and no other man would have you as long as I breathe. Is there anything about that you don't understand?"

"I think I'm pretty clear on it now." Her jaw set and her tears fell. She hated to cry and she damn well hated the man who seemed to have no trouble drawing them from her.

Preston's dad slapped him hard on the back. "Then, you've decided you're going to keep her?"

"She's my wife."

"She's never going to be your wife, Preston. You don't have what it takes to tame or even train a woman like her for the marriage bed or for motherhood. I didn't have what it took to tame her mother and I know you don't. You're not the better man."

"And because *you failed*, you think we will, too, or rather I will?" Preston dared to ask.

"I don't think it, son. By God, I know it." He glared at Carly with condescending eyes and as if to solve everything in one action, he made a leap for his gun.

* * * *

Daybreak came and Carly didn't move from the bed. She strained to listen and didn't hear anything but the sound of someone chopping wood. "Preston! Preston!" She screamed and yelled as her hands shook for no reason.

He rushed inside to find her on the bed, rocking back and forth and back and forth. "Where are they? Are they coming back for me?" She cried out as the pain and agony of lost time haunted her. She remembered being struck by something, but the details of why or when were a bit fuzzy.

"Who? Is *who* coming back for you?" He watched her with curious eyes.

"Your father. Is your father coming back here for me?" Tears streamed down her face and she held the coverlet closer to her chest.

Preston's hand touched her cheek. "I'll never be able to answer you and give you a truthful answer. I don't know."

"You don't know or you don't want to know, which is it?" She blotted her eyes with the blanket covering her.

"I just don't give a damn as long as you're with me and we're together. I'm ready to put my father to rest." He walked over to the window and looked out over the vacant land. "As long as we're together, Carly, nothing else really matters to me."

A few hours later, Carly stepped out on the

front porch and watched as Preston mended the fences. The snow had melted, and the only reminder the storm they weathered even existed was found a few hundred feet or so from them. The pond still and frozen, covered in ice, lured her. For some reason, she wanted to see it in the frozen state.

She walked inside and grabbed her coat before she started for the hill. She heard him screaming behind her, but she didn't turn around. Something told her to keep on walking, keep her feet moving closer and closer to the pond.

"Carly! No! Stop!" he shouted.

She ran faster and then fell to the earth, peering over the ridge as if she knew, already guessed what to expect. She stared down at the evidence of death and it frightened her back to her feet but yet she didn't run away. She stood where her feet were planted and even though she shuffled and tried to inch closer, a greater force made it impossible. She glared straight down and her mouth fell open in a gasp.

"Preston! Preston!" Panic stricken, she screamed. Before she could start making her way down to the pond, she stopped once more and teetered between one side of the ridge and the other.

She strained her neck, making sure her eyes weren't playing tricks on her and it was then

when she studied the clothing strewn around the parameter of the pond. The gun holsters and the coats, the denim pants and the blankets—the evidence of men who dared to tread there in the first place. The remainder, the only reminders of the past she wanted so desperately to leave behind.

He slowly approached her. “Carly...”

Quickly, she faced him. “What have you done?” she whispered.

“What I’ve done is ensure that no one ever hurts you or the family we want ever again.”

“You killed them.” She seemed to question it even though the evidence of frozen bodies stilled underneath the thin layer of ice. Soft words barely formed on her lips as she whispered out to him once more. “You’re not a killer, Preston.”

“No but I’m a survivor,” he replied, snatching her wrist and forcing her to look at him. “And you’re a fighter, Carly. You deserve to live a full life and you fought for it.”

“What are you talking about?”

Preston moved closer and brushed a strand of fallen hair behind her ear. “He planned to kill you, maybe he even planned to kill us both. He went for the gun, you brought one out from under the windowsill and,” he paused, reluctant to finish, “then...you tossed me the gun and I started shooting. You don’t remember?”

Carly closed her eyes. *Vaguely*. "I don't want to remember this." She swallowed as she said the words out loud, but just as she acknowledged them, she choked on the visual memory beginning to unfold in her mind's eyes.

