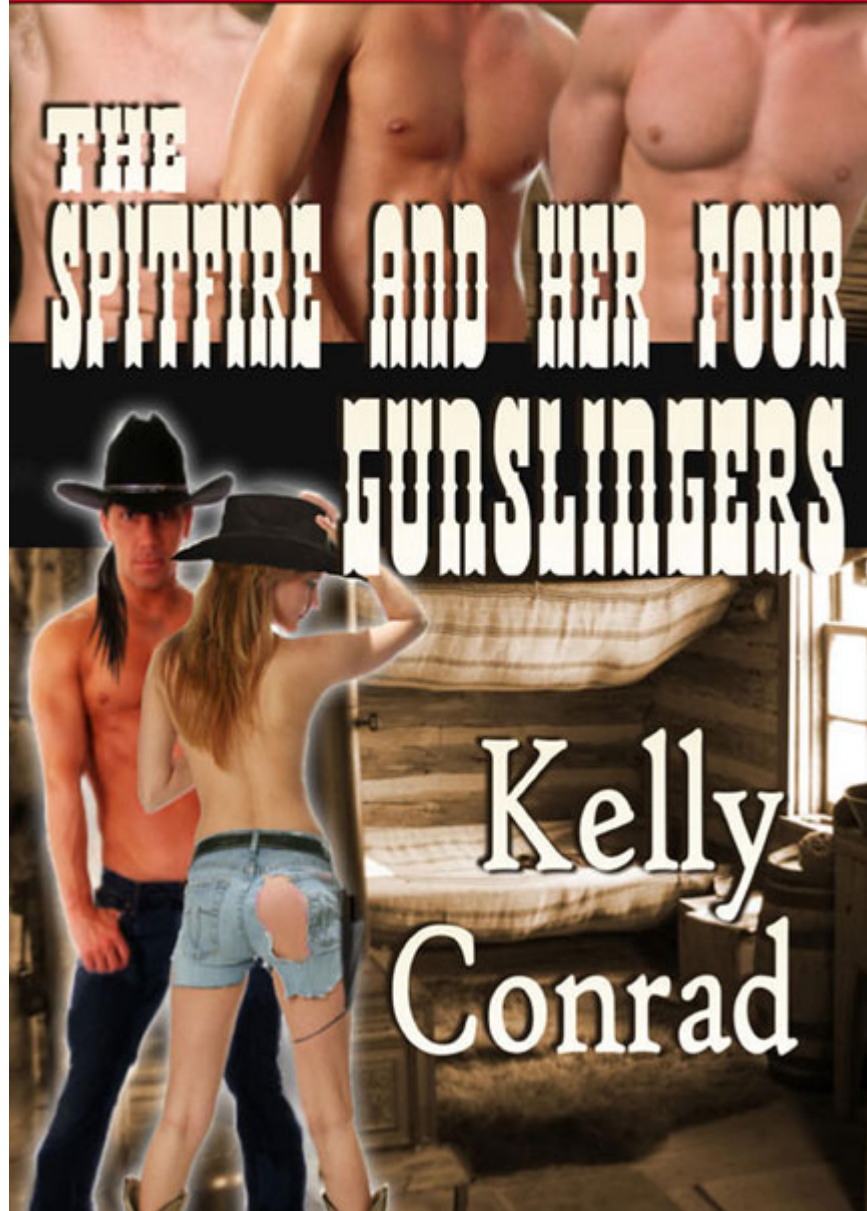


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THE SPITFIRE AND HER FOUR GUNSLINGERS

Kelly Conrad

MENAGE AMOUR



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Letter from Kelly Conrad

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With deep gratitude,

Kelly Conrad

THE SPITFIRE AND HER FOUR GUNSLINGERS

KELLY CONRAD

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Chapter One

"Carl!" Mike shouted as the pungent odor of blood wafted beneath her nose. "Do you have to do that now? It stinks!"

"Sorry Miz McClure, but it's gotta be done before me and the boys leave." He stopped for a moment, wiped his sweat and looked up into a white sky. "Unusual weather for this time of year. No wind to speak of. Slaughterin's best done in cold weather, you know. Don't smell so bad then."

"I ain't never seen a hot spell hang on so long," she answered as she hung up her last piece of wash.

"We'll probably have a cold winter for sure when it finally breaks."

She looked toward the barn when she heard the fast clip-clop of horses riding off. "Where they goin'?"

"To the General Store in town. We need a few things before we get started. As soon as I get through here, I'm gonna get cleaned up and meet 'em out along the south forty."

"How long will you be gone?"

"Three or four days at the most."

"Well, you boys be careful."

With her young bones aching, she turned to the house to go rest a spell. The wind was so still, even the slam of the front door didn't

make much of a sound. She quickly pulled off her bandana and used it as a rag to wash off her sweaty face, and then immediately headed for her bedroom. She fell on the bed and lay there for a moment, breathing deeply before reaching under her lumpy mattress to dig out *Frank Starr's Ten Penny Novels*.

Reading all about the dangerous escapades of the men of the west was her favorite past time. She was so used to hiding them from her father that she couldn't seem to break the habit now that he was gone. She looked at the title, *Vigilantes and Bad Men of the West*, and flipped to the pages about the notorious Cayo Sinclair. Cayo was the most famous gunslinger the West ever knew. His name was on everyone's lips all the way from California to New Orleans. Every time she opened the book she looked at the drawing of him—at his long hair, dark eyes, and muscled physique, and knew this man was worlds away from her. She shuddered inwardly when she wondered what in the world she would do if she ever met him in the flesh.

He had several books written about him, but the one she held in her hand was the most sensational. It had everything from midnight raids, to the countless number of saloon girls he satisfied in their bedrooms. Each word gave her a thrill, and it was hard to put the book down. It finally came time to drag herself up when she heard her ranch foreman slam into the house and yell out that they were leaving.

"Okay. You be careful, hear?"

"Yes ma'am."

She piddled around in the kitchen for a while, carrying water, banging skillets, and then went outside to clean up the larder after Carl had hung the meat. She just got back into the house when suddenly she heard a sound and stopped. She ran to the front, pulled the handmade curtain back and saw a man dressed in black fall off his horse and lay bloody and dying not five feet from her front porch. A spear of fear shot through her. Her first inclination was to run and hide, but she quickly got hold of herself. She couldn't fall apart now. Other girls would have broken down and slobbered for hours, but she

didn't have time. Instead she grabbed the shot gun her father left when he died and ran outside. She lifted the gun and pointed it while swinging it from side to side, sure there was a gang of murdering cowboys hiding in the bushes, but everything was quiet. Finally, she threw the gun aside and sank down beside him.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I got a bullet in the shoulder," he said softly, his white, even teeth clenched with pain that was etched in deep lines around his mouth.

"I'll have to get you in the house, then go for the doctor."

"No...no doctor."

"But you've lost a lot of blood. You could die."

"No doctor!" he insisted.

A chill raced up her spine. She knew there was only one reason why a dying man wouldn't want a doctor. He had to be wanted. An outlaw! Her gaze strayed toward the bunkhouse wishin' her cowhands were here, but they'd already left, so she was here alone.

"My name's Mike."

"Mike?"

"No time to explain. Look, I'm gonna have to try and get you inside. I'd never be able to lift you, so do you think you can help me a little? Can you walk at all?"

"I might...be..."

Suddenly his teeth clenched in pain, and Mike could almost feel it all the way down to her toes. "Here, lean on me," she said, and slowly they both made it into the house with him stumbling. She did everything she could to hold up this giant of a man with blood all over him. By the time she finally got him in bed, he had passed out with the pain, leaving her to loosen his clothes and try to get him comfortable. When she moved toward his boots, she suddenly stopped dead still.

Sometimes when you think he's nowhere around, you'll hear the clink of his silver spurs. The star points on them are sharp enough to

do someone some real damage. It's like a death rattle. Next thing you know, you're dead.

Those words—where had she—

Oh, my God. She thought as she put her hand over her mouth in panic. *They're from the ten penny novel I've been reading.*

Slowly her curious gaze raked along his dark stubble and savage features that screamed danger. *Is he...is this man...?* She couldn't say it, she couldn't even think it.

One look at him will take your breath away. He's big, and rugged, and his eyes shine like two black pearls—or an angry rattler. He's killed thousands! Some people think he's a half-breed because he refuses to cut his hair. He wears it long, and pulled back with a buckskin. They say when you face Cayo, you come away with one of two things—a grave, or a reputation.

With these words whirling through her mind, she wanted so much to collapse and let someone else take care of her notorious visitor, but she couldn't. She simply didn't have time to be afraid. Not now. He may be a professional gunslinger, but he's also a man who needs help, a man bleeding all over her bed, for God's sake! She would just have to somehow shake this fear off until she could decide what to do.

Leaning down, her hands trembled when she tried to avoid the dangerous spurs so she could pull off his boots. Finally her eyes shifted to the ripped up shirt where the bullet entered and began to tear at it until she saw his bloody flesh. She moved quickly in spite of the waves of heat and danger that seemed to radiate from him.

Was she afraid because he carried death in his gun hand, or was it because even passed out and harmless he made other men she knew look like young pups in heat? She realized for the first time that she'd been with nothing but boys. Now she was wondering what it would be like to ride a man's cock—a real man's cock—*this man's cock?*

Chapter Two

She couldn't deny the hot flashes of demon lust she felt rear up in her like a wild stallion as she watched him laying there all dark and handsome—and big. She stood paralyzed for a moment, but finally forced herself out of her paralysis, and rushed over to the side table where she poured some water from the porcelain pitcher into a matching bowl. She put the bowl on the table, wet an old rag and tried to clean his wound, but his shirt kept getting in the way. Putting the rag down, her trembling, unsure fingers began to undo the rest of his buttons.

She jumped when suddenly his hand grabbed hers. "What the hell are you doin'?"

He was awake! "I'm...I'm just tryin' to take off your shirt so I can get to the wound and treat it properly."

"I can take off my own shirt," he spat out while pushing her hand away.

She wanted to laugh at his remark. Here was a big, tough, angry cowboy with a timid side. "Fine, but I would have never figured you for shy, Mr. Sinclair."

"The name's Cayo, and I ain't shy, I just like to take off my own clothes."

"Mr. Sin...Cayo, please believe me. I'm trying to help you, not take advantage of you."

He was about to answer her when he heard something and quickly lunged forward with his gun drawn and pointed.

"You can put your gun away," she said as she reached for the wet rag. "It was only my cat, Hobo."

He looked around, noticing for the first time how empty the place was. "Where the hell is everyone?"

"The ranch hands are in and out," she said briefly while busily dabbing at his wound. "They're out along the south forty ridin' fence right now."

"What about your folks?"

"They're both dead if you must know. My ma died when I was twelve, and my pa got killed in a range war just one month ago. I been runnin' the ranch by myself since then."

"What's the story with your name?"

"Nothing mysterious," she said with a shrug. "My pa wanted a boy, so he named me Mike. Since he had no sons, he taught me everything about the ranch I needed to know." She smiled proudly. "Said I turned out as good as any boy he could've had." Slowly her smile faded in remembrance. "Stubborn old coot. Never did get that boy."

"Sounds like you were close to your pa."

After re-wetting the rag, she wrung it out. "I was."

"Then why ain't you cryin' your eyes out instead of tryin' to run this stupid ranch? Sell it for God's sake and let someone else do it. Give yourself a decent period of mourning. You'll feel better."

She gave a derisive chuckle.

"What's wrong?"

"First of all, them words don't fit well in the mouth of a man who must've killed thousands in his lifetime. While you're shootin' holes in a man, any thoughts of what his poor grievin' widow or his kids would be goin' through?"

"Let's get somethin' straight right now. I never killed no man that wasn't tryin' to kill me first."

"Sure. I've heard it a million times before. It's the gunslinger's lullaby."

"You want to know what *this* gunslinger lullaby is? A snake's rattle, an empty belly, a cold wind that sings in your ear while it

blows up your backbone and freezes you. A night when the only thing that'll help me sleep is a bottle of rot-gut whiskey. You think you got it hard here? Well, welcome to my world, baby."

She shrugged. "So find a place and settle down."

"It ain't as easy as all that. Not for someone with a reputation like mine. I can wish, I can hope, and I can even pray, but I ain't never gonna have no ranch as good as this one." He indicated toward the ceiling. "They wouldn't let me."

"They?"

"Them," he said looking upward. "You know, the gods."

She nodded. "Oh, the...gods."

"They looked down one day and saw me doin' just fine. We can't have that, they said. So they sent a little bad luck my way. Nothin' big, mind you. A father that beat the hell out of me, a mother than ran away the first chance she had."

He breathed deeply, as if reminiscing. "Yeah, I let them tin horn gods push me around for thirteen years before I decided to be the ruler of my own fate. One night after my pa got the razor strop after me, I decided that was it. The minute that belt came whizzin' toward me, I grabbed it, and yanked it out of my pa's hand. With blood in my eyes I started walkin' toward him." Cayo laughed, but it fell dead and humorless between them. "I stood there as surprised as anything when he turned and ran away. That was the night I became a man. It was also the night I found out that my father was a coward as well as a drunk." He looked at Mike, and indicated toward the ceiling.

"Was that enough for them? Nah. First off, they got mad at me for taking things into my own hands. Who does he think he is, they said. He's got to pay for that. So, they hit me with the big one. They put my name in a book, and now every gun in the west wants Cayo Sinclair. The bastards. They made me a gunslinger so I'd never get any rest. Always runnin'. The only problem is after they had their laughs they forgot to turn the bad luck off."

Mike looked at him as if he'd sprung a leak. "Are you crazy on top of everything else?"

