





# The Miner's Wife

by Maren Smith

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## CONTENTS

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

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by

Maren Smith

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# CHAPTER ONE

The best thing that could be said about Mudhole Mill was that it was four hundred miles away from the nearest sheriff's office. Home to nearly two hundred men, the inhabitants of the ramshackle gold mining town were generally unanimous in their appreciation of that fact. That included Cody. Unless a man was stupid enough to rob the Wells Fargo in Downieville--the nearest mining town by almost fifty miles--and ignorant enough to lead a posse straight through the middle of Main Street (also the only street) seeking an avenue of escape, then seeing a man with that dreaded shiny silver star on his chest was, thankfully, a very rare occurrence. The only thing even rarer was the sight of a woman.

To date, Mudhole boasted only one, and that was Miss Molly, owner, operator and one woman employee of the only bordello in town. She was in her mid fifties and was missing almost all her front teeth, but in a town of almost two hundred hard-up men, she ran one hell of a good business.

Town. Hell, Mudhole quite literally did justice to its name. The unpaved road was a quagmire on the best of days and a stinking swamp when it rained. There was one general store, one bar, with Miss Molly in the one and only room on the second floor, and a mill. Most of the men who lived here were without families, and nearly all of them were looking, for one reason or another, to get lost and stay that way.

A smattering of tents, in all kinds of disrepair, littered up and down both sides of the rocky Yuba River. Those stubborn enough, or miserly enough, to decline splurging on a shelter of stiff canvas still lived in caves earlier miners had chiseled out of the cliffs that lined the Yuba's north bank.

No, women were a rare treat for the eye, indeed. Children surpassed even that. So when Cody first saw the heavy-set and darkly-bearded missionary-looking man driving his open wagon along the riverside, headed for the General Store, Cody's first thought was that the man was either misguided or incredibly lost. Either way, the man had to be plumb out of his mind to bring two young boys and a pretty little lady into this God-forsaken stretch of California.

The lovely young thing sat as silent as a ghost in the back of the missionary's wagon, sandwiched between the two boys and taking a break from the mending that was resting in her lap. The sight of her stopped every panner squatting amongst the rocks and minnows in the shallows of the riverside. It brought men out of their tents and out of the bar. It even brought them out of the store, and that included Cody.

She had dark hair and dark eyes, and if forced to hazard a guess, Cody would have said she couldn't have left her teenaged years too awful far behind her. There was a bluish-brown discoloration at the side of her small mouth that suggested she might have a bit of spirit somewhere inside the pale and drawn shell of her. It also bespoke of a less than patient and benevolent manner on the side of her missionary father. Or was it husband?

She didn't look near old enough to have borne the boys, which Cody would have placed at six and ten years of age respectively. But that didn't mean she couldn't be the heavy-set man's second wife. For a moment, Cody felt a stab of anger towards the man, to have something so desirable in his possession and yet mistreat her.

Having just finished some much needed supplies shopping himself, and though he hated like hell to be away from his tent and claim for any longer than he absolutely had to be, Cody nevertheless stood frozen on the porch of the only grocery in fifty miles as the wagon rolled through the mud and stopped in front of him.

The heavy-set man got down from the buckboard. Though he didn't say a word, neither the boys nor the young woman so much as twitched in the back as he jogged up the front steps and tromped across the floor boards into Jenkins's General Store.

If she were his, Cody couldn't help but think, he'd never in a lifetime have left her sitting by herself in the back of that wagon. Not in this town. Already five men had gathered alongside him, to stand and stare at her. A helluva lot more than that were slogging through the muddy main street (also the only street) to get a closer look, too.

Her eyes darted nervously from one filthy man to the next, before her gaze settled briefly on Cody. The corners of her mouth twitched slightly upwards. "Hi," she said softly.

She had a nice voice, too, like a melody all on its own. The sound of it made his loins tighten, and he grew warm.

"Hi," he returned, but he didn't smile.

"Shheeeee-it," said Forrest Blundell, a smelly, shifty-eyed little man, who nevertheless worked the claim right next door to Cody on the downstream side. "Ain't that a sight?"

Nobody else said a word, and after a while, she lowered her eyes to her hands, clenching them tightly in her lap with her fingers laced hard together, as if she were praying.

He'd never been much for churchy women. And she was too thin, too, Cody decided. There was almost a gaunt look to her. Her cheeks were too prominent, her hands looked almost bony, and if she had breasts, they couldn't have been much bigger than pebbles on grapes. The boys didn't look near as thin as she did, and the heavy-set man certainly hadn't skipped any recent meals.

A huge group was gathering around the back of the wagon. The youngest boy sidled closer to the young woman, and she draped her arm around his shoulders protectively.

"Howdy, ma'am," one miner said, taking off his hat.

"Howdy," she said back, a trembling attempt at politeness.

"You sure are pretty," he said. "That man in there," he nodded his uncombed, unwashed head towards the store. "He your husband or your pa?"

She looked away from the store. "My stepfather."

Her eyes skimmed across the crowd. No less than fifty men had already gathered around the back of the wagon, and still more were coming up out of the river and heading right towards her. She began to chew at her lips as her nervousness increased. An old-timer named Stumpy reached his only arm into the back of the wagon and poked her shoulder with one finger, causing her to hug the young boy even closer.

"I'll be danged," he said softly. His grizzled grey beard and mustache parted as he grinned, showing a few yellow teeth and a lot of empty black spaces in between them. "I ain't really dreamin' this. This here gal's real!"

Swallowing hard, she looked up from Stumpy to Cody and then to the door of the General Store. From behind him, Cody heard that heavy tromping again and the heavy-set man marched back out of Jenkins' and onto the porch. He had to push through the crowd to get to the stairs, and then looked around, his face set in a look that was neither friendly nor unfriendly.

His eyes settled on the girl, who promptly ducked her head. To everybody's surprise and Cody's disgust, he announced loud enough for even those still at the river to hear, "I need money. I'll be heading further south, but I can't go much further without supplies."

"Grab a piece of the river," someone shouted back at him, and there was a mixture of grumbles and laughter that echoed from the miners.

"You've come to the wrong place for sympathy, mate," another man said.

Cody couldn't have agreed with him more. In fact, at this point the man would be highly fortunate if he managed to get himself, his family and his meagerly supplied wagon out of Mudhole Mill in one piece.

"Sympathy's the last thing I'm lookin' for," the heavy man stated. "My name's Luke Johnson. I'm here to make a trade, fair and simple. Money, in exchange for my girl."

Cody's stomach tightened hard. The young woman snapped her head up, her eyes huge in her pale face as she fixed her stepfather with a look of horror and shock.

"Stand up, Dulcie," the man said. "Let the men get a look at you."

The gathered miners fell perfectly silent as, reluctantly, Dulcie rose to her feet in the back of the wagon.

"She's sassy and she's skinny," the man told the crowd. "But she's not lazy. She can cook, and she can clean. She looks younger than she is, bein' twenty now. Turn around, girl. Let 'em look at you."

Cody felt a sharp tightening go all the way through his loins and down into his toes as she obeyed, her eyes darting from one miner to the next as made her reluctant pirouette. She was too skinny and barely more than a kid. He was eleven years her senior, and yet it didn't matter. Funny how three years without a woman in his bed could do that to a man.

"I ain't no whoremonger, neither," Luke announced, raising his voice to be heard over the exclamations of his increasingly excited audience. "Dulcie's a good girl, and before I leave here today, she'll be wedded to whichever of you is willin' to give up the most money for her."

Luke couldn't have provoked a meaner fight if he'd thrown a meat bone to a pack of ravenous dogs. The miners swarmed around both the wagon and the porch, shoving and elbowing one another, and everyone started shouting at once. Cody grabbed a roof post and hung onto it to keep from being knocked to the ground and trampled underfoot.

"Fifty dollars!"

"Seventy in gold!"

Dulcie shrieked, grabbing at the two terrified boys and yanking them close to her as the men swarmed the wagon to touch her. She hugged the children, struggling to keep the miners from grabbing hold of her hands and arms, but there was no way she could get her legs and skirts out of their reach. She cried out again when one filthy young man clambered up beside her, stuck his face in a fistful of her hair and smelled it.

He reared back, grinning. "A hunnert dollars!" he shouted to Luke, and a war of bidding escalated like a summer fire raging through the woods.

Dulcie did her best to avoid the forest of hands reaching for her. Her eyes were wild and frightened, darting across the sea of dirty, filthy, ragged men that surrounded all sides of her. It had to be the whole town, two hundred men in all, ninety percent of which probably hadn't bathed in over a month.

"A hunnert and one penny!" Stumpy yelled out, and she looked down at him in horror.

Someone elbowed Cody in the ribs. "A hundred twenty in gold and a mule worth eighty more!"

The roar of shouting became almost deafening as the price for her doubled almost instantly.

"Three hunnert in gold, a pound o' coffee, a pound o' sugar, and two blankets!"

"Three hunnert, a pound o' coffee and sugar, two blankets, and one penny!" Stumpy bellowed out.

Ninety year old Jasper Burlow, who likely only crawled out of the river because he'd heard the commotion, managed to shove his way to the wagon and reached up to grab the young woman's bottom. She let out a shriek, spun around and slapped the old man's hand, which only served to spur the bidding a whopping fifty dollars more.

"Four hunnert fifty-eight dollars," Jasper hollered, and cackled as he danced a quick jig. "Lord a'mighty, that one's got some spunk!"

Dulcie almost fell down as someone grabbed the skirt of her dress and yanked. The hem at her waist tore and she quickly grabbed at her clothes to keep them from being ripped clean off her.

"Stop!" she shouted. "Get away!"

Fat tears were welling up in her eyes, trickling past her lashes as she almost lost her footing. Hands reached in on all sides of her, and she was doing her best to squeeze herself and the two children into the very center of the wagon to keep from being pulled from the cart. If they got her on the ground, they'd have been on her like rabid dogs.

The sudden report of a gunshot put an abrupt halt on the auction. Miners jumped back, ducking and retreating, though only a short distance. It wasn't until everyone turned around and looked at him that Cody realized his pistol was in his hand and he'd just fired a shot through Jenkins's porch roof. He slowly lowered his arm and, in a voice that was a helluva lot calmer than he felt, he said, "Nine hundred dollars."

The crowd quieted.

"Nine hundred," Luke echoed, hardly seeming to care that his daughter had come so close to rape, and quite possibly even death, right there in front of them all.

"And one penny," Stumpy faithfully interjected, though he glared at Cody, squinting one-eyed when he said it.

Nobody else said a word.

"Ten hundred in gold," Cody said. When Stumpy opened his mouth, he promptly upped the stakes again, "Twelve hundred." And then, "Fifteen," when the old man again tried to up the bidding.

Stumpy glared at him, his beard and mustache mashing together as he gnashed his few remaining teeth in frustration. He looked at the girl, huddled with her arms around her younger brothers, then threw up one hand. "Bah!" He turned and shoved his way out of the crowd, stomping bow-legged back towards his river claim.

"Fifteen hundred dollars," Luke said. "Once ... Twice..."

Cody ignored the looks his fellow miners were giving him, many of which were raising the hairs on the back of his neck. Instead, he focused on the skinny little woman/child who was staring back at him with those huge dark eyes of hers, horrified and on the verge of tears.

"Sold," the heavy-set man said, as though she were a sheep or a cow. "Looks like Dulcie belongs to you now."

She swallowed hard, blinking rapidly as Cody pushed through the crowd. He ignored Luke, who stuck out his hand, palm up for payment rather than to shake and secure the deal, and came slowly down the steps. The remaining crowd parted, backing from Cody as he walked up to the back of the wagon and held out his hand for hers. She didn't move, not for several long seconds. But when she finally did reach for him, allowing herself to be helped down to the ground, her own hands were shaking badly.

"You got a wife already?" Luke asked.

"No."

"Any other reasons why you can't marry her?"

Cody turned to glare at him. "It's a bit late to be suffering moral pangs or fatherly devotions. I knew the conditions when I bid on her. You a man of God?"

The heavy man stared down at him from the edge of the porch. "Yes. I'm on my way to a mission in San Diego."

"You'd better hitch us and get on your way then."

The missionary blinked at him, and in particular, at his dirty clothes. "You don't want to get cleaned up first?"

"No," Cody said just as tersely.

Luke cleared his throat, straightening his spine and stiffening his shoulders. "All right, son. What's your name?"

Cody just stared at him, tight lipped and grim.

Getting the hint, Luke cleared his throat. "All right," he said again. "Dearly beloved, we are--"

"Skip to the vows," Cody snapped. From the corner of his eye, he saw a hand reaching for Dulcie's hair. In all likelihood, touching was all Taddeo Donnelly intended, but Cody snapped around and grabbed the young Irishman's wrist. He met Taddeo's dark eyes with a coldly, furious stare until Taddeo wrested his arm free and quickly backed up a step.

Meeting the stares of the miners surrounding him, Cody pulled Dulcie to the other side of him and tucked her neatly between himself and her stepfather's wagon. He glared back up at Luke. "Get on with it."

"Do you take Dulcie to be your--"

"Yes."

"You're supposed to wait until I--"

"I said yes, dammit," Cody interrupted shortly. "Now ask her."

Scowling, Luke waved his hand, "Dulcie will do whatever I tell her to. Guess that makes you man and wife, then."

Cody looked down at the woman at his side. Her mouth was a tight, thin line and her cheeks were flushed, though whether it was from embarrassment or indignation he couldn't yet tell. She kept her eyes fixed upon the ground, her head bowed to avoid looking at anyone.

"Is it legal?" he asked her stepfather.

Luke nodded. "Give me just a minute, and I'll draft up a proper paper to make it recognizably so."

"You do that," Cody said, and took a firm hold of Dulcie's arm.

"Now, hold up there, son!" Luke called after him as Cody headed back towards the Yuba, dragging her along beside him.

"You'll get your money," Cody said, angrily and without the slightest pause.

What the hell had he just done? It was a quarter of a mile up-river to his claim, but the woman hurried beside him, barely making a sound. She stumbled twice, nearly falling but for his grip on her arm, and Cody looked down to discover that she wasn't tripping, she just didn't have any shoes on. The rocks, sticks and blackberry bushes that lined the river banks had already cut into the bottoms of her feet, and the last several steps had left blood on the rocks behind them.