"For you, for us," he lied.

Carly's mind clicked, alerting her to the facts. She closed her eyes and remembered taking aim. She gently squeezed the trigger, pointing the gun at Preston's father's head, and the single bullet provoked sudden death, and a final kill. "Then your father died as he lived and his belief system, you honored all the more."

"What are you talking about?" Preston's green eyes searched her own.

"Don't you see, Preston?" Her voice hitched in her lungs before she finished her statement. "Even now, he'll haunt us because of the people we've become, because of the hatred he bred in our veins. He wanted all of us to be victims, in one way or another, and we are."

"I'm no one's prey, no man's victim."

"You're his. I am, too." Carly refused to cry out, but yet she wanted to be heard. "Don't you see?" She took his face in between her two hands. "Preston, he gave you a choice simply by showing up here and he knew if you chose me, you'd put a bullet in his skull and I'm assuming you did by the looks of things."

She didn't tell him she remembered shooting his father as easily as she'd shot Slim. It was survival and she'd survived, but Preston had his reasons for wanting to carry the burden of guilt so she'd let him have it for now. "Preston, because of the decisions you've made, we're always going to have to live with the consequences of our actions. Just like the Robert." In fact, not only would she allow him to carry the blame, she would let him experience the guilt.

"What the hell does he have to do with this?" Furious eyes waited for an answer.

"Everything and nothing. He didn't have any horse in our stupid little race, but yet we brought him into it."

Preston turned a cold shoulder. It wasn't the first time. When he turned back around, he chose to move them beyond any reasonable mention of things better left unsaid.

"Come on now, let's get you back to the house. You're weak and need to be somewhere safe until you get your strength back and then maybe—"

"Then we'll talk about it? No, I don't think so, Preston. We need to discuss it now because if we don't, we never will and you know it."

"What do you want me to say, Carly? Huh?"

"I want to tell me you aren't like them!" She pointed down the hill with a fierce voice inspiring her words, just another pitch, an octave or two

higher. "I want you to tell me you wouldn't have killed *him* and you only said the things you said about Robert to please your father."

"So you want me to lie to your face?"

"I want you to recognize that you are not a coldblooded killer." Carly spat the words in his face with new rage forming with each passing word.

"Then look a little closer, woman, and tell me what you see because if you look into my eyes, you'll see the truer man hidden there."

Carly swallowed hard against the pain seeing him, as he wanted her to find him, brought her. "You aren't that man."

"I am when another man takes my woman, the only one I have and the only one I ever hope to have, to his bed!" He fired right back and made no apology for it. "And, Carly, no amount of whiskey will ease the pain seeing you with another man will forever bring."

"Then I'm sorry."

He pushed by her ignoring her apology. "I had a hand in it so I'm the one who should be sorry, but make no mistakes, I've been through enough hell in my life to bring more of it down without a second thought if you ever dare make the same mistake twice." He sneered his threats and half-hearted promises.

"You can't always save me or us from the pain,

Preston.” She moved the conversation forward, trying to find a way to bring them to a place of honesty, even if nothing else existed between them.

“I can try. Now go on and start supper. It’s time we started making up for a little lost time and I want to take you home with me—home where you belong.”

Carly cradled her body with wrapped arms. So much had changed between them and even though she’d waited a long time to hear him say those very words, she wasn’t sure they helped her now.

She looked out over the prairie and, without a tone to go on and just barely above a whisper, she said, “I’m already home.” Now, with her enemies there, too, right where she could keep an eye on them, it was time to forget the hidden secrets between a man and a woman and allow them to stay hidden there in her homeland.

Carly slowly turned to walk back down to her cabin. She hoped by the time she reached it, she was ready to forget the past and face their future, but she felt uneasy. Somehow, she felt certain there was more. With Preston, there was always more. Something else waiting, someone else watching and biding their time. Carly knew, without asking, who prepared for one last strike and when the next villain arrived, he or she would

find her prepared for the final fight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Destiny Blaine is an erotic romance author who writes in various genres. Visit her website at www.destinyblaine.com for more information.