"No," he said with a weary voice, "I ain't crazy, just goddamned sick and tired of it all."

"Look," Mike said, her hand suddenly stilled from its task of cleaning his wound. "I'm sorry about your pa and all that, but the way you knock around from town to town you can't possibly know how important land is to someone." She put the rag down, rose from the bed and went to the window. With her fingers punched down in her back pockets, she gazed out at the land. "No black veils and regrets for me. I loved my pa, and I can honor his memory better by taking care of this ranch he spent his life building." She turned back and looked at Cayo with determination shining in her eyes. "I ain't about to let it die right along with him."

"You're wrong." Cayo said as his gaze strayed beyond hers to the vast land Mike was gazing at. "A man who doesn't have land knows better than anyone how important it is. He's a drifter with no roots, no place to rest. It can get old after a while. As for how you feel about this ranch, I understand, but you're so damned young. Hell," he said, indicating toward the front door. "You oughta be out goin' to dances and box suppers with some young punk that don't know a gun from a milking stool."

With a smile on her face, she strolled from the window, sat down and continued cleaning his wound. "Did you ever go to dances and such?"

"Me?" he laughed. "Not me, but I'll tell you one thing," he said angling a gaze toward her with eyes that appreciated what he saw. "If I'd met someone like you back then we wouldn't be wastin' our time dancin'."

"Yeah?" she said with a grin.

"Yeah," he said as he reached for her hand. "How about you? Would you have let me...?"

"I guess we'll never know, will we?" she said as their eyes met. A long silence hung heavy in the room until she laughed and said, "Hey, how'd we ever get on this subject?" She tried to act busy, but her gaze kept crawling back to his. She knew that something serious had come alive between them, and it wouldn't go away. Finally, to try and cover up the awkwardness, she said, "All right, so I'm young. I'm also strong and healthy in case you ain't noticed."

"Young ain't the only problem. I mean...you're a *girl*."

Girl. The word—or maybe it was his prejudiced implication—grated on her until she finally threw the rag down splashing the water. She jumped up, put her hands on her hips, and with a gaze as sharp as any knife, she glared at him. "All right, so I'm a girl. What the hell has that got to do with the price of eggs? In case you think I can't pull my weight, look again, cowboy. I can ride a bucking bronco from sunup to sunset and then cook the best meal you ever tasted. I've sat up all night with sick animals, and then did my chores the next day without complaint. What *man* can do that?"

"Hey what did I say to ruffle your feathers?"

Her green-eyed gaze narrowed on him. "The next time you call me a girl, don't make it sound like a dirty word." She saw Cayo's eyes rake over her body as she stood there. "What the hell do you think you're lookin' at?"

"Them pants ain't that tight because you *don't* want me to look."

"For your information, I hate baggy pants and I also hate men who think girls were created for nothing but their pleasure."

"You're some little spitfire, ain't you?"

"I'm spitfire enough to keep this ranch runnin'. Now, are you gonna take that shirt off, or do I do it for you?"

He looked at her with a challenge in his eyes. "Just tear it off me...uh, *Mike*. Think you can handle that?"

Anger sprouted in her like spikes on a cactus. Without wasting a second, she quickly reached down, yanked it open, and then tore it off his back. "How's that, you black-hearted bastard?"

"First time I ever had my clothes taken off by someone named Mike," he said as he reached for her and pulled her down on the bed.

Before she knew what was happening, she found herself staring into his eyes and his hot breath singeing her skin. She immediately began to struggle, but even wounded, he was stronger than her, so she reached for something lightning quick, gave a sudden turn, and shoved a gun in his face. "Let me go, or get a bullet between your eyes."

"Whoa, now," he said as he stared down the barrel of his own six-gun, and quickly released her. "Satisfied now?" he said, raising his hands for her to see.

"Don't ever do that again," she said as she carefully moved away with the gun still aiming at his chest.

He pointed toward the gun. "I'd advise you to put that right back where you found it, little lady."

"I'll put it back when you remember a few facts. First of all, I might have a boy's name, but I'm all girl, and I'm the kind of girl that refuses to be pushed around by some foul-talkin' gunslinger who thinks he can come into my house and put his hands on me any time he pleases."

Cayo smiled. "You have to admit, a name like Mike—"

With the gun still pointed at him, she said, "You're just like all the rest, ain't you?"

"All the rest? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean men. They seem to think just because of my name they can have their way with me. Well, it ain't true, see. Because of my name I've learned how to take care of myself, and I'd advise you to believe it."

"My, my, saddled with a name like Mike. Yes, I can see where that might be a problem."

She stared closely at him. "You makin' fun of me?"

"No, no. I'm agreeing with you."

She gave a slight shrug. "Just because I enjoy a man's attentions now and again don't make me cheap. Of course, a lot depends on the man."

"I see. A fat-bellied farmer wouldn't have a chance with you, but a black-clad gunslinger with a wound in his shoulder...?"

"I ain't made up my mind about you," she said as she reached over, unbuckled his gun belt, and yanked it off. "The first thing you need to learn is that a bed is no place for guns, and if you want to stay in my bed, they have to go."

He smiled at the implication, and said, "Yes, ma'am."

* * * *

While she tended his wound, he lay back watching her. He looked at her red hair and green eyes, and lips that he'd swear was red enough to have had berry juice smoothed over them. If he kissed her, what would he taste? He had to admire her. In less than half an hour she'd managed to remove his shirt, his gun belt, and his boots while giving him a lecture on the word 'cheap.' He'd never met a woman that wasn't scared spitless around him until he met a little gal named Mike. Her red hair and green eyes were bright enough to put a man's eyes out, and her body was lush from head to toe, and felt damn good wiggling against him.

"Be still," she ordered as she pressed the rag against his shoulder.

"It hurts, dammit! You hidin' cockleburs in that rag?"

"No," she said, looking him straight in his eyes, "but it's an idea. It might be a good way to keep dangerous gunslingers in their place."

He smiled at her bold nature. He figured you'd have to be a real special kind of man to get in this woman's bed. It would be interesting to know just how tough the little lady was, and just how special the man had to be. It might just be the incentive he needed to get better so he could find out.

Chapter Three

Her soft, full breasts rested on his chest.

As she moved around, he could feel her welcome heaviness, a sweet smelling heaviness, a soft heaviness that caused a dribble of semen to fall from his cock.

Oh, God, I can't have an orgasm now when she has a razor floating in front of my face.

He felt the pull of the sharp-edged instrument along his jaw while he lay looking into her soft green-eyed gaze, and smelling lilacs. "You got lilacs growin' in one of them window boxes?"

"Nope."

"You must be wearin' lilac water, then."

"Nope. Don't have time for it."

"Well, it sure as hell ain't me."

"It's the soap my pa gave me. Early this morning I bathed and washed my hair in the lake."

"You bathed just for me?"

"Don't flatter yourself. I bathed because I needed bathing. It wouldn't hurt to douse yourself with a little water either."

Suddenly his face grimaced, and he yelped, "Ouch! Hey, watch it, will you?"

She looked down at him and shook her head. "I ain't never seen such a baby."

"That's enough for now, okay? I got something I need to tell you."

"Be still, and quit talkin', or I might just cut your throat."

He reached up and grabbed her hand. "You can finish cuttin' me up after you hear what I have to say."

She leaned back with a sigh. "All right, what is it?"

"You might be havin' some visitors about noon today. They'll be hungry, tired, and you with your lilac soap are gonna look mighty good to them, so don't swish that pretty little ass of yours around too much. These men ain't seen a female in months, and the next time you take a bath I'd advise using lye soap."

"Here? They're coming here?" she asked, looking at him as if she wanted to cut out his heart. "How do they know where you are?"

"We were in the area yesterday when I got shot. Since yours is the only ranch in these parts, I came here for help. The gang went on to Colter's Cave in the hills."

"Not that I want them here, but why didn't they come with you?"

"A posse was hot on our heels, so we had to separate. If we hadn't the tracks would've led right up to your front door. As soon as the heat's off they'll be payin' you a visit. I figure it'll be about noon today."

"But...how many is there?"

"Three after Honcho got killed last week." He looked up and saw her glance across the room, and followed her eyes to a shotgun leaning against the wall.

"Hey, cutie, don't get any ideas. Them boys is dangerous, and they'll eat a little hellcat like you for breakfast, gun and all."

"They can try," she retorted.

She moved to get up, but when he reached out to grab her, his face grimaced, and he moaned with the pain.

She shook his hand off. "You're as weak as a kitten." She frowned as fresh blood stained the bandage. "Look," she said, "that shoulder is gettin' worse. If you don't let me go get a doctor, then I'm gonna have to get that bullet out of you myself. All I got is a little bit of Laudanum for the pain, some quinine, alcohol, and a kitchen knife that ain't been sharpened in six months. Since I don't have anyone to hold you down, I may have to use handcuffs."

"I ain't havin' no green-eyed hell cat cuttin' into me."

Irritated, she angrily threw the razor blade in the bowl of water, and said, "Die, then!"

While she glared at him, he said, "It might help to give me something to eat. I ain't had nothin' since yesterday noon. What do you have in there?"

"Hamsteak, red-eye gravy, scrambled eggs, and biscuits. Take it or leave it."

"Got any coffee?"

"I might be able to scrounge you up some."

"How about some whiskey to give it a little kick?"

"Can't do it. It'll thin your blood and you'll bleed all over the bed. Besides, I never touch the stuff."

"You oughta try it. Might make you a little friendlier."

She cut her hard gaze toward him. "You lookin' to turn me into a friend or a slut?"

"Why don't you take a guess?"

"Well, I ain't either," she said, and then jumped up and went to the kitchen.

Cayo lay quietly trying not to jar his shoulder while she banged around in the kitchen. His patience was finally rewarded when she came back and set a tray down in front of him. "Hey, that looks mighty good."

"It's the blue plate special," she said sarcastically while watching him struggle to eat. "Here, why don't you let me feed—"

"Don't even think about it," he said, gingerly picking at his food.

"Is your shoulder painin' you any at all?"

"What the hell do you think?"

"You don't have to bite my head off," she said with a huff, and rose to leave. "If you need me I'll be in the kitchen."

She was puttering around about an hour when she heard something outside. She rushed to the window and looked toward the bunkhouse thinking it might be one of her ranch hands. When she didn't see anyone, her gaze shifted to three black-clad cowboys riding

up. She knew they must be Cayo's gang and looked at the clock. She turned and ran into the bedroom. "They're here," she said, a frightened sound to her voice. "And it ain't near noon yet."

"Who's here?"

"Who do you think? Your gang. I just saw 'em ridin' up."

He struggled to get up. "Something must've went wrong. Were there three of 'em?"

"What the hell do you think you're doin'? You can't get up with that shoulder bleedin' all over everything." Just then a loud knock sounded, and her blood turned to ice.

"That must be them," Cayo said softly. "You'll be okay as long as you keep that mouth of yours shut."

With halting movements, she went to the door and cracked it open. An immediate chill ran down her back when she saw the dustiest, dirtiest—and sexiest cowboys she'd ever seen gathered at her front door. The one in front was blond with a devil-may-care way about him. The two in back were darker. One had dimples and a real pretty boy smile, but the last was dark-skinned and dangerous looking. His eyes cut clear through her. He didn't smile—didn't have to. His movements made it clear that he owned the space he was in, and you didn't intrude unless you wanted a bloody ride to hell. He frightened Mike. They all did. They were tough looking hombres that dressed in black—the color of danger that lurked all around them.

"Hi, darlin," the one in front said while leanin' on the doorframe. "My name's Flash. We're here to see—"

"Come on in, Flash," Cayo said from the doorway of the bedroom.

Flash pushed his way in. "Hey, Cayo, how you doin'?" He indicated toward Mike. "Not bad from where I stand."

"Never mind that, why are you here so early?"

"Wasn't no use to wait. The posse quit about nightfall yesterday. I mean, if them blind bastards couldn't see our tracks in daylight, they sure as hell ain't gonna see 'em at night."

"Who was on watch?"

"Cheyenne, and you know how Indians are. They can spot a fly on a dead dog a mile away. Naw, I think they done give up on us."

"That's something, anyway."

Flash looked toward the stove. "That food smells mighty good. Any reason why we can't chow down?"

"Mike," Cayo said, "get the boys something to eat."

Mike looked over at him as if he'd just declared war with Russia. "Hey! I ain't waitin' on these gorillas. If they want food they can get it themselves!"

"Mike," Cayo said softly, "believe me. You don't want these boys bangin' around in your kitchen. By the time they got their food you wouldn't have a blessed thing in one piece."

"Well...I guess you're right," she said while her gaze darted to one and then the other. When she finally stood and walked over to the stove the boys followed her with their hungry gazes.

* * * *

Cayo didn't miss their admiring glances and turned his attention to Mike. It didn't help any that her jeans were too tight, and her hair too red, and her lips too full, so he muttered under his breath, but loud enough for his boys to hear him. "Hands off, guys."

Mike turned around and said, "What?"

"I was just telling the guys who you were. By the way, Mike, this is Flash, Cheyenne and Midnight. Flash there has a fast draw, like lightnin' they say, and Cheyenne is a half breed. Midnight there saved my life one night in a barroom brawl, so we just kind of took him in."

As she looked at each one, she felt overwhelmed. They were easily the handsomest men—no, not men—*outlaws*. The dangerous, unapologetic outlaws she read about every day in her Ten Penny Novels. She wanted to run to the nearest neighbor for help, but instead she plopped their full plates on the table. "Sit down and eat, or you'll be sharin' your breakfast with Rosie, my pig."

"What's that I smell?" Flash said as she passed by him with the coffee.

"Lye soap," she answered sarcastically as her gaze met Cayo's.