Cody swore. One of only a few things that he did better than panning. "Why the hell didn't you say something?"

He picked her up and carried her the rest of the way. Past more claims and envious miners than he cared to think about, across an old fallen log that was beginning to rot at the far end, and up a steep embankment to where his dingy grey tent stood, backed against a rocky cliff-side and facing the water as well as the other miners. He put her down on a bare patch of dirt by his cook fire, then disappeared behind the canvas flap.

"Here," he said, as he emerged again. He came out with a rifle across his shoulder, two pistols on his hip, and a small leather pouch. He held a third pistol in one hard hand, which he loaded before thrusting it out to her. "Get inside the tent. If anybody comes at you, shoot them."

Then, with his gold in hand and his rifle slung under one arm, Cody headed back to Jenkins's Store.

Luke was sitting in the buckboard of his wagon, writing on a piece of paper while Jenkins and his grown son loaded the back of the cart with burlap sacks of fresh supplies.

The ten-year-old boy spotted Cody's return first, and reached up to pat his father's arm. "Pa."

Luke looked up and, as Cody drew closer, grunted. "Thought for a minute you might have got distracted enough to give her a trial run before paying me." He signed the bottom of the page against his knee, and then held it out to Cody. "This here makes the whole thing legal. You'll need to put your mark on the bottom and see if you can get Dulcie to do the same. If she don't mind right off, a quick smack usually does the trick."

The temptation to shoot the man rather than pay him nearly got the best of Cody. In the end, the only thing that kept him from pulling the trigger was knowing that as much as he didn't want to be saddled with a wife, he didn't want a wife and her two orphaned brothers even more. He took the paper, but didn't hand over the pouch right away.

"There's fifteen hundred in gold in that little pouch?" the missionary asked dubiously.

"Jenkins'll weigh it for you, but it's all here," Cody returned. The man reached for the bag, but Cody's fingers tightened around it first. "I want her shoes."

Luke made a face of impatience but over his shoulder told one of the boys, "Mark, give the man your sister's shoes."

The ten-year-old began to dig around, pulling articles of clothing out from under the growing mound of burlap sacks the Jenkins' continued to load in the back.

"I assume she's got clothes, too," Cody said.

The corner of the missionary's mouth twitched as he looked at the money pouch in the younger man's grasp. "Give him Dulcie's things," he said flatly. The man smiled at Cody, though it didn't touch his eyes. "Not like I have any use for them anyhow."

Keeping the rifle free and ready, Cody took the two dresses, the shift, and the worn and well-patched underthings that Mark passed to him over the side of the wagon. The littlest boy passed down a scuffy pair of shoes, and only then did Cody extend to Luke the pouch of gold.

The greedy father took it, but Cody didn't let go right away. "If I were you," he said, "I'd keep my gun handy and drive this thing hell bent for leather as fast as you can away from here. There's folks here who'd kill for twenty dollars much less for what I'm giving you."

Luke pulled at the pouch, but didn't manage to wrest it from Cody's grasp until the younger man voluntarily let it go.

"Try not to sell any more of your children," Cody said.

"She weren't mine," the heavier man snapped, his dark eyes flashing. "I got stuck with her when her ma up and died two months ago. God takes care of his own. Now she's your problem."

With Dulcie's things slung over his shoulder and a grimace of disgust on his face, Cody turned and stalked away. He couldn't help but shake his head at himself the whole way back to the river. What was he supposed to do with a slip of a girl wife? Especially in a town like this. If she worked the river with him, he'd have to pan with one hand, hang onto his rifle with the other, and grow eyes in the back of his head. He sure couldn't leave her alone in the tent, that was just asking for trouble. And anyway, she'd have to be mentally lacking to want to stay inside the thing, day after day, with nothing to do but stare at grey canvas walls.

He frowned, but at this point Cody was done playing the hero. He sure as hell wasn't about to pass her over to somebody else to enjoy. He'd just given



away what had taken him the better part of three years to accumulate. She owed him, if for no other reason than because he hadn't let her go to someone worse than himself. And if it turned out to be as cold tonight as it was the two previous ones, it might take all winter, but by God, he was going to get his money's worth.

Dulcie wasn't anywhere in sight as Cody neared his claim, so he decided that she must have followed his instructions and gone inside the tent. That tightening in his belly was growing worse by the step as he crossed the fallen log and walked up the short hill to his claim area. She was so skinny, he probably ought to feed her up first, but after that, the day had grown late enough that all there was left to do was get to know the woman he'd bought. A tittie no bigger than a grape was still a tittie worth sucking on and certainly more than what he'd enjoyed these last three years.

Cody drew aside the dingy grey flap of canvas, but was stopped up short, not just by the frightened look in Dulcie's eyes, but by the long barrel of his own pistol, which she quickly raised and pointed straight at him. He promptly backed up a step. Her hands were shaking, but that didn't stop her from cocking the gun.

She swallowed hard. "D-don't y-you come n-near me," she quavered.

With a sigh, Cody squatted in the entry way and lay his rifle across his thighs. Resting his forearms on his knees, his hands dangling limply between them, he looked back at her. He couldn't even complain, really. After all, she was doing exactly what he'd told her to.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER TWO

Dulcie leveled the loaded pistol at a point directly between her husband's eyes and kept it there, despite her frightened trembling. When he cocked his head to one side, regarding her for a moment with dark and clever eyes, the very look of him made her shiver. Though not as tall as her stepfather, he was a big man, made so by years of hard work. His shoulders were massive, as were his arms. He looked like he could break trees in half with his bare hands. And when his black eyes fixed on her, they seemed almost angry.

This was the man to whom she'd been sold as though she were naught but a piece of property. She guessed now she was. She was even willing to bet that piece of paper in the big man's hand was a bill of sale.

Her hands shifted on the butt of the gun, but she didn't lower it an inch. "Just you ... you back up ... a-and go away!" she told him, as steady as she could and still her voice shook. To be honest, it shook badly, and he hardly seemed threatened.

The big man rested his rifle across his legs and clasped his hands between his knees. As he sighed, his expression turned both bored and slightly amused. "Little girl," he said, with a timbre voice, "I'm going to point out to you just two little things you might not have already considered. First, I'm your husband. Shooting me for walking into my own tent is as much a hanging offense in California as it is in any other state. And two, in Mudhole Mill, without me your fate will be much, much worse."

He turned his head to look back at the river over his shoulder, a wry smile twisting his mouth. Dulcie looked between his head and the side of the tent flap. On the other side of the Yuba there had to be at least a hundred men, standing, squatting and sitting along the bank, doing nothing but staring at her. Dulcie swallowed hard, flexing her hands nervously on the gun. She took her finger off the trigger, afraid she might accidentally pull it without truly meaning to.

After studying the far bank, the big man turned back to her and smiled. It was a chilling look and not one that reached as far as his eyes. "The only thing standing between you and them, is me. You can shoot me, but the first thing you're going to hear immediately following that gunshot report, is the stampeding sound of two hundred pairs of boots coming straight at you."

Dulcie licked her lips. She shifted her hands again on the butt of the gun, her palms sweating and her arms shaking, and glanced again at the men gathered on the opposite side of the Yuba.

"There's six bullets in that gun," the big man continued. "Assuming, of course, that you do me right on the first shot and don't need to waste a second one, that gives you the ability to stop at least five other men before they reach you. They wouldn't kill you, not deliberately anyway, but you'll be in for a very long and rough night. When they finally wear you out between the legs, they'll just roll you over and start again with a different hole." The big man shrugged his eyebrows. "You may not like the devil who bought you, Dulcie, but I'm a helluva lot better than some you could have ended up with."

Whether it was because he was right or because of a basic human reluctance to take another man's life, Dulcie slowly lowered the gun. After a while the big man reached in and took it from her hands. He relaxed the hammer and gently tossed the gun onto the mattress beside her. Now that she was unarmed, she halfway expected him to hit her.

He didn't. Instead, he gestured with a lazy hand to the battered trunk to the right of her and said, "How about you pass me those cans there?" His dark eyes never left her. "I don't know about you, but I'm a mite peckish."

Smothering under an almost overwhelming sense of doom, Dulcie picked up the two cans of beans and shakily held them out to him. His fingertips barely grazed hers as he took them. As he started to withdraw from the tent, she asked, "Do I get to know who you are?"

He turned to look at her again, and once more his mouth curved into the echo of a genuine smile. "Cody Adams." He touched the brim of his hat by way of a bow. "I suppose we'll be getting to know one another better a little later on." Then he pointed to the gun by her leg. "You can keep that. In Mudhole, it's best to stay armed."

He let the tent flap fall behind him, and Dulcie found herself sitting on the edge of a bed, that was little more than a padded mattress on the ground, without the slightest clue of what to do next. She buried her head in her hands and stared at the gun a moment. Picking it up between two fingers, she lay it gently on the ground. Rolling onto her side, she then curled into a fetal ball and hugged her knees to her chest as she stared straight ahead at the filthy canvas shelter around her.

She'd just gone from one horrible situation to another. But even as bad as Luke had been, she still couldn't believe he'd done this. To have auctioned her off, as though she were a piece of livestock. She covered her eyes with her hand. How could a man of God have done something so horrible?

She'd only been lying there a short time before she began to smell the telltale signs of cooking. It started with smoke and the sugary scent of canned beans, and quickly went on to include the sizzling, flavorful scent of frying fish. Her stomach grumbled loudly and she covered it with her hand, pressing in as though she could silence the sound by squeezing hard enough.

The tent flap moved aside and Cody stuck his head in through the doorway, once more coarse and gruff and no where near as charming as he'd been a few moments before. "Get on out here. Supper's ready."

Maybe a stronger woman might have starved herself rather than submit to a lifetime of rape and degradation at the hands of a stranger--or, if worse came to worst, at the hands of a town full of men just like him--Dulcie just wasn't that strong. She rolled out of bed and walked out of the tent to join him.

Cody only had one tin plate, and he'd heaped it with a trout that overflowed the length of the tin by a head and a crisply-browned tail, then smothered the remaining surface with a pool of canned beans. He stuck a fork under the edge of the fish and handed it to her. "Here. Start eating."

He sat on a stump, and Dulcie warily settled herself on the ground on the opposite side of the fire from him. They ate for the most part without speaking: Dulcie using his only plate, while he dined on trout from the frying pan and ate beans off his knife and straight out of the can.

"Can you really cook?" he asked, as he was scraping the last of them from the bottom of the tin. He barely looked at her.

"Yes."

"Good." He dropped the empty can back into the fireplace. "Then that'll be your job from now on."

"All right." With her plate only half empty, Dulcie set it aside. She wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"You haven't eaten enough," Cody said tersely.

"I'm full." Some of the surrealism was starting to wear off, and that brusk tone of his was beginning to irritate rather than frighten her.

He glared at her over the frying pan and the piece of fish balanced on the blade of his knife. "This isn't the place to be wasting food."

She stared at him, her mouth flattening. As if she'd asked to come here! Taking hold of the plate, she shoved it across the ground to him. "Then you eat it."

"I don't tolerate sass either," he growled, brushing his thumb against the pads of his fingers. "You should consider minding that tongue if you want us to get along. And I would really recommend your wanting us to get along."

They stared at one another across the fading fire, then Dulcie stood up and turned away.

"Where are you going?" Cody demanded.

"Is there an outhouse?"

"There's a bush." Wiping his hand on his pant, he gestured into the woods. "It's over there."

Dulcie followed her nose around the back of the tent to the slop hole—which was exactly that: a deep hole dug into the ground with a thin layer of dirt that covered the waste in the bottom—while Cody presumably finished the rest of her meal. A board had been laid across the top to keep in the worst of the smell, as she was quick to realize the instant she removed it. She quickly spilled another layer, then two more, of dirt back over the hole, before she could stand to make her use of it.

Cody was rinsing the dishes by the edge of the river by the time she returned. She stood uneasily at the mouth of the tent, knowing there was nothing else for her to do, and then just walked inside.

By now the sun had well set and everything in the tent was shadow and flickering orangish light cast by the dancing flames of the outside fire. She stood uncertainly in the doorway of the tiny shelter, hugging her own arms. There wasn't much to the place, just a few worn out trunks, a rickety table with a single chair, and the mattress on the ground. Her stomach rolled as she realized how close they'd have to sleep if they were both to share it.

If? Of course they were going to share it. He was her husband now. It was nothing but naive of her to think he would not take advantage of his husbandly rights. Having grown up on a farm most of her life, she knew exactly what his crawling into bed with her would entail. She clutched her hands tightly in her skirt and swallowed hard.

She heard the sound of dishes rattling together and long slow strides coming back up the rocky embankment. Then the flickering light faded just a bit as Cody banked the fire for the night. Unless she wanted to undress in front of him, she'd have to hurry. And yet, Dulcie continued to stand in the entry way, her heart palpitating, her hands sweating, unable to make herself move not one step closer to that bed.

The canvas rustled as Cody entered behind her. Though he didn't run into her, she could feel the heat of him against her back. It made the hair at her nape prickle as she felt his eyes roving the length of her. His breath caressed her shoulder.

"You just going to stand there all night?" Cody asked. "Or do you need help getting out of this thing?"

Without waiting for an answer, his hands went to the back of her skirt's lacings, and Dulcie came back to herself with a jolt. "No, I-I'll do it."

She stepped far enough into the tent to pull out of his hands.

"Then get them off and get into bed," he said.

He certainly had no reluctance about undressing in front of her. Before he was done speaking, he had his shirt off and was tossing it over the chair to the right of her.

Dulcie bowed her head so she wouldn't have to look at him. Her hands moved slowly down the buttons that lined the front of her bodice, then slipped it from her shoulders and lay it on the table. Turning her back more fully towards him, self conscious of revealing her small breasts, rising in soft mounds above the top of her corset, she slipped her hands behind her and continued to untie the lacings he had loosened.

The heavy calico skirt slipped down over her hips and she pushed it down her legs, stepping free of the folds. She folded it neatly and lay it over her bodice. Standing in only her shift and corset, she looked again at the bed.

Under normal circumstances, she would never have gone to sleep in her corset, but given her way tonight, she'd have made the exception. Unfortunately, Cody wasn't about to allow her her way. When she started to climb into bed, a touch of his hand on her shoulder stopped her.