"I think Mike's got some lilacs in the window boxes."

Cheyenne turned and looked at her. "Say, what's this about your name?"

"My pa thought I was a boy."

Cheyenne snickered. "Whoa, I bet he was surprised."

She stopped what she was doing and looked at him, her gaze cutting right through him. "I ain't laughin' about it."

Cheyenne's lustful gaze met hers and tangled. "I didn't mean no disrespect."

Suddenly it seemed as if no one else was in the room. His smile was gone from his face, but the lust in his eyes pulled her to him with an intimate power. She only pulled her gaze away to the sound of Cayo's voice.

"Cheyenne, that's enough. You boys hurry up and eat. We gotta figure out what we're gonna do."

Mike watched as they dug into their food, some wanting seconds. She kept busy ladling food and pouring coffee when she felt a hand creeping up her leg. Her eyes darted down to Flash and managed to give him a hard look.

He leaned close to her and gave a sniff. "I think that lilac smell is comin' from you, sweetheart. Always did like lilacs." With a strong grip, he squeezed her upper thigh.

She pretended to trip, and spilled coffee in his lap.

He jumped up and yelled. "Hell fire, witch, watch what you're doin'!"

"Sorry," she mumbled, but met his gaze with a defiant look, and a half smile.

As she walked away he grabbed the arm that held the coffee pot. "That half-baked apology sounded about as sincere as a grievin' undertaker at a five dollar funeral!"

"Careful," she said threateningly, "or I'll give you the rest of what I've got in the pot here." Stabbing him with a piercing look, she said, "Did that sound *sincere* enough for you?"

He quickly let go and turned to Cayo. "She's a little she-devil, that's what she is. She could've scalded me to death. Ain't you gonna do something?"

"Flash, it wouldn't have happened if you'd kept your fuckin' hands to yourself. We don't have time for horseplay. We got business to take care of, so sit down and be quiet."

He cut an angry gaze toward Mike.

Cayo leaned forward. "Here's the picture. There's about four cowhands that work the ranch. Right now they're ridin' fence, but they'll be back in a couple of days. We gotta be gone by then."

"Hell, Cayo, I'm dead tired. If we can't stay here, I think we oughta get a room in town. We need rest before we head out again. The trail is pretty rough between here and there."

"I don't give a fuckin' damn what you think, Flash. You know as well as I do that as soon as I'm able to ride we gotta head back. That fuckin' posse ain't givin' up that easy."

* * * *

As much as Mike wanted them out of her house, the idea of Cayo killing himself on horseback filled her with vinegar. "You ain't ridin' nowhere with that bullet inside you, for God's sake! What the hell are you tryin' to do, make a pet out of it? If you ain't gonna see a doctor you'll have to let me, or one of your so-called *friends* here dig it out of you."

"You gotta mouth on you, woman, and I'd advise you not to speak until you're told to."

"This is my fuckin' ranch you miserable, lice-infested excuse for a human being, and I can speak any damned time I want to!"

"Whoa!" came a cry of astonishment from the guys sitting around the table. "The little filly has fire!"

"Look here, you sexy little half-pint, you wouldn't get away with that if I didn't have this bullet in me."

"The point is, you do!" Mike said. "And until it comes out, I'm the boss! Got that?"

Without speaking Cayo snatched Midnight's gun from his holster, cocked the pistol and pointed it at her. "Apparently you've got more courage than brains. I told you to be quiet."

Instead of standing there frightened, she walked over to Cayo and began to wrestle the gun out of his hand. She was caught by surprise when he managed to pull her down in his lap and kiss her brutally.

The gang began hooting and hollering. "Atta boy, Cayo, show her who's boss!"

She pretended to relax in his arms, embracing him while returning his kiss until the right moment finally came. At that time she suddenly snatched the gun out of his weak hand and pulled herself up and pointed the gun. "Now listen to me, you bastard. You go back to bed this minute. And you," she said looking at the others. "Cayo can't ride. In fact, since he don't want nobody diggin' that bullet out of him he'll probably die, and one of you will become the new leader. I'd advise you to think about that." She looked down at the shock on Cayo's face and knew she'd struck a chord. She couldn't stop now, so she glared at him as she spoke to Cheyenne. "Cheyenne, you need to go outside and pick out a nice shady spot where we can bury Cayo 'cause it won't be much longer until he's dead!"

Cayo tried to push himself up out of his chair. "I ain't dead yet, you little hot head!"

"Yeah? Well, by the looks of you it won't be long. Your eyes are almost shut, and your face is drained of blood which you will find in there on *my* bed!" Turning again to the others, she said, "As for the ranch hands, they do what I tell them. That means they'll either kiss you or kill you, so you'd better be nice." She wanted to laugh when

she saw these hardened killers watch everything she did in amazement. "Now, somebody help Cayo back to the bed so he can die in peace." She turned back to Cayo and gave him a hard look. "It won't take long."

The men looked at each other stupefied, and then got busy.

Chapter Four

As soon as the dishes were done, Mike strolled out on the porch to sit back and watch the day turn to twilight, but found Flash sitting on the porch stoop with a rifle in his hand. "Where's Midnight and Cheyenne?" she said as she sat down beside him.

"Cayo's got 'em out there gatherin' eggs. He says while we're here we need to pitch in and do some chores."

She snickered. "Well, that's fine, but I usually gather eggs early in the morning. If they go diggin' around under them chickens at this time of day, they may get pecked to death. Besides, do they know the difference between a hen and a rooster?"

Flash laughed. "Probably not. I can just see 'em trying to talk a rooster into layin'."

She saw him lift his gun when he heard movement in the bushes nearby. "What're you lookin' for?"

"Just keepin' watch is all."

Mike looked at him curiously. He had blond hair that drug his collar and a strong chin. When he looked at her with his sky blue eyes twinkling, she knew Flash didn't have any trouble findin' a woman when he wanted one. "What's this I hear about your lightin' fast draw?"

"Long story," he said as he kept his eyes trained on the path that led to the front gate.

"That's okay. I got time."

"Well, when I was about sixteen, I shot a man. He turned out to be a famous gunslinger, and his reputation just naturally came to me, along with about two thousand dollars he had on his head. A reporter

type man from the east got wind of it and come lookin' for me. He was a smooth talker that convinced me I was somethin' special. I got some new clothes and strutted around town like a banty rooster. I didn't bother to tell anyone that it was just pure luck that I managed to kill the outlaw. The truth is, he scared me so bad that I dropped my gun and it fired. Anyway, the guns started showin' up in town and I was forced into either being as good as everyone thought I was, or makin' a durned fool out of myself. So, I began practicing with my gun until I was really good. So good, in fact that when a medicine show came to town I hooked up with it and became their moneymaker. They started callin' me Flash because they said my draw was quick as a flash.

"I grew up in that atmosphere until I was in my twenties. One day Cayo was in the crowd, and being the cocky kid that I was, I challenged him. Cayo, of course, took me on, and could have killed me, but instead he just shot my gun out of my hand. It was embarrassing, but it was what I needed to finally realize I wasn't the hot stuff I thought I was. Me and Cayo hooked up, and I been with him ever since." He looked over at her. "Fascinatin' tale, huh?"

She smiled. "I guess that means Cayo's the fastest in the west."

"Don't you bet on it. Someone out there's always faster. Cayo taught me that."

"How often does he have to prove it?"

"More times than he'd like to."

"How about we change the subject? I never did like talkin' about death and dyin'."

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Shhhh!" Mike said, and pointed toward a bush. "That's a hummingbird over there. Did you know that hummingbirds are not supposed to be able to fly? They say their little bodies are too heavy." She turned and smiled at Flash. "It's a good thing nobody told the hummingbird, right?" Her eyes moved up, and looked into the sky. "I

love twilight, don't you? It kind of softens the day. You know, puts everything in silhouette."

When she didn't hear an answer she looked over at Flash and saw him staring at her.

"What's wrong?"

"Mike McClure, you ain't as tough as you think you are. All that talk about Hummingbird's and such. Where'd you learn all that?"

"Well, I did go to school, you know." She flipped her hair around in a saucy manner. "Sides Pastor Dunlap done taught it in his Sunday School class." When she saw his doubtful look, she said. "Well, you know how preachers are. They can make a sermon out of almost anything. You know, faith is like the hummingbird. It helps you do things nature never intended, and all that."

"I wonder what he'd say about the lust I have in my heart for a certain little redhead?"

Mike gave him a sassy grin. "We just won't tell him."

As they giggled together Flash picked up a strand of her hair and looked at it. "I think you've got the prettiest hair I've ever seen." His eyes moved upward and searched along her face. "The prettiest eyes, the prettiest lips, the prettiest—"

"You must be missin' your girlfriend."

"Nah," he said, turning away. "I ain't got no girlfriend. I wouldn't ask no woman to live my kind of life. A woman here, a woman there, that's the best I can do."

"It'll change some day."

He looked down at her, his eyes turning soft and sexy. "Maybe," he whispered.

"Well, goodnight," she said as she leaned over and kissed his cheek. "That's for sayin' I was pretty." She indicated toward his lap. "Now that I think about it, that coffee was mighty hot, wasn't it. Hope it didn't injure anything...well, important."

"I reckon I'll live."

She giggled. "Remember, the eggs have to be gathered first thing in the morning."

"I'll remember," he replied softly as he leaned back and breathed in her lingering lilac scent.

* * * *

As darkness fell, a flickering lamplight could be seen outside Mike's bedroom window from early evening to well into the night. Owls hooted, cicadas serenaded, and lonely wolves howled in the distance.

Cayo's sweaty face, his clenched teeth, and grasping palms were indicative of his pain as Mike dug deep into his shoulder.

"Are you sure you know what you're doin'?" Flash whispered.

"I did it for my dad, and I've watched the doc do it, even acted as a nurse when he did this and lots of other things." Her eyes were full of concern as she looked over at Cayo. She gave him a thick twig to bite down on, and he drank Laudanum like whiskey. He growled, struggled against strong hands that refused to let him move until it was all over, and then he fell into a deep sleep.

"There," she said as she removed her knife.

Midnight stood over the open fire in the fireplace heating up a branding iron to cauterize the wound. When he finally applied the glowing rod to Cayo's wound, Mike quickly turned away from the smell of burning flesh, and rose from her squeaking chair.

When she stumbled, Flash managed to catch her before she fell. "Are you all right?"

"I'm just tired," she said, as she made her way to the stairs.

"You're about dead on your feet. Let me help you," he said and swept her up in his arms and carried her to a bedroom upstairs. "You done real good, Mike," he whispered as he laid her down. "You rest now. We'll watch Cayo."

She looked up at him with lazy eyes she could hardly hold open and said, "I'd like to see your fast draw someday, Flash."

He smiled. "Sure...someday."

* * * *

During the days that followed the eating table had become the central area where discussions were held and plans were made. Today Mike was walking around filling and refilling their coffee cups as she listened. They were talking about sending one of them out to scout the area to see if the posse had come back.

"Cheyenne should go," Midnight said. "He's half Indian, and can track better than any of us."

"Not a good idea," Mike said as she lingered close. "There's always a chance a man alone could be captured or shot. If you send two the other has a chance of escaping and can come back and alert the other two."

"What if they capture both of them?"

"I don't care. Two's always better than one. Even I know that when you tie something up you always use a double cord for strength, right? The same principle is true here."

"Where'd you learn that?"

"My pa. He taught me lots of things. I don't think any of you should ever go out alone. You always want backup."

"I think she's right," Cheyenne said. "I don't know why I didn't think of that. He looked up at her. "Was your pa familiar with the practices of the Indian tribes?"

"I don't know. It just makes sense, that's all. If the Indians do it that way it's because they're a smart people."

Cheyenne agreed, and invited Mike to come and sit beside him to discuss things further, always getting her opinion.

During these sessions they got to know each other well, and offered to carry heavy buckets of water, or do things for her they

knew she would have difficulty with alone. All this led up to a familiarity between them, and she found herself the recipient of deep, penetrating looks, an occasional touch or the deliberate brush of a muscled body against hers. The first time was when she happened to find Cheyenne and Midnight down at the lake. Their wet bodies and rippling muscles sparkled in the dappled sunlight, taking her breath away. She stood in the shadows and watched for a few minutes until one of them looked up and caught her snooping.

* * * *

Cheyenne waded close to Midnight, and mumbled under his breath. "Hey, looks like we have a visitor. I'll give you three guesses as to who's hidin' out watchin' us."

Midnight looked up. "Yeah? Where is she?"

"Over there in that clump of bushes. You just follow my lead. I'll get her out of there."

"You're on."

Together they rose up out of the water as naked as the day they were born. While drying off Cheyenne began talking loud enough for her to hear. "Have you noticed that Mike seems to be more boy than she is girl?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she never wears dresses. And her face, have you ever noticed the moles she has growin' on her face? She's beginning to look like a real witch. Brrr, I'd hate to meet her on the trail at night. She'd scare you to death."

Mike tried to stay down, but her anger grew with each word.

"Hey, what about them wrinkles—?"

"Nah, now wait a minute, Cheyenne. She's too young to have wrinkles. What you think is wrinkles is really...well, they're worry lines that's all. After all, she's been under a lot of strain here lately."

"All right, I'll give you that, but that's not her biggest problem."

"What do you mean?"

"It's her weight. Have you noticed how big she's gettin'? If them jeans she wears get much tighter they're just gonna rip right off her."

Suddenly she burst out of the bushes yelling. "You bastards! I don't have lines on my face, and I ain't gettin' fat! As for my jeans they fit me perfect."

"Well, look who's here, Cheyenne, it's Mike."

"You been spyin' on us, Mike?"

"I came down here to bathe. I used to have some privacy before you gorillas came along. By the way, what're you two doin' this far from the house? Ain't you afraid of bein' seen?"

"You know, she's right, Cheyenne. We need to get back up there. Besides, Cayo might need us."

Cheyenne was looking at Mike with a gleam in his eyes. "Nah, Flash is there. He knows where we are. Besides, this little bathing party just got interestin'."

Mike saw the look in his eyes, and glanced from one to the other. She knew what they wanted, but did she dare give in? The truth was, she wanted it too, and they were both so damned good looking. Her gaze moved from muscled chests down to perfectly proportioned legs, and cocks so large...

...don't swish that pretty little ass of yours around too much, these men ain't seen a female in months...

The words, when she'd first heard them scared her, but now it was different. She waited for cold fear to wash over her, but instead it was a fire crawling up into her belly. She wanted it as much as they did, and found her resistance melting into that fire inside her.

Before she decided what she should do, the two of them began walking toward her, the towels around their waist being pulled off slowly. She almost lost her breath when she imagined what it would be like to have cocks that long and large pushing up inside her. She backed away and bumped into a tree, finding herself closed in by Cheyenne.

"Too many clothes, Mike," Cheyenne whispered in her ear as he leaned toward her.

Her eyes closed, and her breath came rapidly when his hands began slowly unbuttoning her blouse. Her breath turned to a moan as his naughty play turned her to jelly. Slowly he moved his fingers up to her face, stroking her lips and pushing his fingers into her mouth. She instinctively began sucking. She reached up and took his hand as if she wanted to devour it. She opened his hand and kissed his palm, and then brought them down to lay naughtily on her breasts. She pressed his palm against her nipples, feeling them stiffen against him.

"Ever had an Indian Brave before?" he whispered while his hand went down and rested between her legs intimately. "We know secrets the white man don't. We keep our squaws satisfied. I'd like to make you happy, Mike. Both me and Midnight could make you feel real good."

"Yeah?" she said, her voice breathy. "What about my moles and...?"

Cheyenne chuckled. "I'll keep my eyes closed."

"Why you...!"

"Come on, Mike," he said as his hands squeezed and rubbed. "You know we was just funnin'."

"Well, I...oh, Cheyenne," she whimpered as she looked up into his dark eyes—an Indian's eyes—eyes so dark and liquid she felt as if she were drowning in them. Those eyes seemed to tell the story of wild, untamed sex on the reservation. Suddenly she felt him undressing her. She knew she should object, but somehow she couldn't. Instead she lifted her hands and began to strip herself of the last obstacle between them. Whatever this Indian, and this rowdy, undisciplined cowboy had to offer, she wanted it.

Chapter Five

She could sense Cheyenne's barely controlled power that coiled inside his body. His strength, his rippling muscles that felt so hard to her tingling fingers as she stroked him. With a wanton tongue she leaned forward and hungrily licked him. Her mouth scoured every inch of his chest, drawing his elixir into her belly, feeling it was the sweetest poison she'd ever tasted.

She wanted their hellish love to continue, building fire after fire inside her. She writhed as waves of sinful orgasms, one after the other, haunted her. She wanted to let go of her inhibitions as she lay in his arms, to experience the wild, savage heat that stayed just beyond her reach. As she called out their names, they fucked her, one and then the other while her nails raked over their backs and down their muscled arms. She bucked beneath them like a wild bronco. Her breasts tingled with their suckling mouths, the scraping of their teeth on her skin sending spears of electric thrills racing through her. Much to her surprise, their scouring tongues, and whispered suggestions triggered a tantalizing response that she had never experienced. She was being fucked by two of the handsomest, most dangerous men she'd ever known, the thrill of the ride finally sending her over the edge and into a red hot frenzy of uninhibited bliss.

This continued for days, nights, anytime the urge hit them. In the hay barn, down by the lake, even on Owl's Ridge, the rise overlooking her vegetable garden. She felt as if she were caught in a world of illicit bliss, night turning into day, and day turning into night with these two notorious gunslingers satisfying her every need. They

turned her simple household chores into a hot tide of passion that raged through her from morning 'til night.

It was as if she were addicted to a special brand of dangerous sex until one day Flash caught her in the kitchen alone and came up behind her.

"Hi, sexy," he said, putting his arms around her and whispering in her ear. "Got any cool water for a man dyin' of thirst?"

The hour was early, and she could smell the odor of shaving soap. "Where's your shirt, you savage?"

"I don't need it for what I have in mind. She could feel his naked chest through her clothes, and smell the clean outside air on him. As he leaned close to her, his warm breath tickled her face, and his lusty cock pressed against her backside. Suddenly she tossed aside her straight-laced reserve, and naughtily pressed her backside against him in response to his wild nature. What was happening to her? She could feel his hands inching around her waist. Just his closeness, the mere pressure of his body against hers made her nipples harden. Slowly his hand moved upward toward her breasts, cupping and squeezing them while his hot breath and tongue made a feast of her neck and ear. Her cunt became awash with sinful heat and moist juices that threatened to turn to an erotic flood and run down her thighs.

She thought she'd reached the pinnacle of desire when suddenly Midnight and Cheyenne appeared. When they touched her, the three of them freed within her a sudden bursting of sensations. Their lips, their hands, their hot, moist breath mingling with hers, turned her legs to jelly.

Before she knew what was happening she could feel their muscled bodies as they passed her from one to the other, their hot breath, hot kisses, and stiff cocks making a feast of her body. While one stroked her, the other massaged her breasts, and another reached down and squeezed her pussy until she thought she would die. When strong fingers delved deeply inside her, she knew she was lost. She wanted

to resist before Cayo came in and caught them, but also knew if they stopped, she would die.

"You want it, baby?" Flash whispered in her ear. "You ever had it with three? We're about to show you what you've been missin'."

Just then her gaze moved over to the small bed she used for company. It was a bed of rough, cracked wood. The mattress, filled with lumpy cotton was almost flat as it fit snugly into the frame around it. On top, spread out in disarray were animal skins that made a thick pallet for whoever used it.

She stared at it as if it were heaven.

Suddenly she felt the last of her clothes being brazenly removed while the three of them carried her toward the bed.

"Spread them legs, sweetheart," Flash whispered as he rose over her and settled himself between her thighs. And with hands that had killed hundreds of men, he dug his cock out, spread her cleft, and pushed himself inside.

The rush of his sudden invasion brought forth a scream. Her throbbing cunt lathered his cock with the carnal juices of her desire, and his fevered plunges began. "Oh, God, Flash, you're so hard!"

When she felt his rough body so deliciously heavy on top of her, her passion mounted. She couldn't resist possessively clinging to him and bucking wildly. With each push of her hips, Flash's cock plunged deeper and deeper. A wicked fire began deep in her cunt, and she chased it, urging herself upward, and reaching for that elusive bliss that grew with each thrust. Her need blossomed, crawling ever upward, more and more, as his plunges became harder and faster. His long, hard cock created such a wanton heat inside her, she could feel her cunt squeezing it like a clawing hand. With throaty moans she pushed her hips against his over and over, feeling the heat flare bigger and bigger as his hungry cock continued to rub her clit while he thrust in and out.

Suddenly, Midnight lay beside her, his hands lingering on her breasts as he kissed her deeply. The two men took turns fucking her,

one and then the other, each starting new fires and then quenching them. The old bed squeaked in pain when Cheyenne joined in, his muscled body and wild movements giving her a new and different thrill as she clung to him. It was flesh against flesh, lips open and sucking, moans bursting, and his breath coming hard and fast. When she finally shattered, her moan was loud and long.

She wilted beneath their touch when suddenly she heard the loud crack of a gunshot and saw something whiz over Flash's head. They all looked to where it came from, and there stood Cayo in the doorway, a smoking gun in his hand. "What the hell is going on in here?"

Flash got up and moved away with his arms raised. "I ain't got no gun on, Cayo. You'll be shootin' an unarmed man. If you want me, give me a chance to defend myself."

Midnight spoke up. "If she's your girl, Cayo, you didn't say so. We was just..."

"Shut up, both of you," he said weakly as he looked over at Mike, and saw her hiding herself behind an animal skin. "She ain't my girl, but it's plain to me that she's distracting all of us. We're too comfortable here. We can't afford to get comfortable anywhere but at the hideout. I've decided that you three need to go on up there and wait for me."

"What? Cayo..."

"Shut up, Flash. You and me both know that none of us are safe here. It's just a matter of time before they come out here lookin'. It'd be easy for one to hide, but not four. Besides, them damned ranch hands are due back soon. What's to keep them from tellin' everyone they see where we are?"

"I resent that."

He looked over at Mike. "You can resent the hell out of it, but it's true, and you know it." He glared at her. "By the way, when did you become such a little tramp? Here I worried about these boys taking your innocence, and first thing I know you're takin' on the whole

fuckin' gang. Damn, I sure as hell had you figured wrong. I hope you got a good laugh out of it." He seemed to be barely able to stand as he leaned on a stick and made his way back to the bedroom.

"Cayo, I think we need to—"

"The decision's been made. You boys be out of here by tomorrow noon. We've inconvenienced Mike long enough."

Flash and Cheyenne just stood there looking at each other. Finally Midnight said, "Somethin's eatin' at him real bad."

"Yeah, but he's right. I don't know why we didn't think of it before."

"I don't think we wanted to," Cheyenne said as he cut his gaze over to Mike. "Like he said, things is gettin' a little too comfortable around here."

After getting dressed, Mike followed Cayo into the bedroom and slammed the door. "Now you listen to me. It's been days since you came here. Why the hell are you still creepin' around like you're almost dead? By rights, you oughta be just about well enough to run a fuckin' race by now. My God, it's just a shoulder wound. If you're throwin' the boys off this place, then I think you ought to go with them. And don't worry about my virtue. I lost that a long time before your boys came into my life, so, give it up, okay? I'm up to here with you tryin' to save me from myself. It's too late, got that? I've been had!"

"You have, huh?" He slowly moved toward the bed and laid down on it, his eyes issuing a challenge as he looked at her. "Well, if I'm well enough to ride a horse, I must be well enough to..." His words faded into a suggestive half smile. When she didn't move, he said, "I'm waiting, you little hothead."

His hot gaze didn't move away, or weaken, but remained strong as it captured hers and held it. The look he gave her made her toes curl. Had he spoken, or was it only his eyes that said, *I dare you?*

Chapter Six

Cayo felt like a king-sized fool when Mike turned and walked away. He had asked her to come to his bed and she refused.

No woman refused Cayo Sinclair!

With a crushed ego, he rose from the bed and threw his walking cane across the room in anger. He knew he didn't need it, and she did too. Everyone here knew it, yet he kept creeping around on it like an invalid because he knew when he was well enough to ride they'd have to leave. He didn't want to leave until he'd felt her breasts and her ass. He wanted it so bad he could taste it. Hell, if wanting to fuck her was a crime, then he'd just committed the biggest one of his career.

Later he took a stroll down to the lake to think. He needed to get out of the house and away from Mike with her lilac smell, the smell of her kitchen and the softness of her bed. He'd found something special here, and dammit, he couldn't just walk away from it. During his life he'd had so many women he couldn't count 'em, but none had ever affected him the way she did.

Looking out over the lake, the way the water rippled, he imagined he could see fish almost leaping up out of the water.

"Damn," he breathed, "and me without a fishing pole."

He happened to look over by a tree and saw a long stick, and grabbed it. He pulled his jack knife out of his pocket and began whittling on one end. After he made it as sharp as he could, he tore his clothes off and waded out into the water, sure he could spear a few fish for a decent fish fry. He'd never seen water so clear. He could even look down into the lake and see the fish swimming one way and

then the other. After several attempts he finally threw the spear aside and grabbed at them.

Them critters are just askin' to be caught, he thought as he threw himself in the lake and wrestled with a few, but didn't catch even one. He finally gave up and quit. *Can't do nothin' without a damned fishin' poll*, he told himself, and trudged up on the bank. Just after he got dressed he heard someone walk up behind him, quickly drew his gun and whirled around ready to shoot.

When he saw her, he put his gun back in its holster. "My God, Mike. I almost shot you. What are you doin' down here?"

"I followed you."

"It's just as well. I need to tell you something. You were right about me leaving with the others. After thinking it over I've decided me and the boys will ride out tomorrow."

"Then we don't have much time," she said as she moved toward him. "I seem to remember a certain gunslinger inviting me into his bed. I think I'd like to take him up on it."

"That fuckin' son of a bitch didn't know what he was saying. If I was you—"

"You know what I think? I think you're jealous."

"Jealous? Where in the hell did you get an idea like that?"

"You been actin' kind of funny since me and the boys have gotten so friendly. It seems to bother you."

"It don't bother me. It's just...well, it's you. I kind of got the idea you was sort of, you know..."

She chuckled. "A virgin?"

"Yeah, I guess it is funny, ain't it? Here I was worried about your virtue, and you're havin' a high old time with my gang."

"So I'm right. It is jealousy."

"It ain't like that at all. I'm just, I don't know, disappointed."

"Look, Cayo, it's true, I was scared of all of you at first, but it was...I don't know, kind of exciting I guess. The boys are big and helly lookin', if you know what I mean, and it's hard to stay away

from them. They're a far cry from them 'fat-bellied farmers' you mentioned."

"Yeah, I remember sayin' somethin' like that." He looked down at her clothes. "First time I've seen you in a dress."

"I wore it for you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You said you liked to see a woman in dresses. More feminine and all that."

"Just the man in me comin' out."

"Is that the man in you comin' out now?" she said, feeling his cock harden as she leaned against him.

"It sure as hell is," he whispered as his hands began to slowly move over her body. "What you got under that dress?"