He turned her towards him and, without a word, began to unlace the ties down the front.

"You may as well take your underdrawers off, too. When you're in my bed, there'll be nothing but skin between us."

He loosened the laces, but left her to remove her corset the rest of the way herself. And for a long time, Dulcie stood by the bed in her shift, frozen in her reluctance to make herself any more vulnerable to this man.

He sat down on the chair and she heard one heavy clump after another as he removed his boots, and then stood up to remove his pants. In the close confines of the tent, she felt his arms brush against her back as he unbuckled his belt.

"You going to take that off, or do I have to do it for you?" he asked.

Swallowing, Dulcie shook her head. Slowly, she pulled her arms out of the sleeves and let the last of her clothes fall away. She had the blankets up and herself burrowed under them before the discarded shift even hit the floor. Rolling her back to him, she faced the wall, her arms folding the blankets across her chest and holding them tightly to her.

The mattress shifted as he crawled into bed behind her, and then the heat of him pressed up against her back. She closed her eyes, his hot skin stretching all down the length of her. His hand touched her shoulder and he shifted away only far enough to roll her onto her back. Looming over her, he pried the blankets from her hands without a word, before pushing her thighs apart and settling himself between them. He was hard sinew and muscle, and that part of him entirely masculine pressed long and thick between her legs.

It startled her to feel it there, and Dulcie grabbed his shoulders. Just as quickly, she let him go again and dropped her hands flat at her sides on the mattress. She clutched at the bedding instead. Turning her head away, she tried to shut him out, but he didn't even allow her that.

"Look at me," he said gruffly, and Dulcie had no choice but to open her eyes.

He was as much a shadow as the rest of him, but the glow of light from the fire did illuminate his features as he lowered his mouth to hers.

He took two kisses from her unresponsive lips; she could all but feel the irritation coursing through him just before he raised his head and growled, "Kiss me back, dammit."

Dulcie hadn't had much experience with kissing. She tried to mimic him, copying the way his lips moved on hers, opening her mouth when he did, shyly touching her tongue to his when he invaded her. An unexpected but pleasurable warmth suffused her stomach as he ground his hips into hers. But those tiny thrills of pleasure didn't mask the pain when he pushed inside her. Her cry was strangled by his kisses and his own answering moan.

"Dammit," he gasped, pulling out only to thrust back hard inside her. He grabbed her leg just behind the knee, pulling it up and over his hip to gain deeper access. His head swooped down and the heat of his mouth fastened onto her breast.

His was a demanding rhythm, the pumping of his hips seeming to go on forever before he stiffened with a guttural expulsion of breath, pressing one last time as deeply into her as he could reach, before his heavier weight collapsed on top of her. He panted, his breaths billowing hot against her neck and ear. Then he rolled over. Turning on his side with his back to her, Cody fell asleep facing the door.

Dulcie lay on her back in the dark tent, staring skyward for a long time after his snores began. She burned between her legs, her lips felt swollen and sore, and she could still taste his kisses in her mouth. Patches along her face and breasts felt a little raw where his evening whiskers had scraped her tender skin. Even her nipples hurt where he'd nipped and suckling at her breasts. He'd bit her at his most passionate, just before the end when he'd risen onto his arms so he could pound into the cradle of her hips with bruising intensity.

So that was lovemaking. The necessary evil that begat children. The wifely duty her mother had once told her she'd someday have to submit to in the dark hours when her husband would come to her.

When the tears began to spill down Dulcie's cheeks, she just let them fall. She opened her mouth in an effort to keep her breathing steady and soft, and did her best to cry as quietly as she knew how. The last thing she wanted to do was wake him up.

\* \* \* \*

The hesitant light of morning was just beginning to peer above the pine-tree-covered mountain tops, staining the sky in varying shades of orange and pink, when Cody opened his eyes. He was entirely alone in the tent. That was the first thing he realized. The second thing was, beyond the rushing current of the river and the songs of whipperswills, woodpeckers and crows greeting the new day, there was absolutely no other sounds and no movement nearby that he could hear.

He threw the blankets aside and jumped out of bed. Dulcie's clothes were nowhere in sight, he noticed as he scrambled to get into his pants and grabbed his rifle. Charging past the canvas flap and out into the brisk fresh air, his dark eyes pierced the predawn grey of morning, searching the steep embankment and the riverside for any signs of movement. The Bibby brothers were squatting around their fires, across the Yuba, a good hundred yards upstream from him, sipping their morning coffee and talking quietly in the hush of the new day. Jasper was already working the river fifty feet downstream, panning by the glow of lantern light. He could see a dozen or more campfires already cooking breakfasts and brewing coffee to the left and right of his claim, but of Dulcie there was no sign or sound.

Cody held his breath, listening hard, but the morning was typically soft, with only the quiet, varied trills of birdsong rising above the whisper of a breeze through the pines. There wasn't the slightest sound of a struggle taking place or the muffled whimpers of high-pitched feminine distress. Had she left in the night, or had she been taken? If he went looking for her, would he find her shivering under the bows of an old evergreen, or spread eagle on the ground, with her clothes bunched around her waist and her throat already cut?

A twig snapped to the left of him, and Cody spun around.

Dulcie came up out of the bushes behind the tent, dressed in only her shift, yesterday's underdrawers and her dress soaking wet and slung over one arm. Her hair was also wet. Freshly brushed, it hung back over her shoulders and dangled down her back just past her waist. She was humming, of all things--humming!--under her breath. At least until she looked up and saw him striding towards her, rifle in hand and a murderous expression on his face.

She froze, her eyes widening, and stumbled backwards a step when he came right up to her.

"Where the hell have you been?" he snarled.

Glancing quickly back over her shoulder, she pointed down the opposite side of the embankment. "There's a creek down there. I was taking a bath."

The creek came, not from the river, but from an underground stream that bubbled up from the rocks and trickled down the mossy cliffside behind his tent. It wasn't exactly a waterfall. It would have taken several minutes to fill a gallon bucket with the slight shower that spilled down the face of those rocks, but it was enough to create a small inland pond behind the huckleberry bushes and rhododendrons, and the resulting creek fed from it into the Yuba. The water was cold as hell, but Cody had bathed there many times himself.

He lowered his voice, not wanting to draw attention. "What the hell are you doing taking a bath without me to keep watch?"

A hint of irritation flashed across her face and was gone, almost before he saw it. "I'd rather bathe where no one watches me, you or anyone else."

"Mind your tongue, woman."

"Well, you're being ridiculous!" Dulcie snapped. "You may have bought me, sir, but you don't own me!"

"Who was down there with you?"

Her mouth dropped open in shock, then promptly snapped shut and her eyes narrowed. "Nobody!"

Cody took several steps past her, studying the bushes for glimpse of a miner who shouldn't have been there. Except for the twitching of a squirrel's tail, nothing moved in the undergrowth.

Switching his rifle to his other hand, Cody grabbed Dulcie by the arm. Her eyes were as huge as dinner plates when he shoved her roughly back inside the tent ahead of him, leaned his rifle into a canvas corner, and then sat down in the only chair.

"No!" she cried out when he pulled her down across his lap.

Cody yanked the back of her damp shift up, baring her bottom. Although scrawny and underfed, her backside was as soft and round as any woman's, an alluringly inverted heart, pale and unblemished but for a light brown birthmark no bigger than the pad of his thumb, which sat high up on her right buttock not far from the crack.

"Wait!" She grabbed at the back of her shift, trying to yank the hem back down again.

At the moment, that was the last thing he was inclined to do. His raised his hand above her, growling, "From now on, lady, you don't go anywhere without me."

And he spanked her hard to make damn good and sure that she got the message. She let out a shrill gasp at the first sharp crack of his hand as it met the wobbly flesh of her unprotected bottom. A pink flush immediately rose to brighten the paleness of her skin, but Cody wasn't satisfied until his palm had angrily painted her entire bottom a brilliant shade of red.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop it!"

She tried to grab at his arm, but he caught hold of her wrists first. Quickly pinning both up out of his way, he continued swatting her backside until his hand was smarting and every inch of her skin was as dark a crimson as any he'd ever seen.

"Stop, please!" she wailed, and then began to sob. Her shoulders shook as she bucked and kicked her feet with abject futility.

Somewhere beyond his anger, Cody became aware of men laughing.

"Please!" she wept. "Ow! Stop!"

And Cody did. But only, he told himself, because his hand was hurting too much to continue walloping her as hard and as fast as she deserved to be. Instead, he picked her up off his knee and dumped her onto his bed.

She yelped and quickly rolled onto her side, clutching at her mostly bare bottom with one hand. Jerking the hem of her shift down, she rubbed as though her touch could soothe the hurt away.

"From now on," he told her, "you don't leave this tent unless I'm with you. I want you one hundred percent in my sight at all times. And if you ever go off alone again, I'll take my belt to you, do you understand me?"

Tears rolling down her face, she nodded. "Yes."

"Yes, what?" he snapped.

"Yes, sir!"

He got up, grabbed his rifle and stalked back outside.

The whole time, he'd been spanking her, a small crowd had been gathering down by the river. A handful surrounded his claim, but the majority were on the other side of the Yuba. The minute they saw him, a cheer went up among them.

"How's married life?" one of them yelled out.

"Get back to work and the hell out of my business!" Cody shouted.

Some laughed at him; others swore, but they moved on, heading back to their own claims or walking out into the river to pan where they could still keep an unobtrusive eye on him.

Sitting down on the stump by the cold firepit, Cody lay his rifle across his knees and glared at the rocks between his feet. He flexed his still stinging hand and waited for Dulcie to pull herself back together again. It was a long wait, and he could still hear her crying when his impatience finally got the best of him again.

"Get out here," he ordered. "I want breakfast and coffee."

The sides of the tent billowed gently. A few minutes later, he heard her rustling through one of the trunks for the coffee and cookware that he'd put away the night before. She sniffled and then the canvas flap snapped open and every dish he owned came sailing out through the air.

Cody jumped to his feet as the tin coffee pot ricocheted off his shoulders and rolled down the embankment.

"Fix it yourself!" she snarled back at him.

Those men close enough to have seen and heard her, burst into gales of laughter and Cody's face turned red. Reaching for his belt, he jerked the worn leather from his pants' loops and stormed back inside the tent.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER THREE

"I'll give you sixteen hundred for her," Miss Molly said. He'd already told her no three times, but the woman was nothing if not persistent.

Miss Molly stood on the bank of the Yuba in her finest dress, a worn scarlet gown with black dangles on the trim and a flouncy bustle and train that might have tempted the eye had she been just twenty years or so younger. There were darker lines along the seams, where they'd been let out to occupy the little extra weight she'd gained over the years and which her corset no longer seemed capable of confining. But even with those few extra pounds and the make-up caked upon her face, Molly wasn't a bad looking woman. She was just old enough to have been Cody's mother.

Standing bent over in the shallows of the river, his pan in both hands as he gently sloshed water over the sediment in the bottom, Cody said, "I'm content with things as they are."

Molly snorted her disbelief, turning her head to look to where Dulcie was sitting on the tree stump by his campfire, sulking. Spanking her hadn't exactly turned out the results he'd been hoping for. Her arms were folded across her chest, her nose and chin were thrust well up into the air. Obviously, she was still madder than a boiled owl.

Twenty good licks of his belt on her already crimson backside had raised some good welts, but he must not have been too hard on her since she was still able and willing to sit. She was also willing to hold a grudge. Not only had she let the fire go out and the coffee grow cold, but she was making absolutely no effort at all to fix any kind of a lunch for him. And it well approaching noon.

He couldn't believe his first impression of her had been that of a meek and frail woman, sitting there in the back of her stepfather's wagon. Boy, had he misjudged that character.

"I didn't buy her just to sell her again," Cody said, turning back to his work.

"I wouldn't have thought you needed the aggravation," Miss Molly countered. "You'll never be able to take your eyes off her. Sixteen hundred dollars," she said again. "And I'll even let you have her any time you've got the hankerin'. Just come on over to Miss Molly's and she's yours. No charge."

Growing more aggravated by the second, Cody snapped, "I can do that now! When and if I decide I don't want a damn wife anymore, I still won't sell her. Not to you or anybody else! I'll get a damned divorce and she can go wherever the hell she wants to go from there! Now, get the hell off my claim!"

Molly turned to go, but after only a few steps, called back over her shoulder. "There'll be no end of trouble for you on account of her. You'd best grow eyes in the back of your head, boy! Cause you're going to regret keeping her here!"

He'd regretted it almost from the second he'd done it, but Cody wasn't about to confess that out loud.

His eyes returned to Dulcie, and his mouth tightened in a flat, angry line. It was time to nip this defiance in the bud, before it blossomed into something worse than it already was and she shamed him in front of the whole town.

Cody waded up out of the Yuba. Dropping his pan on the shore, he stalked up the steep incline past her and marched into his tent. When he came out again, he had two cans of beans in his hands, which he dropped on the pebbled ground near her feet.

"I eat three times a day," he informed her curtly. "Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Now you get those cooked up for me, or I'll haul your backside back into my tent and add some stripes to that collection you've already got."

She ignored him and didn't move.

Out of patience, Cody took hold of her arm and jerked her up off the rock. "You hard of hearing, woman, or do you just like getting your ass whipped?"

Dulcie yanked her arm back out of his grasp and swung around on him as fast as any rattler ready to strike. "You tell everybody I'm your wife, but you talk to me like I'm a dog you'd rather kick! Go ahead and beat me if it makes you feel like a man! Lord knows I'm used to that. But I didn't ask to come here and I didn't ask to be sold like a heifer on the auction block! You want your breakfast, lunch, and dinner? Fine! Then start treating me with some common courtesy and a little respect!"

There was fury flashing in the depths of her dark eyes. Her chin wobbled and her full mouth quivered, but the tears that he could see her fighting hard to keep back were tears of anger and emotion, not of self-pity or fear.

His gaze drifted down to the faded, but still visible bruise that her stepfather had laid along the corner of her lips, then he slowly nodded once. "You're right. I haven't treated you very well."

She blinked twice, as though she'd been expecting a fight rather than his capitulation.

"Truth be told," Cody said, "I only bought you to keep you from going to somebody as bad, if not worse, than your step-daddy." A corner of his mouth turned up wryly. "As hard as I've made it for you to tell, I'm not as bad as he was. Leastwise, I'll try not to be."