"Nothin' but me."

"Not even a corset, or some of them bloomers women wear?"

"Now you know why I wear jeans all the time. I don't like foolin' with all that stuff. 'Sides, I can't do my chores in bloomers and corsets and such. Lace is for special..." Suddenly she began sniffing. "What's that I smell?" She looked around, and then up at him. "It's you!"

"Me?"

She backed away from him. "You smell like fish. Yuck!"

"I was tryin' to get a few for supper tonight."

"I hate fish! You just stay away from me."

She turned to run, but Cayo started chasing her. "Hey, it ain't that bad."

When she began to run, she lifted up her skirts as high as she could get them and felt something in the pocket. She looked and there was a bottle of lilac water she'd misplaced a long time ago, and couldn't remember where she'd put it. She grabbed it now and began unscrewing the cap. Suddenly she felt him grab her. She struggled for a moment, but determined to get away, she thrust it at him, spraying lilac water on him.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Why you little..."

"I ain't makin' love with nobody that smells like fish. Maybe a little lilac water'll make you a little less disgustin'!"

Determined to have her, Cayo kept chasing her in spite of the lilac water she kept spraying him with. Finally, he grabbed her and fell on her among some rushes, and held her down.

* * * *

With the thrill of the moment racing through her, Mike continued to struggle, but finally melted in his arms, the lilac smell intermingling with the smell of fish. She could feel him lifting her dress, and thought about all the nights she'd read his name in her sinful little magazines as she held it beneath the light of her oil lamp. And now he was here. She realized then that out of all the men she'd already had, the cock of this Ten Penny Hero was the one she wanted most.

Cayo's hands cradled her butt as he held her close, so close that Mike relaxed in his arms and wrapped her legs around him. The very moment her pussy met the sensitive head of his cock, their lips met, both moaning and moving as they lay hidden among the rushes. Their hot breath mingled while her hips moved seductively against him. She could feel his cock growing and hardening as it massaged her clit. She wanted him to go deeper, but she couldn't stop. The feeling she got from his rock hard cock was just too good. Finally, he pushed himself all the way in, invading her cunt going deeper and deeper, each inch he conquered carrying with it a new and delicious sensation. She moaned out his name. She couldn't get enough. The more he had, the more she wanted. She delighted when he lifted her higher and plunged harder and faster. Her warm, soft cunt grasped him in its throbbing embrace, giving him an invitation to go even deeper, to find the ultimate place where both their appetites would be appeased. As if he were in another world Cayo plunged over and over, his cock in and

out of her like a mad man, and Mike moaning out his name again and again.

* * * *

He could feel her hands moving beneath his shirt, her nails scratching, her arms clutching him in a clinging embrace, her hot breath licking his face as she bit his lobes. She reached up and pulled at the buckskin that held his long hair back, allowing it to graze her skin as it fell forward. Slowly his mouth moved down her neck and suckled her nipples.

The heat of the day was no match for the heat in their blood as a big swoosh of pleasure engulfed each one, sending them both over the edge and into a flood of wicked sensations.

* * * *

Just then Flash walked up and saw the two of them together. He watched for a moment before he crept up to Cayo and whispered. "I'd like some of that."

"Take over," he said, "I've just come, but she's still hot."

As Cayo moved away, Flash took his place, burying his cock deep into her tight cunt that was moist with her female juices. "Oh, God," he groaned, delighted that the young, firm pussy had a long way to go before she was satisfied. His tongue tingled when he chewed on her nipples, sucking and drawing so hard he was afraid of leaving marks, but he couldn't stop. His hands moved up and down her curving body, squeezing her ass, and pulling it up closer to him and his plunging cock. His hungry tongue darted into her ear, and then slid down her neck, loving the soft feel of her flesh against his.

* * * *

Mike floated in and out of their passionate embraces, one cock and then the other crowded into her. She'd become like a hungry wolf, reaching, clawing, chewing while wanting more and more of them. Knowing that each moment she was with them might be the last, she took what she wanted, and to hell with what people thought. Her body ached for them. Did they feel the same? Was what she felt nothing but lust, or was it something deeper? She'd hated it when they'd come to her ranch, but now she couldn't stand the thought of them leaving.

"Just once more," she begged as she felt them retreat. Almost immediately Cheyenne was bending over her while Midnight began to erotically lick the inside of her thighs. The furnace that had been built inside her still burned until her last two heroes were able to send her over the edge where she shattered over and over again.

* * * *

"Am I your woman?" she whispered as she and Cayo lay beside the lake. "I want to be your woman."

When Cayo didn't answer, she could feel that he had slipped into deep thought, so she didn't press him. She lay quietly for hours it seemed, listening to the restful lapping of the water along the bank. When daylight began to wane, and she heard the cicadas serenading in the bushes, she turned to Cayo.

"Hey," she whispered while softly stroking his face.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, the strong planes of his face softening to a satisfied smile. "Hey, yourself."

"Don't you think we better be gettin' back to the ranch?" She looked up toward the sky. "Looks like the sun's fixin' to go down. It's done past suppertime, you know. The others might be gettin' a little hungry by now."

"Supper? Now that you mention it I could go for a big plate of red beans and cornbread. Got anything like that in that kitchen of yours?"

"Would Southern Fried Chicken do as well?"

"Sure would," he said as he pulled her up with him, and then held her close as they walked arm-in-arm back to the ranch. As the sun sank below the horizon, an empty bottle of lilac water littered the bank.

Chapter Seven

Mike stood at her kitchen counter breading the chicken when Flash walked up behind her. His hands very slowly inched around her waist and then crawled up to her breasts and began to squeeze.

"Stop that, Flash. I ain't got time to fool with you now, I got supper to get on the table."

"Fried chicken, huh?" He looked into a boiling pot. "Somethin' sure smells good."

"I got a peach cobbler in the oven."

"Mike, if you keep feedin' us this good, I'm gonna bust plum outta my pants."

Mike snickered and stopped breading for a moment. Looking up, she said thoughtfully. "Does a cock gain weight?"

"You're funny, Mike. Real funny."

"Look, if you don't get outta here I ain't gonna get nothin' done."

Flash squeezed her. "Mmmm, you smell good," he said as he kissed her neck.

Mike turned around and tried to push him away. When he wouldn't go, she reached down and picked up a handful of flour and flung it in his face. "Now get out so I can finish supper."

"Why you little hothead!" he yelled while brushing the flour off himself. Suddenly he reached around her, grabbed a handful of flour and threw it at her.

After struggling with flour in her eyes for a moment, Mike reached down and grabbed the flour with two fists instead of one and threw it, followed by a pan of water. Lifting it, she threatened him with it. "How about some water to make it stick?"

"Hey, no fair!" he yelled.

Midnight heard the scuffle and looked in. "What in hell?" He quickly turned around and ran outside to get Cayo.

Within minutes Cayo was bursting into the house and saw both Mike and Flash throwing flour all over the kitchen and laughing like children. When he went over to try and stop it, he got a handful of flour in the face, making him sputter and spit.

"Stop!" he finally yelled as he grabbed Mike with one hand and pushed Flash back with the other. "What in hell is going on here?"

"That little witch threw flour on me!" Flash yelled.

He quickly reached for Mike and drug her kicking and scratching to a straight-backed chair, sat down and laid her over his lap and began spanking her.

* * * *

"You bastard!" she yelled as she tried to shield her butt from the stinging blows. "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"If you're gonna act like a child, then I'll treat you like one!" he yelled back. After a few more slaps with his hard hand, he lifted her up and sat her down in the chair. "Now tell me why in God's name did you start this flour fight?"

"Me?" she yelled, rubbing her backside. "He started it. He wouldn't leave me alone while I was tryin' to fix supper, so I gave him a face full of flour."

Cayo looked over at Flash. "Is that true? Did you start this fight?"

Flash hesitated, and then said, "Hell I was just bein' friendly."

"Friendly, my hind leg! I know what you had on your mind," Cayo yelled. "Now get busy and get this kitchen cleaned up."

Flash heard snickering and looked over at Midnight and Cheyenne. "Shut the hell up, or so help me, I'll..."

"Flash!" Cayo shouted.

Supper that night was a strained silence until suddenly they heard something outside. Cayo quickly leapt up and looked out. "It's an Indian!"

Mike went to the window and saw an old Indian with braids down to his waist. He was old, his shoulders stooped as he waited on his horse.

"It's just old Charlie comin' by for table scraps. He usually comes by after supper, but since supper's late tonight—"

"Charlie?" Cayo said questioningly.

"Well, Charlie's what I call him. He's got some Indian name I can't ever remember, so I just call him Charlie. He don't mind." She looked over at the table. "Y'all got anything I can give him?" she asked as she quickly grabbed a paper sack and put several things in it. When she'd gathered up everything she could spare, she carried it out and handed it to him. "Here you are, Charlie."

After he made gestures of thanks, he rode on.

"How did you ever learn to read his hand gestures?"

"It's not hard. His gestures are crude. Anyone can tell what he's saying. Sometime I have what he wants and sometime I don't. If not, he just rides on and comes back the next night."

"Strange," Cayo muttered.

"You know, now that I think of it, We haven't had any Indian attacks around here for ages." She looked at Cayo. "I just wonder if old Charlie's the reason for that?"

* * * *

Hoooot! Hoooot!

The moment she heard it, she stopped reading and grabbed her gun belt. After she cinched it around her waist she checked the bullets, and slowly opened the front door. The rustling of bushes near the house somehow had a sinister sound as Mike stood on her porch and looked warily out into the darkness. Something—*someone* was

out there, she knew it. Living alone since her father died she had developed a sixth sense about these things. When the old owl that lived in the trees on her property began to *hoot* his haunting message, she stopped whatever she was doing and listened. Slowly chills would crawl up her back, and she knew something wasn't right. It could be anything from a fox stalking the henhouse to the old Indian that came by her house occasionally for table scraps. Since Charlie had already been by tonight, she knew she had an uninvited guest. Just then she saw a dark rider, the moonbeams painting his strong shoulders with its cold light.

"Evenin', ma'am," came a smooth voice.

"Who are you?" she called out, her gun pointing threateningly at the chest of a silhouette on horseback.

The man eased up when he saw the gun pointing at him. "No one important, just a poor traveler in need of food."

"Your name, nimrod, what's your fuckin' name?"

"Why, uh...Ben...yes, that's it...Ben Wheeler. And you are...?"

"The name's Mike McClure, and this is the Lazy M Ranch. It's a fur piece to the gate, how come you been hidin' out in them bushes? Are you a lawman?"

"Oh, no ma'am. I don't have nothin' to do with the law. I'm down here from Wheelock. Are you the owner of this way station?"

"Way Station? This ain't no way station, friend. I'd advise you to get back on the road out there and go east about five more miles. There'll be one there."

"Five miles is such a long way at this hour of the night, I was wondering if I could trouble you for a meal, and a night's lodging."

Just another dumb cowboy, she thought as her defensive stature slowly became relaxed, and she put away her gun. "All I've got left is some cold chicken and turnip greens, maybe a little cornbread. You can bunk in the barn, but don't get too comfortable. You'll have to leave at first light tomorrow."

"Yes ma'am, I understand. And thank you."

* * * *

When the man entered the house, he saw the flickering light of only two wall lamps, giving the room a warm, comfortable feeling.

"I couldn't sleep, so I was up readin'," she said as she entered the shadowy kitchen.

He looked over at a chair where he recognized the cover of Frank Starr's Ten Penny novels. "Lucky for me you were, I guess," he said as he saw her stretching upward toward a carriage wheel that hung from the ceiling. Attached to each spoke was an oil lamp that gave light over the eating table. "Can I help you?"

"I can manage. Been doin' this since I was knee high to a grasshopper."

His gaze drifted downward, and noticed her rounded figure that fit so well in a man's jeans. His gaze was drawn to the belt that cinched the jeans up to fit her small waist, and the way the gun belt she wore lay seductively along her hips.

"There now," she said. "Nothing like being able to see what you're eatin'."

Later, while the man ate, he looked around. "Just you in this great big house?"

"I've got ranch hands that help me keep the place up."

He nodded his head. "Must get lonely, though. A woman alone—"

"Who said I was alone? Look, don't get no ideas, see. I've got cow punchers around here as big as houses. They'd eat a little dirt farmer like you in one bite."

He looked up the staircase to the second floor with interest. "Big enough place to have lots of house guests, though. Anybody besides you stayin' here now?"

Mike felt a warning and angled a suspicious look toward him. "Why the hell are you askin' so many questions?"

The man shrugged. "Just friendly interest."

As she walked over to the table to get his dirty dishes, she looked down at him, her green gaze putting out a stern warning. "Just don't let me find out it's for anything else. These guns on my hips ain't there for show."

"Oh, no, it...it's nothing, just being friendly."

Taking one last sip of coffee, and laying his napkin on the table, he rose from his chair and took a few halting steps toward the front door and opened it. A sudden gust of wind blew against him, making him pull his coat closer around him. He turned to Mike hoping she'd insist he stay in the house. "A storm must be comin', the wind's picking up."

"The barn's got a good roof on it," she said as she cast a hard look in his direction. "You'll find what you need in a chest by Killer's stall."

"K-Killer?"

"Killer's my bull. He don't like strangers, so you'd best be quiet." She gave the man one last knife-like look before she closed the door. "Hope you don't snore."

* * * *

Later on that night Mike woke up to some distant chanting, and got up from her bed to look outside. When she realized it was Cheyenne doing some kind of Indian ritual in a clearing behind a grove of trees in back of the house, she quickly pulled on her robe and ran outside. As she ran toward the sound, she looked back at the barn, hoping the passing cowboy hadn't heard it. She had a feeling about him, and didn't want him to find out that Cayo and his gang were here.

She worked her way through the shrubs until she finally found Cheyenne, dressed in Indian garb, and war paint on his face. She gasped as she saw his magnificent body shining with sweat beneath the moon, and dancing around a pile of sacred items. His voice was

smooth and deep, and the mystery of it seemed to sink into every pore, forcing her to stop and listen.

*From the south the enemy comes.
From the north, the east and the west, they come.*

*The birds, the warlike birds, with sounding wings
Will come and save us.*

*I wish to change myself to the swift, warlike bird
And throw my body in the strife...*

As Mike listened, she was almost in awe. The beauty wasn't in what was said, but in the delivery, the passion, the faith that she felt in the air about him. Apparently Cheyenne was praying to his God for victory over their enemies. But something seemed to be wrong. A *gunslinger* praying for victory—*gunslingers* that shot other men—*gunslingers* that killed daily. Would any God answer a prayer like that?

She moved closer, but she stepped on a twig that sounded like thunder. Cheyenne quickly ceased his chant and turned quickly, his body in a crouch, his hands raised in offense.

"Mike," he said when he saw her, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry, Cheyenne. I heard your chant from the house and came to tell you that there's a drifter in the barn that might hear you. It seems I became so mesmerized by your ritual that I forgot why I was here."

"Who is it?" Cheyenne whispered.

"I don't know. Just a passing cowboy that asked for food and a bed for the night. He should be gone at first light tomorrow."

"Thanks for letting me know."

Mike was entranced by his appearance. Her eyes raked over the rippling muscles in his broad chest and arms that before had been

hidden beneath his western garb, never in his Indian get up. God, he was handsome. His hair was loose and thick, hanging around his face like a cloud, making him appear so mysterious. He had a colorful band around his head, and there were feathers and different kinds of objects all over him that she didn't know the meaning of.

Her eyes focused on his strong jaw, his lips, and the darkness of his eyes that were deep and liquid. She felt a jolt when those eyes looked up and saw her staring at him.

While the shadows hung around him, he said, "Why do you look at me that way?"

"I'm sorry. I've just never seen you in your native garb before. For the first time I see you as you really are."

"Which appeals to you more? The cowboy...or the Indian?"

"T-T-The..." She trembled. "I don't know."

"Come here, Mike," he said, his voice smooth and deep. "Perhaps it is time for the truth."

She stepped out of the brush and carefully walked up to where he was. He took her hand and led her to a rock and sat her down. As he crouched before her, he began to speak in a whisper, and looked deep into her eyes.

"There is a rose that blooms at midnight
It blooms the whole night long.
It's fragrance is a mighty mist,
It's beauty like a song.
The stars and moon hide their face in shame
When the petals of this rose spread forth
For nothing in this world can equal its beauty
When the hour of midnight comes forth.
That is you, my love,
That is you."

She looked at him with tears in her eyes, and when she couldn't contain them, she began to cry. "Oh, Cheyenne, that's so beautiful. Thank you."

"Mike, I'm not a half-breed, I am a full-blooded Indian Brave, and my name isn't Cheyenne."

"What? N-Not Cheyenne?"

"I escaped from my reservation when I chose to live among the white man. My tribe would have killed me had they found me, so I changed my name to Cheyenne and have been hiding among Cayo's gang since. Cayo is the half-breed. I am a full-blooded Apache."

The tears in her eyes drew the light of the twinkling stars. "If your name's not Cheyenne, what is it?"

"I am Cheveyo."

Mike gasped as she remembered a story in her Ten Penny Novel Book about an Indian Brave named Cheveyo. The stories were so exciting they took her breath away. There were colored pictures galore of an Indian Brave riding, fighting and even loving, but suddenly they stopped. The last story she read was all about his strange disappearance. The loss was almost devastating to those who kept up with his exploits. She was still waiting for his return when suddenly he was here—loving her. His love a little more wild than the others. His love more passionate and free. His love more serious—as necessary to the Indian as breathing. Now she knew why he seldom smiled. He felt deeply making his love a savage kind of love.

"It's our secret," he whispered. "Now you tell me a secret, and when we have shared our secrets we become as one."

She was silent for a moment, almost afraid to speak, and then the halting words seemed to spill out of her mouth all at once. "I...I'm afraid of Indians."

He snickered, trying to keep from laughing. "Mike, you try to act so tough, but you are such a little fawn. Yes, that is your Indian name. Little Fawn. Again, this will be our secret." He squeezed her hand. "And Little Fawn, you will never have reason to fear me. Unless, of course, you will not let me make love to you, in which case I would have to kill you."

They both laughed. "You know, you even speak differently. More like an Indian, frankly."

"Because I must pass for white, I speak like the white man."

"Oh, Cheyenne, you're so different tonight than you are with the others. Your sensitive, romantic, and so absolutely beautiful in your Indian getup." She gazed at him, searching his dark eyes. "It must be terrible to live a lie, and yet you seem very religious."

"All Indians have a sacred spirit that guides them, protects them. I pray for everything. Rain, food, safety in my travels. It's the way I was brought up." He caught her hands in his. "Mike, what you have seen here tonight is what I truly am. Now that you know you must never tell."

"I never will, I promise."

"I would love to make love to you right here, right now, but during prayer I must stay pure."

"I understand," she said.

"Now go back to the house and try to sleep. Morning will come sooner than you expect."

With his mouth close to her face, she could feel the hot breath of his race on her skin, but instead of trying to seduce him into making love to her, she showed respect for his beliefs. "Goodnight, Chey...Cheveyo," she whispered.

"Good night, Little Fawn."

* * * *

I want to be your woman.

The words reverberated in Cayo's head over and over again as the morning sun warmed his back. Shots rang out one after the other as he practiced drawing his six gun and shooting tin cans off a fallen log. The cans flew right and left as the whizzing bullets hit them. His arm was stiff so he worked it, trying to limber it up. He felt like an amateur as he continued to curl his finger around the trigger and

squeeze. Since he'd taken a bullet in the shoulder his aim was off a little, but he knew all he needed was a little target practice.

I want to be your woman.

While he stopped to re-load, the words still played along the edges of his mind, refusing to give him any peace. Sure, he'd wanted her, so he took her. Cayo always took what he wanted, but he never dreamed that she would take their relationship so seriously. She didn't understand. Cayo was not someone who could ever offer a woman marriage.

His lifestyle was just too damned dangerous. He had women when he wanted them. A saloon girl, an occasional brief affair, a woman he had tucked away somewhere, but it was always a quick hello and goodbye as he crawled in and out of her bed. He'd never considered marrying any of them. He hated to say it, but it would have to be the same with Mike. She was young. She probably had ideals about this romance and marriage stuff, but to him, sex was just sex. It was something he indulged in when he needed it, like food and water. He drank when he was thirsty, and ate when he was hungry. Sex is an appetite that every man satisfies when necessary, and when it's time to move on there are no regrets.

That is—until Mike.

He could tell that his men liked her. Maybe a little too much. He could tell because he felt the same way. None of them wanted to leave. The four of them were like brothers. They shared everything, even women. They'd almost hit a rut in the road the day he woke up to find them all over her. His first thoughts were that they were taking advantage of her. He leapt in trying to save her virtue only to find out that she'd been a willing partner in their little ménage. He managed to hide it well, but the truth was, it just about blew his mind when he discovered that she wasn't what he thought she was. He'd told her he was disappointed, but it was a lie. If anything, she looked even better to him. She was young, hot, and always ready. But he knew the day was coming when he would have to break her heart.

Trying to keep his mind on his target practice, Cayo began doing some daring moves. He stood with his back to the fallen log, and then whirled around and blasted the tin cans. Next he rolled on the ground stirring up dust until he came to a stop on his stomach and shot three or four tin cans that made a hollow sound when they were hit.

As he practiced, his aim became better, and the tin cans flew in the air in all directions. During his re-loading, a blast sounded, and a bullet that just missed him got lost in a tree trunk. Cayo whirled around, but no one was there.

"Cayo!" a strange voice shouted out. "Cayo Sinclair!"

"I'm Cayo," he shouted in return. "Come out where I can see you, you coward."

Slowly a tall, lanky cowboy stepped out of the bushes with his gun trained on Cayo. "I'm Rio Judson, and I'm gonna kill you."

"The line forms on the left." Cayo said sarcastically.

"I been watchin' you. I see you got a bum shoulder there, but apparently you haven't lost your touch."

"I'd better not," Cayo said, casting a hard look toward his visitor. "Otherwise I'd be dead."

"Yeah, well, better get used to that idea, cause come sunup tomorrow you'll be layin' dead in the street of Red River."

"Is that supposed to worry me?" Cayo said as his face took on a hard look. "I don't scare easily, kid. I've been threatened and forced into gunfights with the best, but I came out of all of them still alive. What makes you think you're any different?"

"For one thing, you're all shot up. You don't really think you can beat me with that shoulder in a sling, do you?"

Moving swiftly, Cayo pulled the sling off, and shot the tin cans one after the other before the kid could blink his eyes. "What do you think?" Cayo said while reloading. "It only takes one hand and one draw to shoot a little coward like you. I'll be sittin' down to a cold beer five minutes after this little shootout ends."

"You got a lot of ego, ain't you Cayo? But that ego ain't gonna help you tomorrow. You just remember this one thing. You've met your match in me, and tomorrow while they're diggin' your grave, I'll be the one sittin' down to a cold beer."

"I doubt you're even old enough to drink." Cayo hesitated, a concerned frown on his face. "Look, kid, believe me when I say you don't want to be in my shoes. I'm not famous, I'm feared, dammit! I can't go nowhere that I ain't recognized. I ain't done one damned thing, but I'm blamed for half the crimes that are committed. I have to stay hid most of the time, and for what? The glory of being famous?" Cayo snorted. "Believe me, it ain't what it's cracked up to be. If I do show up in a town somewhere, some young punk like you is always challenging me to gunplay in the street, and some sheriff is frantically looking through wanted posters." Cayo began advancing on the man. "And it's all because of young whippersnappers like you. You read them stupid magazines, and plan for the day you can put me down. Well, I'm fuckin' tired of it!"

"I don't care what you say," the kid yelled, pointing at him threateningly. "I'm comin' for you tomorrow, so you be ready."

"You wanna die, kid? All right, but remember when that bullet hits you're belly, this was your choice, not mine. Now get out of my sight until tomorrow at sunup, because your time is up! Got that? You're dead!"

Chapter Eight

"Them's mighty harsh words."

They both whirled around, and there stood Mike all decked out in her tight jeans and six guns.

"What the hell are you doin' up here?" Cayo barked.

"Well, the dishes were done, and laundry day ain't until tomorrow. I don't know, I thought if I come up here you'd show me a few of your tricks. Might even get a little practice in myself." The men stepped back as she lifted a gun out of its holster and began twirling it around her finger. She quickly stopped it when it pointed toward them. "A woman alone needs to know how to handle a gun—" She gave them a teasing smile. "—wouldn't you say? By the way, what's all this talk about killin' somebody?"

"Nothin'," Cayo snapped. "Get on back to the house."

"Listen here, Cayo Sinclair, I ain't no snivelin' female you can order around. You seem to have a hard time rememberin' that. I'd work on it if I was you." She looked over at the tall, lanky cowboy. "Now who the hell are you?"

"I'm Rio Judson, ma'am."

"Oh yeah, I recognize you now. You told me your name was Ben Wheeler."

"You know this snake?"

"Found him hidin' in the bushes last night," she told Cayo, and then looked back at Rio. "I thought I told you to get out of here at first light. What are you doin' still hangin' around?"

"I came to see Cayo, ma'am. Him and me are working up a little business deal." He looked over at Cayo, sending him a signal with his

eyes. "Right Cayo?" As his sharp gaze dug into Cayo, his next words were bathed in a threat. "See you at sunup tomorrow."

Mike and Cayo watched as the cowboy walked toward his horse and untied it, mounted it, and then rode off.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothin'. The less you know, the better off you'll be."

"What's this 'business deal' he was talkin' about?"

"Nothin', just..."

"Cayo, talk to me."

"I don't want to get you involved, Mike."

"I'm already involved, for God's sake. I've given you shelter, I've fed you...my God, I've even slept with you. How can you say I'm not involved?"

"All right, here goes. You already know that I earn my money as a gunslinger. At first it wasn't much. I was hired to take care of sticky situations such as getting water rights for farmers through intimidation, checking the brands on steers to see if they had been altered, but slowly it turned into more than that. When these damned books started coming out I began being hired to kill. A little gunplay on a dusty street, a saloon brawl. I never lost, so my reputation grew until I was being blamed for everything from train robberies to heisting stage coaches. Hell, Mike, if I'd done even half the things they say I've done I'd have to be in two places at one time. The thing is, I'm an easy target. If they don't have anyone else to blame, they blame Cayo Sinclair. I thought hidin' out at your ranch was workin', but I should have known better. We're sittin' on a keg of dynamite, and we're puttin' you in danger."

"Keg of dynamite? What do you mean?"

"I mean if that weasel found us there'll be others. It's time to get out."

"Have you ever thought of having a woman as part of your gang?"

He looked at her as if she'd lost her mind. "Now that makes about as much sense as puttin' a milk jug under a bull."

"Why?"

"Because we live in a ghost town way out in the Mohave Territory."

"A ghost town? What are you doin' livin' in a ghost town?"

"It's our hideout, the only place we're safe."

"The only place I know of out that way is Wolf Canyon."

"That's the place."

"My God, Wolf Canyon? Ain't that place surrounded by Indians?"

"Yeah. That's the reason why it's safe. Nobody wants to go into Indian territory. But these Indians are peaceful. We don't bother them, and they don't bother us. There's a creek nearby that flows at the base of Horse Head Mountain. It once belonged to the town, but we share it."