Dulcie clasped and reclasped her hands in front of her, as though unsure what to do now that he was no longer angry with her. After a moment, she reached down to pick up the cans of beans. "Give me a few minutes to get your lunch ready."

Cody dredged down deep into his past and came up with some manners. "Thank you."

He tipped his hat to her and then headed back to the river.

\* \* \* \*

"Is this all you eat?" Dulcie asked, as he scraped a heaping helping of beans onto his only plate and handed it across the fire to her. He'd given her the

ion's share of the meal, despite the fact that she alone was laboring knee-deep in water. She stared at her food, knowing she should eat it and not wanting to be rude, but she'd never had a great fondness for beans.

"It's what's cheap," Cody told her. "I don't have the time for cooking if I want to make money."

"Maybe I could fix something different for you," she said.

"I don't need fancy dinners." Using his knife to spoon beans directly from the hot can, which was all she had to heat the beans since he didn't seem to own a pot, into his mouth. Then Cody shrugged, and said, "But a little variety now and then wouldn't be so bad, I guess."

"All right." Dulcie smiled, although he didn't return it, and did her best to eat what was on her plate. It was a lot of food though, much more than what she was used to, and she only managed to swallow half of it before her stomach felt full almost to the point of being uncomfortable.

"You don't eat enough," he said, when she set the plate aside.

"One more bite, and I'm going to pop," she told him. She held her plate out to him. "Would you like the rest? I know you said you don't like waste."

"Do you not eat much because you starved yourself, or because he didn't feed you enough?" Cody looked at her over the top of the can while he chewed.

Dulcie feigned interest in the wrinkles of her skirt. "There wasn't always enough to go around," she admitted, brushing a little dirt from the fabric just below her knee. "I'd sometimes give my share to my brothers to make sure they didn't go to bed hungry."

He grunted. "Well, I got enough to feed you. Nobody goes to bed hungry on my claim."

Dulcie looked quickly away from him. She swallowed hard. Though she didn't miss her stepfather, Mark and Billy were a different story entirely. She truly hoped to see them again some day. That is, if Cody would even let her.

Cody's fork scraped the bottom of the plate as he scooped the last of her leftovers into his mouth.

"Would it be all right if I walked up to the store?" she asked.

"No," he told her.

"But you said you wanted variety..."

He silenced her protest with a hard look. "I already told you. You're not going anywhere, and you're not leaving this camp without me. If you want to stay in one piece, then you don't go anywhere alone."

Dulcie averted her eyes, lest he see the flash of mutiny that shot through her. Struggling to keep her voice even and calm, she said, "Fine. Beans for supper again."

Though she did her best not to seem angry, she all but snatched the empty plate from his hands and marched down to the river to wash it.

Cody took a deep breath and let it out slowly. For the sake of civility and because he really didn't want to keep fighting with her, he gave in. "All right, dammit." He got up and stalked into his tent, returning a moment later with his rifle. "Let's go to the damn store."

Although it had been on the tip of Dulcie's tongue to accuse Cody of overreacting where her safety was concerned, no sooner had they crossed the fallen log to the opposite bank of the Yuba than did she become aware of the hungry eyes following her. There were miners everywhere: in the river, in the tents that littered both banks, and even in the woods. As she trailed a step or two behind Cody, she could feel them watching her. But what was worse, she could count the number of smiles she came across on the fingers of one hand. They all looked as grim and as hard as Cody.

"I'll never argue with you again," Dulcie said as they walked up the steps to Jenkins's Store.

Cody snorted, a sound of amusement as well as disbelief. He held open the door for her. "Don't worry. I won't hold you to that." In a moment of unexpected playfulness, he swatted her bottom as she walked past him. "No going hog wild in here."

That warning intensified with the sting of his palm's sharp contact--playful or not--and coupled with knowing they didn't have a lot of places to put what groceries she would buy made Dulcie a very thrifty shopper. She bought only what she needed for a week's worth of meals, and she was very careful to get the cheapest of what was there, painfully aware that the money she was spending wasn't hers. The only splurging she did was on the fresh eggs and bacon and a loaf of slightly stale bread because she didn't have an oven to bake her own.

Cody made a purchase of his own in a second panning plate, a second set of silverware, laundry soap, and an extra pair of boots, the smallest that Jenkins carried, and even that was still too big for Dulcie's tiny feet.

He paid for the goods in gold pebbles and dust, and watched with a hawk's eye as Jenkins weighed the worth. Beside him, Dulcie picked up the pan.

"Just in case you ever get tired of sitting on rocks," Cody said, not taking his eyes off Jenkins and making sure the man's thumbs didn't tip the scale. "I'll show you how to work the river."

"Oh," Dulcie said, setting the pan back down again.

"You know how to use a rifle?"

"I can fire one," she said truthfully. "I don't often hit what I'm aiming at."

"All right. So that'll be the next thing I show you." Cody added a box of bullets to the pile of goods.

"I'll have my boy carry the box down to your place," Jenkins told him.

"That'll do." Cody took the boots, pan and bullets with him.

"Arlo!" Jenkins called behind the curtain that separated the store from the back where they lived, and then hurried around the counter to get the door for them. He smiled at Dulcie when she passed him. "Have a good day, ma'am."

"Thank you, Mister Jenkins." She smiled and walked out onto the front porch.

But as Cody was coming out behind her, her smile faded as she heard Jenkins whisper to him, "Five dollars. Just for a little while. I won't take long, and I won't hurt her none."

Cody's voice was as icy as she'd ever heard him. "Don't ask me that again."

Her face burning, Dulcie lowered her eyes to the floor so she wouldn't have to meet Cody's as she let him take the lead. They walked back to the claim, neither one of them saying much of anything. Halfway down the river bank to the fallen log, Dulcie lay her hand on Cody's shoulder, stopping him. Raising up on her tiptoes, she kissed his cheek with a kiss, and then started walking again.

"What was that for?" Cody asked.

"Thank you," she said back over her shoulder.

"For what?"

"For treating me like a wife."

Cody blinked after her several times, then gruffly cleared his throat. "Well, I ... don't share my shovels. It only goes to figure."

"I thank you just the same." She beamed a smile back at him, and after a moment he started walking again. He reached her in time to offer her a hand up while she climbed onto the log to head across the river.

Funny what a little bit of common courtesy could do. She walked across that fallen tree's trunk holding her cotton skirts up as though she were a queen and feeling happy for the first time in ages. She was so happy in fact that the first thing she did upon reaching their claim was to toss another log on the fire and start boiling a fresh pot of coffee for Cody.

Perhaps it wasn't the best of situations, but if Cody was willing to act like a husband--and a protective one at that--then it was only fair that she should do her part as well. She'd be so good to him that he'd never regret having taken her to wife.

\* \* \* \*

Cody dug through the chest of clothes at the foot of his bed, down past the dishes to the layer of clothes that lined the bottom.

"Here." He handed her two pairs of socks, a black and brown checkered flannel shirt, and a pair of worn denims. He leveled a stern look at her. "Keep one pair of socks dry at all times. Got it?"

Dulcie nodded. She lowered her head, almost burying her nose in the shirt. "Mm."

He looked at her. "What?"

Her cheeks flushed. "The ... the shirt smells like you."

Cody raised an eyebrow, but her cheeks were blushing furiously and she was doing her best not to look at him. He cleared his throat. "I guess that only goes to figure, since it's mine. Get changed."

He left the tent so she could dress in private. Squatting down by the fire, he poured himself a cup of coffee. Black and strong, he chewed on the grounds to let the sharp flavor of it fill his mouth as he eyed up and down the river and thought. Except for the occasional glance now and then, most of the other men were back to working the river. It was business as usual, with everyone seemingly content to keep themselves to themselves.

As unreasonable as it was for Cody to try to hide her in his tent and out of sight, every time she came outside, she drew the stares of more men than he could shoot at one time and it made him nervous. Panning with his rifle slung across his shoulders was going to slow him down too, and he'd do well to keep his six-shooters strapped on, if he could remember to keep them from getting wet.

It wasn't that he expected trouble at this point. He'd killed two men in the eight years since he'd first come to Mudhole Mill. Anymore, the others just seemed to steer clear from him. Many wouldn't even meet his eyes.

Still, a woman was a powerful draw, and he'd known more than one man to do a damn foolish thing for the sake of attracting a lady's attention. So there was value in being prepared for the worst, just in case.

"Hey!" he heard Culley, his nearest upstream neighbor call from behind him, and Cody glanced over his shoulder.

His pants soaked from the knee down, Culley came up out of the Yuba. Watching Cody warily, he trudged up the steep embankment.

"What do you want?" Cody asked as he neared the fire.

Culley had been in Mudhole Mill a year longer than Cody, and they'd been stuck side-by-side with one another for so long that they'd struck up a relationship that could almost have been called a friendship. Once in a while they shared a cup of coffee, and Cody almost even liked the man. Of course, he liked him even more when he stayed on his own claim and kept to himself.

"Hey--uh. Them two Hunt brothers seen your little gal bathing out by the creek." Culley nodded his head off towards the fairly well-hidden inlet. "JD dun heard 'em talkin' this mornin' on how they was gonna wait until she come do that agin, an' mebbe catch themselves some of what you're gettin' at nights."

"Is that right?" Cody said, and took another sip of his coffee.

"Thought you'd wanna know," Culley said.

"Thank you."

Culley's gaze flicked up towards his tent, and since he didn't amble back down to his own claim Cody continued to stare at him, silent and waiting until Culley cleared his throat and sheepishly asked, "Mind if I linger on a bit and mebbe say howdy to yer bride?" He held up both hands, "I won't touch her or nuthin'. I just wanna take a gander, is all."

Cody knew the exact moment when Dulcie came out of the tent behind him. Not because he heard the rustle of the canvas as she pushed the flap aside, or the crunch of the rocks beneath her boots as she stepped outside, but because Culley's eyes grew as big as dinner plates between his salt and pepper eyebrows and the bush of a beard that nearly consumed every part of his face. And not just that, but across the river, every miner within sight stood up where they were and gaped his way.

Sighing, Cody turned around. There was a real damn good reason for why women wore skirts. What man could be expected to keep his mind on what he was doing when confronted by such shapely female hips alluringly packaged in a wrap of faded blue denim britches? The shirt practically hung off her, and she'd rolled the sleeves up her arms to keep her hands clear. Likewise the pants were too long and she'd turned up the cuffs before stuffing them down into the tops of her boots. There was at least a good six inches of extra waist around her middle and were she not holding her pants up by the belt-loops, in all likelihood, they'd have slipped right off her and puddled on the ground

Damn if he wasn't tempted to turn her around, march her back inside his tent and devote the rest of the day to making her moan and cry out beneath him in his bed.

"I need a belt," she said sheepishly.

There was a low, appreciative whistle, and Cody jerked around to look at Culley. He frowned, but Culley didn't even notice. His eyes were glued on Dulcie.

Culley snapped his hat off his head, hastily swiped a hand over what remained of his hair, smoothing the three grey strands down over his shiny bald spot, and cleared his throat. Wringing his cloth hat between his rough hands, he said, "Howdy."

"Hello," Dulcie said, her cheeks turning a little pink as she pulled her loose pants up that much further.

Cody cleared his throat loudly, and frowned at Culley even harder. This time, the other man noticed.

"Well, I, uh..." Culley took a few steps back. "I guess I better get on back to my own place."

"You do that," Cody told him dryly.

Placing his hat on his head, Culley took a last look at Dulcie and then quickly walked away.

"It was nice meeting you," she called after him.

If anything Culley walked even faster, hunching his shoulders and shoving his hands deep down into his pockets.

"Was that a friend of yours?" Dulcie asked.

"Yes," Cody snorted. "I reckon so."

"Should I ask him to stay for coffee?"

Looking after Culley, Cody shook his head ruefully. "Hell, if you do that, he'll probably keel over right on the spot from heart failure. He can't take sitting at the fire with you, woman. You're too damn beautiful."

Dulcie's cheeks blushed at the compliment, and she looked at him in surprise.

But Cody steadfastly refused to meet her eyes. Clearing his throat, he ambled past her for his tent. "Come on. Let's get you a belt."

She followed him quite readily, holding her pants up as she went inside.

Cody pulled a length of rope out of one of the trunks and sat down in the chair. "Come here," he said without looking at her, and pointed to a spot between his knees.

Her cheeks went hot again, but this time for a wholly different reason. She didn't like seeing him sitting in that chair. It made him look as though he were about to take her across his knee again. Her bottom tingled dreadfully, and her nerves tittered inside her. Then he touched her, stringing the length of rope through the belt loops of her britches, and that slight touch of his hands around her waist caused the most embarrassing and unexpected heat to surge inside her belly. Dulcie quickly turned her head to one side, unable to look at him, afraid he'd be able to see those feelings rolling inside her.

"There," he tied the rope around her waist and reached down to pull a concealed knife from out of the top of his boot, cutting the extra length away. He slipped two fingers into the waistband of her pants. "Too tight?"

Staring at the grungy canvas wall, she mutely shook her head.

Removing his fingers from within her pants, his hands settled on the sides of her hips. His thumbs overlapped the waist of her pants and the heat of him burned right through her shirt and into her skin. The length of his fingers seemed to stretch around her sides to brush the swells of her buttocks.

"Cat got your tongue?" he asked.

Her breath hitched in the back of her throat as she shook her head again.

"You going to look at me?"

Cody's timbre voice turned husky and low, the way it had the night before, and it made the funny trembling in her belly go absolutely haywire, branching out and down until she could feel the vibrations of it pulling between her legs. With the utmost reluctance, she made herself look at him, and her eyes betrayed her.

"Yeah," he breathed. "That's what I thought."

He untied the rope around her waist and unfastened the front of her pants, letting them fall right off her hips.

"You can't," she said weakly, when he untied her underdrawers.

"The hell if I can't," Cody said. "We're married."

He took them down as well, and Dulcie came right up onto her tiptoes when his warm hand cupped between her thighs in the most intimate caress any man could do to a woman. She almost stopped breathing.

"It's the middle of the day," she strangled.

"So it is," he said, and stood up. He was a good head taller than she was and positively towered over her, leaving her no place safe to look that she couldn't see him.