"When you first came here, was it Sheriff Hargraves that was chasin' you?"

"No, that was Lassiter, the sheriff over at Cold Creek. He chased us all the way from Table Rock to the Oklahoma border. We finally lost him when we entered Big Sandy. I guess he didn't want to battle them hot, dusty winds to the other side, so he gave up. He gave us one more taste of hot lead before he left, and that's when I got hit. By the time we got all the way through Big Sandy I was almost dead in my saddle. The boys pretty much left me at your doorstep with a bullet in my shoulder." He hesitated, trying to make her understand that her request was ridiculous. "Look, Mike, this life ain't for you. Hell, it ain't for anybody, but it's the price I pay for my so-called fame, I guess. I don't want to bring you no trouble, that's why we gotta leave before anyone knows we're here." He looked toward the trail that Rio took to leave. "I'll just go into town tomorrow, get it over with, and then we'll be gone. Out of your hair for good."

"Over with? What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's lookin' for a fight."

"In the middle of town?"

"He wants an audience when he comes up against me. If he should win this shootout, he'll want everyone to know he's the one that killed Cayo Sinclair."

"But Cayo, you can't go into town. What about the sheriff? Won't he lock you up the minute he sees you?"

"No, not Sheriff Hargraves."

"Why not? Doesn't he know who you are?"

"Sure, but there are some places I can go, such as Red River here. Sheriff Hargraves knows me, and he knows how my reputation started. He don't exactly like me comin' into town and stirrin' up trouble, but he backs me up when somethin' like this happens. He's a good sheriff that can tell the difference between a real outlaw and one on paper."

* * * *

Back at the ranch, Cayo noticed how empty the place was and asked, "Where's the gang?"

"Gone to pick up supplies," she answered.

"You mean we're alone?"

She gave him an impish smile. "For a while, I guess. They've been gone for a couple of hours so they could ride up any minute."

"You know," he whispered sadly as he put his arms around her. "I'm gonna hate to leave you, Mike. You make a man wish things could be different, you know?"

"I think I do."

With her in his arms, Cayo felt a need rise up in him that was so great he pulled her to him roughly, almost violently.

"Do you realize I've been here for days, and I've yet to have you to myself? So, before I leave, I'm gonna show you what it feels like to have a real man inside you."

"You're in trouble, mister," she said as she began undressing.

"There's just some trouble a man don't mind gettin' into," he said as he slid beneath the sheet.

This is it, she thought. She could feel her nipples harden at just the thought of his hands on her. Her eyes moved down to the inviting sight of his muscled body only half hidden by the sheet. As he lay there looking like a god, he leaned upward on one elbow.

"Come on, you little spitfire, and let's see what you've got."

Without thinking, she walked to the bed and pushed the sheet aside. "Oh, God, Cayo," she whispered as she looked at his generous manhood.

Seeing her hesitancy, he rose to a sitting position and grabbed her hand. "Ride me," he whispered seductively.

While her heart thrashed in her chest, she straddled him, and moaned breathlessly as his naked flesh made contact with hers. Her lazy eyes closed in ecstasy as his hands squeezed her breasts, and his mouth covered her nipples and chewed and sucked. She could feel a stab of electricity every time he tweaked them with his tongue, sending a current of power through her, all the way down to her groin. She immediately felt an awakened response the moment his cock entered her dripping cunt.

"Ohhhhhh."

She whimpered over and over again as she writhed and bounced, everything in her responding to his rough handling. She buried her face against his throat, feeling his hands as they stroked her back, and then her hips, gradually lowering to her thighs.

Shivers of excitement took her breath, chills danced down her spine. His hands, both gentle and rough stroked her sides, sending tingles all the way through her. Suddenly, his cock, so rock hard, thrust over and over again, causing a loud, whimpering moan to escape her throat.

"I've dreamed of riding your cock, Cayo," she said breathlessly. "Even when I didn't know who you were, I wanted you." Suddenly

she felt his fingers pinch her nipples, and she screamed into the still, hot air of the house.

"Ohhhh, God!" she cried out again as she thrust her writhing hips forward, causing his cock to go deeper into her cunt. She could feel his breath, hot and damp next to her ear. She turned her face upward, her desire turning her feral with teeth that nipped at his face, his ears, his neck, and then she licked at the rippling muscles on his chest.

"More, Cayo, more!"

Before she got the words out, Cayo thrust hard and fast, his cock thrusting into her cunt so hard that she screamed again and again. Finally, his pulsing rod rubbed her clit over and over as it continued to plunge into her, discovering places within her she never knew existed. Suddenly he pulled her backward and turned her over. With a strength that thrilled her, he raised her hands upward and kept them there as he fucked her with a brazen fury.

Flat on her back, she raised her legs so high that he lifted them over his shoulder while he thrust in and out of her cunt. Sensations whirled in her groin until she found herself climbing him as his cock rubbed inside her cunt, carrying her higher and higher. Her nails dug into the flesh on his hands as they struggled to keep her captive. All at once she could feel a sticky substance and knew her nails had pierced his palm, covering both their hands in blood. Finally, when she was as close as she could get to an orgasm without bursting, her legs lowered and reached around his body and clung. Her legs tightened as her orgasm drew nearer until she finally clenched him, riding him up and down, up and down, faster and faster until she felt herself shatter.

As the two lovers slept, suddenly Mike was awake by the stomping of boots, and a trio of voices yelling, "Is anybody here?"

She slipped out of the bed and put on a thin robe before she opened the door of the downstairs bedroom. "Shhhh!" she said, "Cayo's asleep!"

"Really, now," Flash said, his hungry eyes looking her up and down. "What have you two been up to?"

He began advancing on her, his good looks and helly body reminding her of his insatiable appetite. She looked over at the other two as they put the supplies on the table, and began advancing on her as well. She watched as each of them began to slowly undress.

"Maybe we'll get some of what Cayo enjoyed while we were gone," Flash said.

By this time Flash was standing in front of her, the front of his jeans strained as they molded his generous manhood. He was backing her up steadily toward the kitchen when she said with a mocking sympathetic voice, "My, my, it must've been hot out there." And then all at once she reached out and grabbed a dipper of water from out of the water pail, and threw it on him. "You need coolin' off, cowboy."

"Why you little spitfire!"

While the others were laughing, she turned to run toward the day bed, but he caught her, and said, "I'll make you pay for that, you little demon from Hell!"

"Oh, really?" she asked. "You and what army?"

Just then he grabbed her and kissed her roughly while the others gathered around. "This army," he whispered.

She looked up at them and smiled. "Oh, that army. Why didn't you say so?"

Within only seconds she was beneath him, his legs between hers, and pressing against her was the biggest and the longest cock she'd had besides Cayo's. It grew as he rubbed, the already long length growing against her. She yielded to the searing need that had come alive in her. The more he teased her with his male strength, the more she felt herself wanting to give in to the burning sweetness that seemed captive within her. He pressed and pushed while her thoughts fragmented, draining her of any resistance. She could feel his hands and lips as they continued their hungry search of her body. The sensation he caused was nothing less than explosive, and along with it an orgasm that was building to volcano levels. Her body betrayed her with a wanton response. Suddenly she felt the hands of the others as

they pulled at her, one trying to push the others away as he struggled for her pussy.

"No need to fight, boys," she said breathlessly, "there's enough for everyone."

She reveled in their bodies as they pushed against her with their cocks, one pushing inside her, and then the other. She stroked one muscled body and then the other as they rolled over and under her, their hands loving her breasts by squeezing and tweaking her nipples. She could feel a rock-hard cock between the crack of her ass, until Midnight finally pushed himself in, and took her like a wild tornado. Her body lay between them, her legs splayed as their hands and cocks throbbed along her body quenching the fire in themselves and in her. Finally, as her cunt dripped its juices through the cleft of her pussy, she began to moan for a blazing invasion. Her body writhed as she dreamed of that big cock plunging inside her, riding up and down until she was having one of the most thrilling fucks possible. Finally a hot tongue was thrusting inside her mouth, and the sensation seemed to spread down her body until it found the fire between her legs. When she felt his breath on her face, it was as if a fire-breathing dragon had captured her and invaded her cunt like some medieval monster in heat.

God, he was wild!

The frenzy of movement excited her, and with every buck her body made, a scream escaped her throat. She struggled, but she didn't really want to be let loose. Cheyenne's warm breath grazed her skin causing a gang of goosebumps to dance down her back. His mouth pulled her robe aside and sucked and chewed on her breasts. Swirls of red flames passed in front of her eyes until at last she felt an orgasm floating on the edge of her passion, lurking, waiting to envelop her at the end of this thrilling ride. Until then, she bucked with him, clung to him as he thrust himself in and out, in and out, in and out! Sweet moisture broke out inside her, lathering his cock with her own sweet oil.

And then, like a wind from the south side of Hell, a series of orgasms lapped at her, causing her to kiss and lick his chest, scratch his back, and bite and chew at him until the mother of all orgasms flared into one final fiery burst.

Feeling a melting heat turn her bones to rubber, she relaxed against him until another fire was started and quenched by Midnight. Flash had begun this love feast, and ended it when his cock gave her one more ride to the moon and back. With her last volcanic explosion drifting through her groin, she felt positively boneless, and could do nothing more than lay back basking in the warmth of satisfaction these three had at last given her.

Chapter Nine

Later that night after supper, Mike sat in the porch swing talking to Midnight.

"Midnight," she said, "can't you talk him out of this?"

"Mike, I can't do that. Besides, he wouldn't listen, and he'd think I was crazy for asking him to. Hell, he don't want to face the kid, but he's been challenged. If he backs down now he'd be labeled a coward. He'd never live it down."

"But I'm so afraid for him."

"Look, Mike, this kid, he don't stand a chance against Cayo. He's a hot head that just wants a reputation. Cayo's not worried. If he had to go up against a man like himself, or someone with more experience it would be different, but this kid is just an annoying little insect that Cayo has to deal with now and again. Believe me, I know."

"How come you know so much about this, Midnight?"

"Because I was one just like this Judson kid. I was in a bar one night in San Antonio, and Cayo came in. He strutted around bigger'n life, and I admired the hell out of him. But I wanted a reputation and knew to get it I'd have to kill him. The thought didn't set well with me, so I was slow on the uptake. So slow that this saddle tramp came in and challenged Cayo before I had a chance to.

"The man was older, more experienced, and Cayo knew he had a serious challenge on his hands. I stood there scared spitless for Cayo. That's when I knew I could never kill him. The saddle tramp didn't give Cayo a chance to defend himself. He drew on him right there in the saloon. He knew he could never outdraw Cayo, so he tried to trick him by making Cayo think he was reaching for his drink, but at the

last minute he drew his gun. I don't know why I did what I did, but before I knew it I was fighting Cayo's battle for him. I drew my gun and sprayed bullets all over that bum.

"That's what Cayo meant when he said I saved his life in a barroom brawl one night. He bought me a few drinks, and we been together ever since."

"Thank God for you, Midnight."

"Yeah, well anyway, that's how I know so much about these stupid punks that come lookin' for Cayo. They see him struttin' around bigger than life, and want that for themselves. The trouble is, they think a few shooting lessons puts them in his league."

"It's been a long day," Mike said, and tried to stifle a yawn.

"You look tired," Midnight said, turning her face up to his. "Maybe you should—"

"My gosh, Midnight, you've got the most beautiful eyes. I don't think I've ever seen eyes as blue as yours. They remind of the nighttime sky."

He smiled shyly. "That's how I got my name. Some saloon girl told me I had eyes like a midnight sky."

Mike laughed. "And you loved it."

"Well, I wasn't gonna argue with her."

"How old are you, Midnight?"

"Twenty-three."

She reached up and stroked his cheek. "She was right, you know. Your eyes have the depth and wisdom of a much older man."

Midnight was silent for a moment, and then said, "Mike...you like Cayo, don't you?" He hesitated. "I mean, I know you like all of us, but Cayo's kind of in a league all his own with you. Right?"

"Cayo is special, Midnight, but honestly, all of you have become very special to me." She reached up and stroked his cheek. "You know what I like about you?"

"What's that?"

"You're very manly, Midnight. You have strong features, and I've never seen anyone break a horse like you. And those dimples, shame on you for having dimples like those. A girl needs to be warned about you before you enter a room."

He laughed. "Woman, if I stayed out here with you another five minutes, you'd have me believin' I was pure cat nip to the women of this world."

"Hey, everything I said was true."

He leaned over and kissed her softly. "I only want to be cat nip to one woman," he said, and winked. "I'll give you three guesses as to who that is. Now, I've got a big day tomorrow, so goodnight, you little witch."

Mike knew she should go to bed too, but she couldn't get Cayo's impending date with destiny out of her mind. It was only a few hours away before he would have to go into town to face that kid, Rio. She was afraid for him. Cayo had a red hot reputation. A lot of people hated him and would love to see him laying in the dirt. But they didn't know him like she did. Strangely enough, that was one of the problems she was having. She began caring way too much for him. Her feelings weren't just those of one friend to another, her feelings were serious. The other three, Flash, Midnight and Cheyenne meant a lot to her, too. Although they were hot, sexy men that set her blood to boiling, compared to Cayo they seemed more like mischievous little boys that appealed to her dirty side. Cayo, on the other hand, was a real man—a man that some people called dangerous. They plainly didn't understand his situation, and the thought of him dying sent a stab of fear as sharp as any blade all the way through her.

What if she lost him?

Seeing him laying on the dusty street of Red River would kill her. The boys tried to tell her that Cayo was up to it, but she knew that even if he won this fight, there would be others. These ambitious little mama's boys wouldn't leave Cayo alone until he was cold in the ground.