She began to tremble, though for the life of her she couldn't say why. She wasn't afraid of him, though her legs felt so weak her knees wobbled back and forth just like they'd do whenever she'd had to face her stepfather's heavy-handed rage. She took a deep and shaky breath, leaning slightly into him when she felt his fingers cup her chin.

Firm but gentle, he forced her head up. Unlike the night before, his mouth when he kissed her was tender, soft, almost wooing. It made her legs tremble even more. She was trembling all over now, in fact.

The palms of his warm hands settled on her shoulders, pausing briefly to caress her there before moving down to her breasts. He cupped and lightly squeezed, and then trailed down over her stomach. It wasn't until she felt the cold breeze against her shoulders that she realized Cody had unbuttoned the front of her shirt and was taking it off altogether.

He looked down at her naked breasts.

"Mm," he said, and she shivered as his arms closed around her, drawing her in close. His hands smoothed over her back, tracing down to cup her bottom and lifting her up off her feet. Dulcie grabbed his shoulders to keep from falling, and he drank her soft cry from her mouth with another hungry kiss as he walked her to the bed. He carried her by her buttocks, his fingers digging into her soft flesh, his mouth never far from her own. He was soft and hard and demanding all at once, teaching her how to kiss him back with far more patience than he'd shown the night before.

This was nothing like the first time. She felt a trill of both pleasure and panic when he lay her on her back on the bed, settling himself over her even as he skinned her pants and underwear down off her legs. His touch was making her melt inside. As he bent his head to suckle at her breasts, she could feel the pulling of his mouth all the way down to her toes. She curled them into the mattress when he lay a trail of kisses down her belly. Her legs shook even more violently when he spread them apart, and when his fingers combed down through the folds of her sex, Dulcie nearly came up off the mattress to feel the heat of his mouth closing over her there.

She fell back, arching her back and covering her mouth with both hands to keep from screaming out loud. He shattered her. Before he ever entered her, he made her fall apart. It was the most vulnerable feeling she'd ever known. And the most frightening. And worse than that, in the aftermath as he lay braced above her, panting and sweating, his strong arms shaking as he held his weight off her, Dulcie found herself staring up into his hard, almost angry eyes.

"Damn you're beautiful," he said.

Dulcie reached up to cup the side of his face, but at the last minute he pulled away from her touch. Rolling off her, he sat up on the edge of the mattress. He dressed without another word, strapped his guns back around his waist and headed outside.

"Come on. Daylight's wastin', and we've got work to do."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER FOUR

Cody might have been able to do better panning on his own. Under any other circumstances, he would have considered having to stop what he was doing every few minutes, just to show Dulcie what she ought to be doing, or to pick through the ore granules in the bottom of her pan until she became familiar with what was good and what wasn't, an incredibly irritating waste of time. However, Cody thought as he squatted in the rocks that littered the shallows not ten feet behind his young wife, every petty annoyance he'd been forced to suffer silently through these last few days was mollified by the sight she presented every time she bent down to dip her pan back into the river or scoop up another plate of silt.

Oh yes, Cody thought. It was a hell of a view. Round and soft, maddeningly outlined by the denim britches she wore, the seat of which was already dusty from sitting on the rocks, since she didn't have the strength or the stamina to work bent over or even squatting down for long stretches of time. Already he couldn't wait for night to fall so he could pull her back into his tent, shuck those jeans down and bury himself right up between those long and slender legs of hers. Just thinking about her silken limbs wrapped around him, breathing in her soft sighs of pleasure as he loved her, was making the front of his britches an uncomfortable constraint.

Dulcie stood up, picking through the smaller rocks in the bottom of her pan as she waded back to him. "Are these anything?"

He made himself pull his wayward thoughts back under control as he obligingly looked into the bottom of it. Damn, she even smelled good. "I ought to go pan over there. You seem to have all the luck this morning."

It was amazingly easy to make her smile, and his slight compliment was no exception. She grinned up at him, her dark eyes sparkling happily as she bit her bottom lip. "Is it that good?"

"Those two are." He gestured to a section sprinkled with light colored sand. "That one's just a rock." He picked the offending bit out of the pan and tossed it back into the water. "And this here..." he picked up a small stone. "This is more than just dust. Looks good, too." He held it up to the sky, squinting at it against the brightness of the sun. "Yes." He patted her shoulder and slipped the nugget into the pouch on his belt. "Good job."

She beamed. Compliments like that, he had learned, could send her back out into the water, ready and willing to pan for hours more. Until she was near to dropping from exhaustion, much like she'd been yesterday when she'd waded out too deep after a flash of yellow. Being such a little thing, the current had swept her off her feet and in a flash had sucked her under and washed her two claims down. Thankfully, Harley had been out deep enough to grab her leg. She'd liked to have swallowed half the Yuba before he got her feet down and her head up above the water. But damn if she hadn't hung onto that rock. Fool's gold, but still.

Which reminded him. "How's your arm?" he asked.

She made a face as she passed him her pan so he could give it a final wash in the river before picking out the dust he liked. "Sore, but I'll manage. At least I can move it now." She cupped her right shoulder with one hand, shrugging gingerly as she spoke.

"If you over do it like that again," he warned, giving her a steely-eyed look, "I'll bust your backside."

"I know, I know." She tried to laugh it off, but the look she gave him said quite clearly that she fully believed his threat. She took the pan when he handed it to her, and headed back for her digging spot. Crouching down among the rocks, she lifted her small hand shovel, scooped a portion of the river bottom into her pan and started all over again.

Both good news and bad news hit Mudhole Mill with the same amount of enthusiasm. One could all but see the ripple effect as the excitement of fresh gossip broke through the monotony of panning and worked its way through the miners. Generally it would follow the flow of the Yuba into town, but today was the exception to the general rule. Cody glimpsed the possibility of new news when he happened to glance up and noticed the huddle of men around Jenkin's Store. As he watched, it grew from three men to a noteworthy seven within seconds. Two men ran out of Molly's and quickly followed the muddy road out of town.

Cody stood up, watching as Culley broke from the group and jogged down to the river in lanky, long-legged strides, calling out a few quick words to those men he was friendly with as he passed them. He was even calling out to a few that he wasn't, which made the hairs on the back of Cody's neck prickle. That kind of blatant enthusiasm for gossip was usually reserved for the serious tidbits of knowledge, like the approach of a bounty hunters, the really experienced lawmen or rangers that were tough enough to dare coming here. The kind of news that oftentimes meant the difference between working your claim and going to jail for a spell.

The hair on the back of Cody's neck prickled even more as he realized that Culley was coming right towards him, jogging briskly across the fallen log and waving his arm as he called out, "Hullo, Cody!"

As caught up as he was in his news, he apparently hadn't noticed Dulcie in the water. At his hail, she stood up, shielded her eyes with one hand and waved, "Why, hello, Mister Culley. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He let out a shout and his foot slipped out from under him. He fell sideways into the water, washing under the log and several feet downstream before managing to get his feet under him enough to come up for air. He blew water between his mustache and beard, grabbed at his hat before the current could carry it too far away and sheepishly made his way towards them.

"Ma'am," he said, rolling his hand between his hands as he passed her.

Thoroughly drenched by Culley's wet plunge, Dulcie wiped her wet face with a slightly drier sleeve and said, with slightly less enthusiasm, "Hello." She looked down at herself and shook her wet head as he waded past her and came up to Cody.

"They found the wagon," he said as he sidled up to Cody. He glanced back once over his shoulder to Dulcie, before turning his back to her and lowering his voice to a hushed whisper. "Down yonder, just 'round Billy Bog Bend." He lowered his voice even more. "They're all dead, o' course."

That damn fool stupid missionary. Cody closed his eyes, bowing his head and shaking it.

Unfortunately, Culley hadn't lowered his voice far enough, because Dulcie must have heard that last part. She waded two steps closer. Her eyes saucer-large in her pale face. "What's happened? Has there been an accident?"

Covering his eyes with one hand, Cody sighed, then reluctantly handed his pan to Culley. He met Dulcie's wide eyes.

"What happened?" she asked again.

And he was going to have to tell her.

"They're mighty bloodied up," Culley said, helpfully. "She shouldn't see it."

"Shut up," Cody snapped at him. He waded towards her, but a funny look came over her face when he reached for her, and she shied from his hand. "Come here, Dulcie."

"W-why shouldn't I see it?"

Cody tried again, wading a step closer to her as he beckoned her to him. "Come here, honey."

Instead of soothing her, the endearment that fell so easily from his lips only seemed to unnerve her further.

"Who's dead?" she demanded, backing up.

"Weren't no sign of the money, neither," Culley added, studying Cody's pan. He whistled. "Nice color."

Cody glared at him, and the old miner quickly looked from him to Dulcie and clamped his mouth shut. The damage was already done, though.

Dulcie spun around, almost falling over in the water as she slogged her way to the rocky shore.

"Dulcie, wait!" Cody chased after her, but he was in even deeper water than she was and by the time he got solid, dry ground beneath him, she was already halfway across the log, running in soggy boots that were just a hair too big for her feet.

"Dulcie!" he shouted after her. Damn it! He barely had time to grab his rifle before giving chase. She was skinny and small, but hell if she couldn't run.

She followed the parade of miners heading out toward Billy Bog to take a look at the gruesome scene. And the only reason he caught up with her was because the minute she topped the short hill enough to see the wagon, she stopped stalk still in the middle of the dirt path, surrounded by gawkers and looters. There wasn't much left of it. The wagon was torn apart, scavenged for items of value. Most of the goods had already been stolen, although bits and pieces were scattered among the bushes and covered over by the dying leaves of late Autumn. Some of the least successful miners, those too broke and hungry to care about the rights of the dead, were still picking through the wreckage, stealing anything of any use.

Cody caught up to her about the time she must have seen her brothers. If he died without ever hearing that sound she made again, he'd be a happy man. Like the screeching of a wounded animal, her sob was high-pitched and totally lacking of any words to detract from the grief and pain.

He tried to catch her before her knees buckled, but they both went down to the ground. She curled into a ball, covering her face as she made that awful sound again, and all he could do was hold her against his chest.

"I'm sorry," he told her. It was a useless thing to say, but he just couldn't think of anything else. "I'm sorry."

The bodies lay scattered around the wagon as though they'd been tossed out with the rest of the unwanted goods. All three had had their throats cut.

\* \* \* \*

Dulcie buried her brothers in the bushes not far from Cody's tent. She did it by herself, refusing to let anyone help. Not even Cody.

He'd never been much good at expressing emotional things like grief. While he would have a hundred times rather been down in the river panning, there was just no getting around the fact that that was a boneheaded and unforgivably insensitive thing to do while one's wife was digging graves for her only family. So instead, Cody wound up sitting on the ground not far away from her, waiting in vigil while she dug some of the meanest blisters into the palms of both hands and cried until her eyes were nearly swollen shut. He'd never felt so useless in his life. And it was surprisingly hard to see her so hurt without being able to do a damn thing to help. He kept having to swallow his sympathetic feels, because pity and sympathy were two things that just didn't belong in the wilds of California.

Neither did she, a voice inside him suddenly said. Mudhole Mill was no place for a woman. Particularly not one like Dulcie, who wasn't as tough as nails in the side of a weathered barn. She shouldn't be wearing out her hands and her spirit digging graves. She should be sitting in a proper house, with a smile like sunshine on her face.

Cody looked at her red-rimmed eyes, and then he looked away. Somewhere in this camp, there was sixteen hundred dollars of gold in the pocket of the man who'd made her cry. Unfortunately, it would probably stay there, too. Because unlike the five-and-dime hero novels, this was the real world where not all crimes got solved.

It took her two hours to dig both graves, wrap her brothers in burlap and bury them over again. When she was done, she stood for the longest time at the foot of the freshly turned mounds of earth and simply stared. There was no marker or even a eulogy. In fact, Dulcie never said a word. After a while, she simply picked up her shovel and starting digging again.

Cody could understand why she'd want her brothers so close by, but her stepfather was harder to comprehend. Perhaps she did it so her brothers could be near their father. Whatever her reasons, she didn't share them. She just dug until the grave was deep enough for a man, and then waited silently for Cody to place her stepfather down inside.



Luke was a big man and difficult to maneuver. Cody ended up calling Culley over to help, and together, they awkwardly shifted and rolled the corpse until they could lift it down into the bottom of the hole. By the time they were done, both men were panting hard. They took a breather in the bottom of the grave before attempting the jump back up.

It was as they were eyeing the top of the ground for the best place to try and get out, that Cody noticed the first telltale of yellow, mixed in with the soft earth. For the span of a heartbeat, his whole body froze. He even stopped breathing, as though if he kept real quiet, then maybe Culley wouldn't see it.

That hope was shattered when Culley whispered, "Color!"

"This is a grave," Cody told him. "It's my wife's kin."

"So?" The older miner countered. "He's already dead! What's he gonna care?"

"Get out of the damn hole!" Cody snapped.

Grumbling, Culley scrambled from the grave. "Gettin' married's changed you," he snapped back down at him, but then quickly stepped back before Cody could slap at him with his hat.

Squatting down, Cody picked at the dirt, sifting a handful of loose soil through his fingers once. Luke hardly deserved to be buried in dust and pebble-sized nuggets, but it was still a grave and still boneheadedly insensitive to try panning for gold in it. Dulcie had been hurt enough.

As he came up out of the grave, he shot Culley a Keep-Your-Mouth-Shut look, then shifted his gaze to Dulcie, who was sitting cross-legged on the ground, the handle of her shovel lying across her lap. She had a scoop of dirt and pebbles that she was idly bouncing in the palm of her hand, letting the granules fall through her slightly splayed fingers. When all the rocks had fallen though, then she picked up some more.

He couldn't think of a single thing to say to her that would make a difference in the hurt she felt, but he squatted down in front of her and tried to think of something. 'I'm sorry' was all that came to mind, but those two simple words fell far short of making up for what she'd lost. Cody reached for her shovel instead.

"I'll do it," she said, without looking up. She started to take the shovel back again, and that's when he saw how bad her hands really were.

Everywhere the rough wood handle had rubbed as she'd been digging had rubbed away the skin. From the soft pads of her palms to the tips of her fingers, the blisters had burst open and begun to seep. And because she'd been picking at the ground, now the wounds were full of dirt. He pulled the shovel from her grasp and grabbed hold of her wrists, turning her palms up.

"Jesus, woman!" he swore.

She yanked the shovel back from him so fast that she left splinters in his fingers. "I said I'll do it!" she snapped, her dark eyes flashing.

His temper reared just as suddenly to clash with hers. Cody stood up when she did and grabbed her wrists again. He forcibly removed the shovel from her hands. He quickly jerked his head back when he glimpsed the flash of her fist flying at him, and she hit his shoulder instead of his jaw.

"Let go of me!" she yelled.

He quickly grabbed her other arm and Dulcie became a fighting-mad lunatic in his arms.

"Let go, I said!"

He grunted when she kicked his shin and promptly let go of one of her arms. The fight died as suddenly as it had started when, with a crisp crack, she slapped his face. They both stared at one another in shock, and then, below the hot, pulsing anger that began to pound in his ringing ears, Cody heard his own low-pitched growl.

He grabbed her arm and dragged her back to his tent. Slapping aside the canvas flap, he pushed her in ahead of him and dumped her into bed. Grabbing the blankets, he jerked them all the way up to her neck. With a hand braced to either side of her head, he snarled, "You just lost your family, so I'm not going to give you the whipping you deserve. But I haven't kicked you, I haven't punched you, and I haven't slapped you. If you want to keep it that way, I suggest you don't ever--and I mean EVER--do that to me again."

Tears welled up in her eyes and she blinked rapidly to keep them back "Okay," she whispered.

Knowing he had to get distance between them, Cody got up and stalked back outside. The sounds of her crying followed him all the way back to the graves.

\* \* \* \*

Culley was back in the hole by the time Cody got there, squatting down over the body of Luke, scratching in the dirt with his fingers, looking for more gold. Glaring at him, Cody grabbed the shovel and began to dump fill in the grave anyway.

"Hey!" Culley yelled. He tried to climb up, but Cody kicked him back in and dumped the dirt in faster.

"Unless you're confused on where the claim lines are," Cody snarled, "you're still on my land!"

Culley scrambled from the hole spitting dirt. "You ain't pannin' it!"

"My choice."

"But there's gold down thur!" Culley protested, combing his beard with his fingers to get the loose dirt out.

Get!" Cody drew back his shovel as though about to take a swing at the other miner, and Culley scrambled to get out of the way.

He took off running back to his own claim, shouting back over his shoulder, "Gettin' married's changed you!"

"I'm still as mean as ever!" Cody shouted back. "And don't you forget it!"

He jabbed the shovel into the earth and stomped on it with his boot. Swearing and growling under his breath, he finished filling in the grave.

\* \* \* \*

Sitting on the tree stump by the fire, Cody broke bits off the twig in his hand and tossed the pieces into the flames. Now and then he cast a longing glance to the river. It was just beginning to get dark and Dulcie still hadn't come out of the tent.

He was wondering what the appropriate amount of grieving time was before he could get back to panning when an old, white-bearded miner in buckskins waded up out of the river and strolled up the steep embankment to Cody's camp. The man was as weathered as any Cody had yet met. As he handed over a string of four fish, in a voice as rough as gravel, he said, "Sorry bout yer loss."

It was the first time Cody had ever spoken to the man, but he stared after him for a long time just trying to match the sun-wizened face to a name. He never did figure out who the man was, but the fish cooked up fine all the same.

"Dinner's ready," he called into the tent.

"I'm not hungry."

Standing, Cody left the still sizzling fish in the pan and set it on the treestump. He walked over to stick his head into the tent. "I haven't spent the last week putting meat on you just to watch you starve yourself thin again. Dinner's ready. Get out here and eat."

"Go away. Leave me alone."

Pushing the tent flap aside, Cody stepped in. Squatting down beside her, he said, "You can either get up on your own and eat your supper sitting comfortably, or I will drag you out of bed and you will eat your supper sitting on a backside as blistered as your hands."

She rolled partway over to look at him, but she didn't move.

"Fine," he said with heavy determination. "We'll do this your way, then."

He actually had his belt off and in his hand before she sighed and rolled out of bed.

She walked like a zombie. As if she were only half there, a mostly empty husk of a person, who sat down in Dulcie's place by the fire and just stared at it, her back hunched, her ruined hands held limply in her lap for lack of something better to do.

Standing in the doorway of the tent, his belt dangling from his hand, she left him feeling like a perfect heel. Cody threw the doubled coil of leather on the bed and stood there, hands on his hips, glaring at the back of her head and telling himself that he was expecting too much from her too soon. He needed to practice patience. Except that he wasn't any better at that than he was in dealing with emotional situation.

He took her down to the river to wash her hands, and though he was as gentle as he knew how to be, she cried through the whole ordeal. The skin hung from her flesh in narrow strings in some places and was completely gone in others. She could barely even uncurl her fingers, the exposed flesh hurt so much, and Cody shook his head. He could see where the infection was already starting, and he soaped her hands three times in an attempt to keep it from getting any worse.

"This is going to hurt like hell," he said. But all the same, once the wounds were as clean as he could make them, he doused her hands in whiskey. She screamed and stomped her feet against the ground, but he kept a firm hold on her wrists and made sure every inch of exposed flesh was disinfected. When he was sure there were no loose bits of dirt left in the broken blisters, he cut an old shirt of his into strips and used them to bind her hands.

"Here," he said, and held the whiskey flask to her lips. "Take a belt of this."

Cradling her hands to her chest, her face a mask of tears and hurt, Dulcie shook her head.

Cody insisted. "It'll help with the pain."

He held the flask to her lips because her hands were incapable of grasping anything. Her first swallow left her choking and sputtering, but when he started to recap the whiskey, she hoarsely rasped, "No, wait."

He tipped the bottle to her lips again and she downed two more swallows as though the hard liquor were nothing more than water.

Cody fed her dinner to her as well, and Dulcie managed to swallow about half the fish before suddenly jumping up and running into the bushes.

"Hey!" Cody ran after her, but only until he heard her begin retching, and his anger became a stab of concern. Kneeling beside her, he held back her hair and wrapped an arm around her chest, holding her to keep her weight off her damaged hands.

"It's okay," he softly told her, as her body spasmed again and again. He continued to hold her until her vomiting eased into sobs, and Dulcie leaned helplessly against him.

Cody picked her up and carried her down to the river. He washed her face and neck. She didn't feel feverish when he pressed his hand to her forehead and cheek, so he figured her stomach's reaction was due more to a bad combination of whiskey, pain and grief, than to being sick.

"I'm sorry," she wept.

"You've got no reason to be." He carried her back to his tent and put her to bed again. As he lay down beside her, she rolled away from him. But he held her anyway, cradling her close to his chest while she cried herself to sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER FIVE

Dulcie's brothers had been in the ground for about a week, when Cody woke up in his tent one night alone. Dulcie's side of the mattress was cold.

Cody rolled his head to look at her pillow, and then sat bolt upright in bed, listening. There was an odd sound, like the muted scream of a rabbit freshly plucked from the earth in the talons of a hawk, and Cody quickly threw the blankets aside. He rolled out of bed and quickly stuffed his feet into his boots. Dressed only in his long underwear, he ducked out of the tent. It was a cloudless night, with only a partial moon and the stars to see by. He turned in a full circle, his eyes straining to see through the darkness as he scanned the bushes and trees for anything that moved.

There was a snap of a twig and the rustle of bushes off down by the inlet, and another of those odd and muted squeals. Cody headed for the sound, nearly falling when he rounded the hilltop, skidding and sliding down the embankment instead. He saw a flash of grey in the bushes as he neared the water. It was Dulcie, lying on her back with the shadows of two men struggling to pin her wildly flailing limbs down.

She made another snared-rabbit scream of a sound and Cody heard one of the Hunt brothers hiss, "Get 'er damn arm, Arlo!"

Sitting on her chest, it was everything Arlo could do not to get his face clawed. "What d'ya think I'm tryin' to do?!"

Cody hit Arlo at a run and they both tumbled down the rest of the embankment, splashing loudly into the water. Cody couldn't remember the last time he was so angry. His fist gained a lightning quick life of its own, slamming into Arlo's nose and jaw three times before they even surfaced for air.

Somewhere in the back of his awareness he heard a shout of pain from Arlo's brother, Max. But it wasn't until Arlo was scrambling on hands and knees and holding his nose at the same time, that Cody realized it was because Dulcie had latched onto his ears with both claw-like hands and sunk her teeth into the side of his shoulder and neck. How he could ever have mistaken her for a meek and biddable woman was beyond him, especially now when she was latched onto the man's neck, growling like an animal.

Cody chased Arlo from the water, taking the time to plant the flat of his boot in Arlo's backside and dropping him face down in the mud of the bank. Turning, he stalked upstream to Dulcie's--or was it Max's--rescue.

He hauled Dulcie to her feet by one arm and Max to his by the hair of his head. A sudden gunshot rang out, the sharp report echoing up and down the Yuba, sounding obscenely loud in the tiny valley of the inlet. Cody spun around, but it wasn't Arlo he saw waving a gun at his back. Instead, Cully crouched on the opposite bank, his rifle leveled at everyone.

"Cody," he said evenly. "Ya best git yer bride on home."

Without taking his eyes off Cully, Cody pulled Dulcie close to him. Keeping himself between her and the rifle, as they passed Cully, Cody said, "Thanks."

The old miner merely nodded once.

As they reached their camp at the top of the hill, behind him, Cody heard his neighbor saying, "That weren't no way to treat a lady. You boys got 'til the count o' five to git on outta here, or I'll put yer both in the ground."

Dulcie stumbled, but Cody kept a firm hold on her arm, pushing her ahead of him until they'd reached his tent and he could finally shove her safely into it. He on the other side of the flap, staring back through the darkness in the direction of the inlet, his ears straining to hear another tell-tale crack of Cully's rifle, but the night stayed silent and neither Hunt brother came racing back over the lip of the embankment, either in a panic for his life or to finish what he'd started with Dulcie.

As the minutes slowly stretched one into the other, some of the tension eased from his shoulders and Cody gradually relaxed. He turned around and stared at the tent. His mouth tightened into a hard line, and his hands clenched.

Everything was black inside the canvas shelter, but he could still make out the shadow that was Dulcie was standing in front of their bed when he pushed his way inside. It took him a few fumbled attempts to get his angrily shaking hands to coordinate themselves enough to light the lantern. When he finally turned to face her, her eyes were wide and wary and she even backed up an inch or so before regaining control over her obvious urge to flee. Neither of them spoke, and the longer he stared at her, the more he could feel that slow hot anger building inside him.

"I-I couldn't sleep," she stammered. "I wanted to take a bath."

"I could give a damn," he growled. "What part of 'don't go anywhere without me' are you finding hard to understand?"

"I'm not your prisoner! You can't keep me confined in a tent!"

"You're not my prisoner," he affirmed. "But you are my wife, and you will obey." He unbuckled the front of his belt and, in two short angry motions, jerked the length of leather from his pants' loops. Folding it in half, he wrapped the buckle end twice around his palm. "Turn around."

Dulcie shook her head. "No."

The look he leveled at her was hard and quelling. "You've already pushed me farther than you're going to like. Now turn around."

"Don't," she whispered.

"I'm trying to keep you safe," Cody snapped, fighting to keep his temper and losing the battle with every refusal she uttered. "If this is what it takes to get you to listen, then so be it. Turn around, Dulcie. If I have to tell you again, you won't sit for a week."

She swallowed convulsively, her hands clenching in the folds of her nightgown as she lowered her head and slowly turned to put her back to him.

"Get on your knees," he said flatly. "I want you bent over the bed."

She shivered even as she obeyed, clutching the blankets in both hands as she lay her torso flat across the goose-down mattress.

Half kneeling on the edge of the bed, he took hold of her wrists and twisted them behind her back, pinning them there with one broad hand. He jerked the wet and muddy hem of her nightgown up over her hips, baring the pale mounds of her trembling bottom.

His anger broke when he raised the belt. With hard, fast strokes, he lit a fire into her backside that would take days to die. He paid little attention to her kicking and flailing, and even less to her cries. With single-minded determination, he darkened the soft, pale swells of her buttocks to shades of crimson and plum, leaving no inch of her from the tops of her hips to the middle of her thighs unknissed by the supple length of old leather.

He didn't weaken when she began to scream and beg, and neither his determination nor the force of his arm wavered when she dissolved into tears. This was the second time he'd awakened alone to find that she'd wandered off into the night. With one hard stroke after another, he made damn sure there'd never be a third. He wanted this to be a lesson she'd remember for the rest of her life. Because if she ignored him again, in a town like Mudhole Mill, the rest of her life could very well be no more than a matter of minutes.

Dulcie kicked and writhed herself into a state of limp exhaustion before he was through. Too hurt and tired now to struggle, her movements diminished to little more than the bounce and wobble of her buttocks and thighs as the belt cracked again and again across already livid skin.

With her hands still caught firmly in his grasp, her fingers clawed and clenched at the empty air behind her, and she cried in wordless wails, no longer even able to form the words to beg him mercy. That was when Cody stopped. His arm was aching as he held it above her, belt ready to deliver another stroke or two if he had to, but Dulcie was beyond fighting him. She only lay there and cried, her bottom looking so battered that, as deserved as the thrashing had been, it still left him feeling like a monster.

Letting the belt drop from his fingers, Cody let her go. All her bucking and kicking as she'd struggled to evade his discipline had left her lying slightly twisted upon the bed, her torso partially wrapped around his knee while she sobbed into the bedding. And now she made no effort to move away, not even when he released her wrists and allowed her the rare luxury of cupping her raw bottom with rueful fingertips.

As she rubbed, she wept, "I hate this place!"

The urge to comfort her was almost overwhelming, but she rolled away from him before Cody could reach for her. Uncertain if she'd even allow him to hold her, he lay down behind her instead and hesitantly lay his hand upon her shaking shoulders. He rubbed her back.

"It's not for everybody, that's for sure," he said. "But this is where you live now, and I need for you to listen to what I tell you."

Dulcie crawled to her side of the bed, shrugging out of his touch as she went. Lying on her side with her back to him, she hugged her pillow to her and used it to wipe away her tears. Her voice lost some of its quaver as she said, "I hate you, too."