She finally got up from the porch swing and went inside. With her mind full of worry, she drifted into a troubled sleep, tossing and turning until she saw herself standing on a lonely, dusty street. She seemed to hear someone calling her from out of a deep fog, and turned to see who it was. As the fog lifted, she saw a cowboy dressed in black with silver spurs that clinked, and long black hair that lifted on the breeze.

It was Cayo!

"Oh, Cayo!" she called out as she ran to him and jumped into his arms.

The two of them laughed like children while he turned them around and around in that empty street.

"Where have you been, Cayo?"

"I've been looking for you, Mike. All my life," he said. "I wanted someone to love, to care for. Someone to love me."

"Oh, Cayo, I do love you. Don't leave. Stay here with me."

"Oh, God, Mike, I want to—"

The words had just left his lips when they heard an echo of evil laughter and looked around. They saw hundreds of men with their guns pointing toward Cayo in challenge.

"Is this what you want for her?" they asked Cayo. "Because this is what your life will be like. We'll come by the thousands when you least expect it, and one of us will be faster than you. One will be the death of Cayo Sinclair, the terror of the west! One will put you in your grave!"

"Cayo, who are they? What's happening?"

He turned and took her in his arms. "You heard them, Mike. Life with me won't be easy. Can you live in a world of guns and death, never knowing what day might be my last?"

"Cayo, all I know is I love you. If I had to live my life without you that would be a death sentence for me."

"That's all I needed to hear." He turned to the crowd of gunslingers, bounty hunters, gamblers, and even lawmen, and said,

"Go back to the hell you came out of. Someday we'll meet, and when we do, make sure your widows are taken care of."

Before he could turn back around, the men were crouching, their guns pointed and firing, the bullets whizzing all around them. Cayo grabbed Mike's hand and shouted, "Run, Mike!"

Together they ran, their enemies chasing them through the empty streets of the town. And then suddenly from out of nowhere came two saddled horses, and they quickly mounted them. They rode until Mike saw her ranch in the distance. She somehow knew if they made it to the ranch, Cayo would be safe.

And then suddenly they were there, out of harm's way at last. She'd never felt such happiness as she did at that moment. They went into each other's arms. She wanted to hold him forever. She didn't care that he was a gunslinger, a wanted man, a man that was feared by everyone. She would give her all to him, and value every minute they could spend together.

Suddenly the beautiful dream that had turned to a nightmare blew up in jagged pieces, jarring her awake. Mike woke up crying, a feeling of doom indelibly stamped upon her heart.

She turned and saw Cayo laying there so handsome in the moonlight. Feeling a deep desire for him, she turned and held him in her arms whispering, "Don't leave me, Cayo, please don't leave me."

Cayo woke up and took her in his arms. "What's wrong, Mike?"

"Cayo, please stay with me. I don't care that you're a gunslinger, I love you. We'll think of something. Just let me love you as long as I can."

"Mike, I can't put your life in danger."

"I don't care, Cayo. I'll die anyway without you."

"Come here," he whispered, and kissed her deeply as he gathered her close to him.

Slowly she moved over him, opening her legs as she straddled him. Lifting herself, she lowered her cunt over his cock causing him to moan and clutch her hips. Her moist juices made the invasion pure

joy. She closed her eyes as she began to ride him, savoring the stiff push and pull of his cock as it rubbed her clit. Suddenly he pushed his hips up, and plunged himself deeper where the fire burned brighter. His size rubbing against the sides of her cunt made her want to scream. His cock was so full she could feel it stretch her as it entered. It was like a giant flame that leapt in and out of her, bringing such delight she could hardly stand it.

Finally she leaned over him and breathed in his manly scent before she nibbled on his hard chest. It was an erotic scent, a scent that was better than any spring flower, any lilac water, or the air after a spring shower. She closed her eyes, feeling his cock pulse and twitch inside her, bringing her closer to that place where passion pounded the blood through her heart, chest and head. Little bursts of sensations pushed her deeper and deeper until she cried out for release. Her hips moved in a frenzy, urging her upward toward the elusive blast of sensations that taunted her.

His body bucked beneath her, his cock thrusting, bringing her into a wild and exciting place where she shattered at last. She just felt the fire being quenched when he gave one final solid thrust and the two wilted against each other. After all the fires were out, she lay against him loving the feel of his large body against hers as she fell asleep.

When she woke up later, Cayo was gone.

Chapter Ten

Cayo and Rio Judson walked slowly as they began to square off in the middle of the dusty street of Red River. Frightened townspeople scattered, some going into the general store while others looked on from the saloon. Finally, Cayo came to a halt when the street was vacant of cattle ranchers, dirt farmers and school marms. The whipping wind whistled out a funeral dirge, and the sun that was barely shining was behind him.

While Cayo looked into the face of possible death he couldn't help thinking of Mike, and her soft, warm body next to his. If only he could have that forever. To wake up every morning with her beside him was all he wanted out of this life. He knew that now. He'd been fighting it, but with his life on the line, all he could think of was her and how much he loved her. He knew his roaming days were over. He didn't know how he'd do it, but he had to call it quits and settle down.

Suddenly he saw Rio reach for his gun, and quickly reached for his. Before the kid had it half way out of his holster, Cayo fired, and the kid went down. The instant it happened Cayo felt a pain in his gut, and ran over to him.

"You stupid kid," he said. "Why the hell couldn't you leave me alone?"

"Tell my mama..." he began, and then his head fell to one side.

While Cayo knelt there with tears in his eyes, the townspeople slowly began crowding around him, some from the saloon, the general store, and even the bank. The town that was as quiet as a cemetery before was now bustling with crowds of people.

Cayo finally rose and stumbled into the sheriff's office. He'd been in there a couple of hours when suddenly things turned ugly and loud voices were heard coming from inside.

"I want you out of town, Cayo! I'm sick and tired of you bringin' your trouble to Red River. I run a quiet, law-abidin' town, and I don't want the likes of you hangin' around givin' us a bad reputation."

"Why, you bastard! Do you think for one minute I'm gonna stand here and listen to some weak-kneed sheriff tell me what to do? I could own this town if I wanted to!"

"Just try, cowboy, just try. I should have locked you up a long time ago."

Suddenly someone struck a blow, followed by furniture breaking, and a body flying across a window. The fight went on for several minutes until finally the sheriff's door burst open and Cayo rolled out into the street at the feet of a crowd that had gathered outside.

Sheriff Hargraves came to the door with his lip bleeding and his hair mussed and sweaty. Taking a threatening stance, he said, "Get out of here, Cayo, and don't come back!"

Cayo stood up, and with a threat in his voice, he said, "This ain't over, Hargraves. I'll meet you tomorrow at high noon, right here. Be sure you say your prayers tonight because you're gonna die in front of all these people you're tryin' to protect. Let them see what a coward you really are!"

* * * *

The next day dawned dark and cloudy. An expectant silence hung over the town while a rumble of thunder traveled through the sky threatening rain. At high noon, Cayo, dressed in his usual black with his six guns hanging threateningly on his hips and his silver spurs sending out a sinister rattle, walked alone down the dusty street to the Sheriff's office. When the minute hand on the old wall clock finally jumped to twelve, the silence was broken.

"Hargraves!" Cayo bellowed.

The sheriff rose from his desk, checked his gun and walked heavily to the door. Outside, he saw the legendary Cayo Sinclair. He looked dark and dangerous as he stood there wide legged, his hand hovering near his gun.

"Hello, Cayo."

"Get the hell out here, you spineless coward."

"Cayo, come on into the office, and let's talk this over."

"Hell, no, Hargraves. You ain't about to weasel outta this. We've done all the talkin' we're gonna do. You and that sanctimonious badge of yours made it clear that I ain't welcome in your town, and I don't take kindly to that. You, like so many others, are in my way, and I'm tired of it, so get ready to draw. I've come for your hide."

"Have it your own way," the sheriff said as he hesitantly stepped off the stoop and onto the street.

While the two of them sized each other up, the wind kicked up, blowing a wall of grit across the dusty street. Dark clouds formed overhead, thunder rumbled, and a cawing bird flew overhead, sending out messages of doom. While gloom settled over the little town, each one waited for the other to draw. Finally, Cayo, lightning fast went for his gun, but something went wrong and he couldn't get it out of his holster. He struggled until it finally slipped out. Trying to make up for lost time he shot toward the sheriff, but his shot wasn't aimed well, and he shot wild. Just then another shot rang out, its bursting fire coming from the sheriff's gun. In only seconds, Cayo dropped his gun, grabbed his chest, and fell to the ground.

A woman's scream came bursting out of the crowd.

It was Mike.

Slowly, everyone began spilling out of the surrounding buildings and crowding around him. They were afraid to ask—was he dead, or just wounded? The town doctor rushed over to Cayo's body and began examining him. After several minutes, he lifted his head, looked at the sheriff, and shook it.

*It was the end of an era.
Cayo Sinclair was dead.*

Chapter Eleven

The next day a crowd of people, including Mike and the sheriff, stood on Boot Hill at the graveside of Cayo Sinclair. In the distance were three darkly-clad cowboys, still mounted on their horses, looking on from beneath a tree. The moment was solemn, the sky still cloudy, the rumble of thunder still sending a threat from the sky. Cayo had no friends in this town, so many of the townspeople came just out of curiosity.

"From dust we came, to dust we shall return...he who lives by the sword shall die by the sword..."

The parson's words were solemn, and rang in everyone's ears. Once he was finished, the gravediggers began filling up the grave, and the people slowly wondered away—all but Mike and the mysterious strangers. They stood very still, the whipping wind singing a funeral dirge that tore at Mike's heart. Again, she read the words inscribed on the gravestone that were placed at the head of the grave—

*Here lies
Cayo Sinclair
The terror of the west
Born September 9, 1837
Died November 2, 1869*

* * * *

Mike's ranch hands finally returned, and life had gotten back to being pretty much like it was before Cayo and his gang had invaded

it. She was doing some cleaning when a knock sounded at the door. Putting down her broom, she answered it.

"Hello, Sheriff, what brings you out to the Lazy M?"

"Just checking to see if everything's okay. Is Roby in?"

After grabbing his hat, a man appeared at Mike's side. "Right here, Sheriff."

"I just wanted to check and see if everything was okay."

"Couldn't be better."

"Looks like it worked," Hargraves said, smiling.

"It sure does. I can't thank you enough, Sheriff. If it hadn't been for you I'd still be runnin'."

"Well, I'm always ready to help good people make a new start."

"Hey, thank the doc for me, too. We couldn't have done it without him."

"Sure will." He tipped his hat to the couple, and said, "Well, good day you two. Let me know if you need anything."

After the door closed, Mike turned to Cayo. "Roby Tyler. It's a good, strong name, but kind of hard to get used to."

"I'm just glad it's a name that doesn't draw gunfire. Now, I'd better get out there and help the others bring in that crop."

"I don't know," she teased. "Think you and the gang can handle just bein' plain old folks for a change? Doin' chores from sunup to sunset, plantin', prayin' for rain, fightin' dust storms. Might not be much fun."

"Don't you worry. I'll take to it like a babe takes to its mother's milk. I'll be so dull you won't be able to stand me."

"Hey Cayo," she said, indicating toward the ceiling. "What about them?"

He looked up. "Them? I don't know. Maybe they think I'm dead."

"Or maybe they just decided you've had enough bad luck, and now they're gonna give you a break."

Cayo shrugged. "Could be, I guess, but just to be sure, call me Roby."

* * * *

Mike watched Cayo as he headed out and felt a contentment inside she'd never felt before. She turned to her bedroom, knowing she had to do one last thing to put all this behind her. As she lay across the bed, she dug out her latest Frank Starr book, and flipped to the story that told about Cayo Sinclair's last showdown. Instead of reading it, she took the book, gripped it tightly, and gave it a strong rip. She kept tearing, knowing that she would never again read about the adventures of Cayo Sinclair and his gang that left her cold and wanting. Now her thrills came from those same black-clad heroes who reminded her with kisses, embraces, and mind-blowing orgasms that they weren't made of paper, but of real flesh and blood. As she threw the book into the trash, she looked up toward the gods that Cayo believed in, and whispered a tearful "Thanks."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Who is Kelly Conrad you might ask. A butcher, a baker or a candlestick maker? No, I'm just someone who loves to write. Why write romance? Because love stories have always been a major part of the books I've loved. Even more so, it's because I love writing romantic heroes no matter if they're the normal every day type, lusty cowboys, or the dark, dangerous "were" type you meet only in your fantasies. I write about men who sweep both heroines and readers off their feet – not to mention their authors, too!

My other love is the arts. Singing, dancing, acting. And life happens, right? One day I got sidetracked, and my love for writing kind of faded into the woodwork. And then one day fate hit me upside the head and woke me up. I realized then that dreams are good, but unless acted upon they'll stay nothing but dreams forever. So I put myself in gear and began reading all the 'how to' books I could find and even went to a writing school. Actually, I learned quite a bit. I finally got to the point that I had absorbed about everything I could, and anymore time spent reading about writing instead of writing, was time wasted. So, I did it. I dusted off my computer and began. After my share of rejections I finally hit pay dirt and hit the ground running. The rest is history.

I currently live in South Carolina with my two favorite men—my two sons, and my Maine Coon cat, Tigger. By the way we named her Tigger before we realized she was a female. Oh my! Will she ever live it down?

I hope you enjoy *The Spitfire and Her Four Gunslingers*. I will have another book coming out in the near future, so be sure to look for it. You may contact me at menagewriter@aol.com. Thanks.

Also by Kelly Conrad

Love and Lust for Three

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