It was surprising that such small and few words could sting so much. He rolled out of bed, but then sat there for a moment, his arms balanced on his knees, glaring at the ground between his feet. His mouth tightened as he glanced back at her once, then kicked his boots off, blew out the lantern, and lay down beside her again. He glared into the darkness when Dulcie shifted away from him. She even shied when his elbow accidentally brushed her back when he tucked his hands behind his head, and Cody lost patience with her sulking.

He shucked out of his pants and long johns in fast, angry jerks, then snapped the blankets over them both and rolled onto his side. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he then pulled her back against him. Her hot little bottom settled right up against his groin and her whole body went stiff, but he lay his head down on his pillow and refused to let her go.

"You're in my bed," he told her gruffly, pulling her nightgown up and throwing it on the floor. "And, lady, when you're here, there won't be nothing between us but skin!"

She remained stiff in his arms for the rest of the night, and he went to sleep angry.

\* \* \* \*

Dulcie dozed off and on throughout the night and in the morning when the sun finally peaked over the tall pine trees that decorated the surrounding mountainsides, she woke up just as angry as she'd been before exhaustion had finally claimed her. Her first conscious thought was of how much she hated Cody. She hated him and the town and all the other miners in it. She hated the dirt and the filth and worst of all she hated herself for lacking the will and the courage to simply pack up and leave. In the middle of the night, if need be.

Snoring behind her, his arm still around her waist, Cody shifted in his sleep, moving just enough that Dulcie was able to creep slowly out from under the blankets and his hold. Always a little unsteady on her feet first thing in the morning, she stood up carefully. It took a moment before she caught her balance, but as she stepped slowly over the top of him, Cody opened his eyes.

In a flash, he rolled onto his back and grabbed her ankle. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To brew some coffee," she snapped, glaring down at him.

Traces of remembered anger flashed in the depths of his blue eyes, but after a moment's hesitation, he let go of her leg. "I don't want to fight with you."

It both shocked and surprised her, the strength of her furious desire to fight with him. She'd never been willful before. She'd never deliberately sought to argue with or anger a man in all her life. But right now, rationally or otherwise, she wanted to scream, yell and beat against him with her fists, to kick and fight and hit and shout until she was simply too tired to move.

And yet she didn't. Instead, she did what she always did. She swallowed the feeling and turned her face away, lest he glimpse through her eyes the rage roiling just underneath the thin layers of her skin.

"Let go of me," she said tight-lipped. "I'll get your coffee."

He sat up. "Dulcie."

But she didn't look at him again and only reached for her clothes.

After a moment, he swore and kicked the blankets aside. They both did their best to dress in the close confines of the tent without touching one another. Neither spoke, except for the sharp hiss of breath as Dulcie gingerly eased her denims up over her hips. The stiff fabric felt as rough as gravel scraping across her raw and welted bottom flesh.

Shrugging into his shirt, Cody snapped, "You deserved every lick of it, too." Slapping the flap of the tent aside, he stormed outside.

Her eyes narrowed and her hands shook. In a sudden whirlwind of fury, she snatched up her boots and hurled them after him. The tent, however, halted both assaults, and the canvas caught each boot before dropping them harmlessly to the ground just outside the entryway.

It was some time before Dulcie could compose herself enough to get the coffee pot and fixings. And by the time she'd emerged, Cody had a fire going.

She got the coffee started, and then pulled on her boots and gathered her things in preparation for another day spent working in the river.

"You going to fix me something to eat?" Cody asked her.

"Fix it your damn self," she snapped back.

"Lady, are you trying to pick a fight with me?"

She rounded on him, her eyes flashing furiously. It took everything she had not to shout 'Yes!' back in his face. She shook from the effort, but in the end only turned away. Cody still wound up cooking his own meal.

"God's testing me," Cody muttered as he dropped two cans of beans to heat in the fire. "That's what it is. He hates miners. Miners and money changers."

He made enough for them both, but Dulcie didn't wait around the campfire for any part of it. She had a single tin cup of coffee, then gathered her pan and shovel and started down to the river.

"Oh, I see," Cody glared at her retreating back. "You're mad at me, so now you're not going to eat, either."

"I'm not hungry," she threw back over her shoulder.

He stood up by the fire. "You sit your scrawny ass down and eat your damn breakfast! How the hell you think you're going to do a full day's work on an empty belly?"

"I'm not hungry!" she snapped.

"You're going to make yourself sick!" Fed up, he stalked after her, catching up with her down by the water's edge. Grabbing hold of her arm, he spun her around. When Dulcie tried to shrug out of his hands, he caught her shoulders and shook her once. "You want to be mad at me, lady? That's just fine. You be mad then. But you're not going to make yourself sick out of spite!"

"I'm already sick!" she shouted back in his face. "The smell of that stuff cooking is turning my stomach!"

"Then I'll fix you up a damn egg," he snarled. "But you will eat and you will take care of yourself. Out here, people who don't, die."

"Maybe I'd rather be dead!"

His eyes narrowed and he grit his teeth, his hands on her arms tightening until she winced. "You ever say that again and I'll bust your ass like you've never had it done before. You understand me?"

She must have believed him because she lost some of her anger, and as it drained away, she began to shake. "Just let me go."

Cody shook her shoulders once again. "I said, do you understand?"

"Yes!" she gasped.

He held her to him another minute more, then slowly made himself let her go. "If you think you're going to work the river today, then you get back up there and get something in your belly first. You're eating at least an egg."

He left her standing at the water's edge and went back up to the fire to fix her breakfast. It took several minutes before she finally gave in. Following him back to the campfire, she gingerly sat down on the stump and hugged her knees to her chest until the egg was ready.

Dulcie managed to get a few bites in her before she suddenly dropped her plate on the rocks at her feet and lurched towards the nearest bush. She was retching before Cody even realized what was happening. By the time he reached her, she'd collapsed to her knees. Her stomach was empty, but the spasmodic dry heaving continued for several long minutes more.

Cody pulled her hair back behind her and held her until the spasms faded gradually to nothing, leaving Dulcie panting, clutching her stomach, and crying. She leaned weakly against him, though in his arms was still the very last place she wanted to be.

"Let me go," she wept.

Cody stiffened, for a moment his anger so intense that he nearly dropped her in her own vomit and walked away.

"I can't stay here," she said between gasps. "I just want to go. I'll pay you back. Everything I pull out of the river, I'll give you until you've got the whole amount back. Please ... just let me go."

Cody shook his head at her, but then he could only shake it at himself. He hadn't wanted her in the beginning. He hadn't wanted any kind of a wife, and she certainly didn't want him. So why was the idea of living without her all of a sudden so damned unappealing?

"If that's what you want," he said. "Fine. But you're still not working the river today. Sick as you are, you're going back to bed."

She turned her face away, struggling weakly to get back on her feet. "I feel fine."

Cody snorted his disbelief as he helped her back onto her feet. But though she stubbornly started for the water's edge, he wasn't about to give in. He turned her back towards their tent and gave her a sharp swat to get her going in that direction. "I'm not taking no for an answer."

She could be mad at him all she wanted to. She still spent the rest of the morning in bed.

\* \* \* \*

Cody did his best to keep his eye on her throughout the day, coming up out of the water to make sure she had something to drink, that she had enough blankets, that she wasn't running a fever, which would have been a serious cause for concern.

It was the damnedest sickness he'd ever seen. By noon she was almost perfectly fine and chomping at the bit to get out of bed and down to the river so she could start mining her freedom from him. He might not have wanted her at first, but even in the short time that they'd been together, Cody found himself growing awfully accustomed to having her around. Whether he liked admitting it or not, it was really grating his nerves that she was so all-fired eager to get away. That she was even driven to come up off her sickbed so she could get started all the faster bordered on damned near insulting. He was half near tempted to give her what little he had by way of money and just let her go.

Except that he did didn't want her to go. He wanted her to stay right here with him, in his tent, in his bed and in his life.

He was still thinking of how he could convince her to stay later that night as they were getting ready for bed. He watched her surreptitiously as she pushed her denims down her legs and stepped from the folds. His eyes wandered over the paleness of her skin and, as she bent to pick up the discarded jeans, were drawn to the flush of decorating color that covered her bottom and peeked out from beneath the hem of her shirt as she bent slightly forward to lay her pants on the straight-backed chair.

Cody felt a twinge of conscience. "How's your backside feeling?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Her mouth tightened and she turned all the way around so she wouldn't have to look at him.

"Fine."

"I might have been a bit hard on you," he said, unbuttoning his shirt. "I'm not saying I was wrong. You deserved a good hiding for running off in the middle of the night. I'm just saying I might have been a little rough."

Unlike her pants, which she'd folded neatly, her shirt she threw on the chair in a wad. She crawled into bed, retreating to the farthest edge of the mattress, and pulled the blankets all the way up to her chin.

"Good night," she snapped and glared at the canvas wall.

Cody stared at her bristling back. Sighing and shaking his head, he finished undressing in silence, then blew out the light. He got into bed beside her. Laying on his back, his hands folded behind his head, he studied the darkness. Outside, it had begun to rain again, and the drizzling patta-pats of the drops hitting the tent were almost as bad at keeping him awake as the angry sound of her breathing.

After a while, he rolled towards her. Reaching out into the darkness, he touched her back. She stiffened, but didn't try to wiggle away. A corner of his mouth lifted. Probably because she was already lying half-off the mattress as it was.

Reaching around her waist, he pulled her back into the center of the bed. "Being mad is tiring," he said, and snuggled against her to rest his chin on top of her head. "I don't want to do it anymore."

Dulcie didn't say anything, but the stiffness of her back and shoulders eased ever so slightly.

He kissed the top of her head. "Good night, Dulcie."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER SIX

Dulcie lay in the dark, feeling more empty and sad than angry anymore. She tried to go to sleep, but it felt wrong lying so close in his arms when there was so much driving an invisible and unshakeable wedge between them. She wished she could just shrug it off, the way Cody seemed to be able to. She wished she could roll over in his arms, bury herself against his chest and cry until the miserable lump taking up all the space in her chest went away. She didn't know how to do either. So she lay there, instead.

Behind her, Cody took a deep breath and shifted closer to her. He rested his cheek near her ear before kissing the sensitive lobe, the warmth of his breath prickling the fine hairs along her nape.

Dulcie wiggled, mostly to hide her involuntary shiver and tried to pretend as though it didn't affect her. Her nipples betrayed her, perking into stiff little peaks that all but begged for his attention, and she quickly folded her arms across her chest to hide them.

"Don't do that," she said, but her tone lacked both conviction and malice, and Cody kissed her again. He made her belly clench and tighten as he sidled in closer, pressing the length of himself to her back. She could feel his manhood stiffening and swelling behind her, nestling up between her buttocks as he slowly rocked his hips against hers.

Dulcie caught her breath, closing her eyes as his hand journeyed slowly around her to lightly touch her stomach. He caressed downwards until his fingers cupped her womanhood, holding her there.

"You're wet," he murmured, and his husky tone made her shiver again.

Dulcie tried to ignore him, but already she could feel that familiar molten heat building in her womb and it was so hard to pretend indifference when he touched her with such intimacy, alternating between cupping, squeezing, palming, and stroking his fingers back and forth along the nether lips of her femininity. The tips of two invaded past the dewy folds and slipped into the very heat of her. She bit her lips, and turned her face into her pillow, but he was impossible to dismiss.

"You can stay mad at me if you want to," Cody whispered, nibbling along the shell of her ear. "But wouldn't you rather we called a truce?"

Her eyes fluttered open when he nudged her shoulder.

"Come on, Dulcie honey. Aren't you tired of fighting?"

Dulcie swallowed before, obligingly, she rolled onto her back. All she could see of him was a shadow, rising to perch on one elbow above her.

"I don't hate you, you know," he said, caressing her cheek with the most tender of kisses. "I don't even dislike you. You aggravate the hell out of me sometimes, but that doesn't mean I want to stay mad at you. I'd just as soon there not be any anger between us at all."

Dulcie released a shaky, pent-in breath as he oh-so-gently nibbled at her lips, coaxing her into kissing him in turn.

"In fact," he said softly, brushing her hair back from her face. "I think you're one of the nicest women I've ever met."

Dulcie turned her face into his shoulder, closing her eyes once again as his hand between her legs made her hips arch into his touch.

"Pretty as peaches," he said, nibbling the bow of her lips. "Soft as flower petals in the early morning sunshine." His head lowered and she felt his hot breath between her breasts. "Hello, my darlins," he greeted them, kissing one perked tip and then the other.

Dulcie reached up to catch his shoulders, biting back an involuntary moan as, between her thighs, his fingers found the most sensitive of places. Her toes curled.

"Mm," he rumbled. "Make that sound again."

But Dulcie locked her lips and except for another sharp intake of breath as he stroked her there again, caressing and circling that tiny nub of pleasure until her back arched and her legs trembled, she remained silent.

"You are one stubborn woman," he said, but then he smiled. "All right. You can just be like that if it's what you want. But I think it's time we figure out which of us is more stubborn than the other."

He gave each of her nipples one last suckling kiss apiece, and then moved down her body. His hands held her thighs apart as his mouth replaced his fingers and, despite all her best efforts to feign indifference to his touch, Dulcie lost all hold on her ability to remain silent.

\* \* \* \*

Dulcie lay in Cody's arms, the pre-dawn glow of a cloudy and drab morning ducking in through the crack between the tent and the door flap each time the wind rustled the canvas. Spattering rain drops sprinkled the stiff canvas and the sides of the tent shuddered periodically as the wind picked up in minute gusts.

Although the blankets had been kicked back all the way down to their feet sometime in the night, Dulcie wasn't cold. Not really. Lying nestled against her back, Cody felt as warm as a cast iron cookstove. He hugged her to him with one arm, his hand cupping her left breast possessively. One of his legs was between her own, drawn up at an angle that wedged his thigh right up against her womanhood. After last night, as sensitive as she'd become, she could feel the coarse, sporadic hairs and the hard ridges of his muscles pressing up against her, and it was as if he were caressing his hand between her thighs all over again.

Her loins felt that liquid desire each time he breathed. Every now and again, deep in sleep, his hips moved against her bottom in an ever so slight thrusting motion. She could feel the hard, thick length of his penis pressing into the side of her hip, and when he flexed his own in sleeping contentment,

she had to fight the urge to shift just a little bit and see if she couldn't fit him--awake or not--back inside her again.

She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip, before turning her head to bite her pillow as his leg moved and pressed that much more firmly against her. She swallowed hard to keep from moaning, and then had to swallow again, convulsively, to keep from throwing up as a wave of nausea washed through her. Arousal was the sensation that had wakened her in the grey-tinged half hour that preceded the sun's daily rise into the sky. But it was her queasy stomach that kept her awake and lying as motionless as she possibly could, knowing her first activity of the day would likely be a hasty dash for the nearest bush.

Cody shifted restlessly behind her, and Dulcie had to swallow again, repeatedly, her mouth watering in warning. That delicious sense of arousal was all but gone now; leaving her awash in the sensations that her roiling in her stomach was inducing

She covered her mouth with one hand, willing him to either hold still or roll away from her altogether.

Cody raised his head instead, looking first towards the door and then peering down at her. He rubbed one eye sleepily, then touched her shoulder and tried to roll her onto her back. "You crying?"

That was the motion that broke her. Naked as the day she was born and without even bothering to reach for her clothes, Dulcie scrambled for the tent flap. She fell to her knees halfway through the entry and began retching. Icy droplets of rain struck her head, shoulders and back as she spat out mouthful after mouthful of foul tasting bile. There was nothing in her stomach, but she heaved anyway, over and over again, until her nose was running and tears of misery were rolling down her cheeks.

"Jesus!" Cody swore and rolled out of bed. He threw a blanket over her and tried to hold her up as the waves of nausea receded and she began to sag weakly towards the ground. "You must really be sick."

Clutching her stomach, Dulcie covered her eyes with one trembling hand and tried to keep from crying. It didn't work, and her shoulders began to shake all over again as she dissolved into tears.

"Aw, honey, don't do that." Cody wrapped her in the blanket and picked her up, taking her back to the bed. Only bothering to pull his pants on, he ducked down to the spring to bring her a tin cup of cool water, and held both her and it while she rinsed her mouth and drank in small sips.

He felt her forehead and then both of her cheeks. "You'll be okay," he said, and lay her back on the pillows before reaching for his pants and boots. "Fever hasn't set in yet. But just in case, I'll go fetch Doc."

Just before he left, he laid a pistol on the bed beside her and bent again to touch her face, feeling her temperature. He bent and kissed her forehead. "I'll be right back. Everything'll be fine. Don't you worry."

He ducked out of the tent, repeating, "Everything'll be fine," even as his footsteps in the rocks retreated towards the river.

But Dulcie knew better. She covered her stomach with both hands, spreading her fingers to cover the whole of her womb. She had taken care of her mother during both pregnancies that had brought her brothers into the world, as well as through three others that had ended badly. She knew this for what it was. She was going to have a baby. Now there'd be no escaping Mudhole Mill.

She rolled into her pillow, smothering her sobs with it. Despite Cody's assurances, nothing would ever be fine again.

\* \* \* \*

Barnaby Tuttle had never been a great physician, but rumor had it that he used to be quite adequate before he started drinking full time. Having sold his once thriving business back East to become a Californian miner, nowadays the Doc was a man ruled by habits--most of which were bad--and everybody knew his schedule.

His nights were spent at Miss Molly's, where he'd drink enough to knock out six men. When Molly was done with all her other customers, then he'd stagger up the stairs to see her. His mornings were usually spent sleeping off the previous night's indiscretions. On about two in the afternoon, he'd stumble downstream to work enough out of his claim to do it all over again that evening. He was an ornery and bitter old man, and anyone foolish enough to talk to him could generally expect to get his head bit off in return. More than just a few miners had chosen, over the years, to set their own broken bones rather than submit themselves to Doc's somewhat less than tender ministrations. For the more serious injuries and illnesses, when there was just no getting around the need for a qualified physician, one was sent for out of Braddock Town, a good twenty-miles to the North.

Cody stood just outside of Miss Molly's saloon, pacing twice up and down the raised wooden sidewalk, furiously debating whether or not he ought to simply bundle Dulcie up, kiss his claim goodbye and make the trip. Doc Johnson was a capable man, friendly, and almost certainly sober. But a lot could happen in the day's-length of time it would take him to reach the town. How sick was Dulcie? He just didn't know. Influenza, pneumonia, bronchitis: How willing was he to gamble with her health? Not very, which left him with very little choice.

Cody stepped through Miss Molly's saloon doors and took quick stock of what few patrons were sporadically scattered throughout the dark room. There were only a handful of men. Most were passed out or well on their way to getting there. Only one turned around to look at him. And none of them were Doc.

Taking the rickety steps two at a time, Cody darted up to the second floor. He threw open the door of the only room, nearly striking Molly in the arm as she dressed by the bed. Her started look eased quickly into a practiced sultry smile, despite yesterday's makeup which was smeared upon her unwashed face. Bracing one hand on her ample hip, she struck a pose. "Well now. That wife of yours driving you to me already? I told you she was trouble you didn't need. My offer still stands, if you're looking to get rid of her."

Ignoring her, Cody strode towards the bed and the bare foot he could see sticking out from under the long-unwashed and sour-smelling sheets.

"Doc?" He shook the leg and the blankets emitted a loud and long-drawn out belch. The fumes of it sent Cody reeling back a step. He clapped a hand over his nose. "God damn, Doc!"

The blankets didn't move again.

Bracing himself, Cody waded in through the smell, grabbed the leg again and this time pulled.

The blankets erupted into a belated flail as Cody dragged the drunken physician out of bed and dropped him dressed in only his long, red underwear on the floor.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Doc bellowed, sitting up blearily. "Can't you leave a man the hell alone!"

He reached up to grab the edge of the bed, but Cody caught his arm and heaved him onto his feet instead.

"Come on, Doc," he panted, trying to hold onto both his nose and the drunk man, who struggled just as determinedly to shrug Cody off. "This is an emergency!"

The doctor snorted and then belched again.

"Jesus, man!" Cody stepped back, holding Doc at arm's length. "What have you been eating?"

Miss Molly ducked past them to throw the window open and rapidly fanned the air with both hands. "Nothing more than usual," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"He ain't paying you enough."

"Don't I know it."

"Bah!" The old man shooed at them impatiently with both hands, and leaned down to crawl back into bed. "Just go away and leave me the hell alone."

"Dulcie's sick," Cody told him.

"So the hell what?" Doc snapped back. He pulled the blankets back up over his head. "I ain't a doctor anymore. She could be dying, and I could give a damn. Get the hell out!"

Cody stood for a moment, staring in shock and rapidly growing anger. His hands clenched into fists and then, grinding his teeth, he began to roll up his sleeves.

"Don't you hurt him!" Molly shouted as he grabbed Doc by the back of his long johns and hauled him back up off the sour mattress. "Cody, dammit, don't you hurt him! He ain't settled up his tab yet!"

"Get off me!" Tuttle bellowed, flailing his arms as he spun around to face the younger man.

Cody hit him anyway, his fist connecting with Doc's jaw and sending the grizzled drunk reeling backward out the door.

"Cody, god dammit!" Molly shouted, chasing after him as he stalked after the doctor. "He's a steady customer!"

Cody would have liked nothing more than to plant his booted foot in the drop-seat of Doc Tuttle's long reds and kick him all the way down the stairs, expect that halfway down the Doc lost his footing and fell the rest of the way to the barroom floor.

"God dammit!" the old man bellowed. He crawled onto hands and knees and staggered to get back on his feet, but Cody reached him before he was fully erect. The Doc took a drunken swing at him, but Cody only grabbed him by the scruff of his underwear and threw him roughly out the saloon doors.

After so many days of rain, Mudhole Mill was living up to its name. Doc toppled off the sidewalk and landed with a splat flat on his back in the street. Growling, he flailed at the rain and the mud until he managed to roll onto his hands and knees.

Cody jumped off the sidewalk, sinking up to his ankles in the ground, and slogged his way over to the Doc. He bent down and grabbed hold of the old man.

The Doc threw mud at him, bellowing, "Get yer hands off-a me! Ain't you got no respect for your elders? It's raining, cuss-it!"

"You can use the bath," Cody snarled, and hauled him upright.

"I ain't got no clothes on!"

"Tough!" Cody dragged him kicking and fighting down to the river's edge and, ignoring the Doc's bellows, flung him into the Yuba.

Doc Tuttle belly flopped into the water, and the current caught him, sweeping him several yards downstream before he resurfaced again in a flurry of flailing arms and sputtering curses. It took three tries before he managed to get his feet back under him enough to stand.

"What the hell are you trying to do?" he shouted. "Drown me?"

"Only until you sober up."

With water dripping from his hair, nose and chin, and growling under his breath, Doc started towards the shore. He stopped a few feet shy of dry land to glare at Cody balefully. "You gonna throw me back in here if I come out?"

"You going to take a look at my wife?" Cody returned.

"I ain't no damned doctor no more!"

"You're what I've got!"

The two men stared furiously at one another again. Then, swiping the water from his face, Doc Tuttle shook the drops from his hands. "Shit. All right! You win, dammit!" He waded ashore, growling and muttering under his breath. Grabbing the front of his long johns, he wrung them out in Cody's direction, barking out, "Mind if I get some dry clothes on first?"

"If they're clean!" Cody snapped, as the doctor stumbled past him. "You're not going in my tent smelling like that. My wife is sick enough already!"

"Bah!" Doc dismissed him with a brisk gesture and headed for his claim.

Shaking his head, Cody waved his hand in the air, trying to dissipate lingering traces of Doc's distinctive smell, but that only seemed to make it worse. On afterthought, he raised his fingers to his face and instantly curled his nose. "Oh lord! It's a wonder he didn't kill the fish!"

Walking down to the water's edge, he bent to wash his hands.

\* \* \* \*

"Pregnant," Doc Tuttle said, patting Dulcie's hand twice. "Congratulations. I'll drink a few in celebration for you."

Dulcie looked away from him. She rubbed her eyes, her fingers trembling slightly.

"Pregnant?" Cody echoed. "Are you sure?"

Doc snapped his grizzled head around and glared at Cody. "You dragged me here, askin' for my expert advice and now you say I don't know a pregnant woman with morning sickness when I see one?"

"I didn't say that," Cody snapped back.

"I ain't never been that drunk!" Doc Tuttle staggered a bit as he lurched self-righteously to his feet. "You wanted my prognosis, and that's it! She's pregnant!"

"All right, all right!"

"And lower your voice, ya black hearted idget!" the doctor bellowed at the top of his lungs. "This here woman needs rest!"

"All right!" Cody said, and the two men bristled at one another, their eyes flashing back and forth under cross and heavy brows.

Finally, Doc raised his hand to rub at his unshaven chin. He sniffed, licked his lips and asked, "Am I done here?"

"God, yes!"

Grunting, the old drunk shuffled towards the tent flap. "Have her eat a little something in the middle of the night. It'll help until the sickness goes away, in a couple of weeks or so."

Cody didn't bother to follow him outside. He just snapped the flap back down, condemning the insides to shadows, and turned around to light the Coleman.

"Pregnant," he said under his breath. "If that don't beat all."

Hearing a breathy snuffle, he looked down to find that, even with her eyes hidden and her face turned away, he could still see her quivering mouth and wobbly chin clearly enough. She was crying.

"Did you know?" he softly asked her.

Dulcie gave one nod of her head, whispering, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" He adjusted the height of the wick to brighten the tent. "What for? You didn't get that way on your own." It took him a moment filled with her silence to realize it was more likely that she was sorry because now she couldn't leave.

"Oh. I see." A bitter laugh tore past his lips. He turned on his heel and stalked outside into the rain.

Two steps from the tent's flap, he stopped. Breathing angrily, he braced his hands on his narrow hips and glared down at the river. His jaw clenched. She was sorry because she couldn't wait to be rid of him. Well, that was just fine with him. He didn't want a baby anyway. He didn't want her, either. Who needs women anyway? Nothing but trouble the lot of them!

In a fit of barely suppressed fury, he bent to grab up a handful of rocks and flung them as hard and as far as he could. The different sized pebbles scattered in the air and splashed down harmlessly halfway across the river.

He needed her.

He needed her, and he wanted her. And why should she want to stay with him when he hadn't given her much of a reason to.

Cody dropped down onto his haunches, picking up a newly uncovered rock that sparkled with a bit of color. He blinked as his eyes began to burn and sting, just as though he'd gotten something in them, and he rubbed at the aching lump that settled in his chest just at the thought of her leaving. It certainly hadn't taken her long, he thought, to turn him into a right old mess!

He shook his head at himself. No, he didn't want her to go at all, but a baby...

He'd never given much thought to having one of those. He guessed that much was irrelevant now, since in less than one year's time, thought of or not,

there was going to be a little--flesh of his flesh and blood--making its entrance into a world that wasn't always kind to children. The idea of one of his growing up without a father, unprotected, knotted in Cody's gut. He dropped the nugget of gold back in the hole where he'd found it and stood up.

Ducking under the flap, Cody walked back inside. He picked up the straight-backed chair and set it down again close to the bed. Sitting, he braced his elbows on his thighs and clasped his hands tight together, leaning over her.

"We need to talk," he said.

She had rolled all the way over to face the canvas. She didn't even twitch when he softly called her name. From the sounds of her breathing, he could tell she was still crying.

Cody took a deep breath. "Dulcie, honey. Do you hate me?"

He held his breath until she slowly shook her head, but she still didn't roll over.

"Do you," he hesitated, "...dislike me? I mean, you didn't seem to dislike me much last night."

Making an impatient sound in the back of her throat, Dulcie rolled onto her back and looked at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her cheeks were wet. "I don't dislike you," she said. "I don't know you well enough to."

It wasn't the most flattering of answers, but it wasn't the worst, either. Cody grunted. "Fair enough." He shifted in his chair. "Look, I was just thinking, Dulcie ... this isn't any place to try raising a baby. It isn't even any kind of place to have a wife. But if you don't, uh.... "he cleared his throat, clasping and unclasping his hands nervously. "If you don't think too poorly of me, what do you say about packing it in here? We could go North, find a proper town. One with a real sheriff, a grocery store--one that doesn't let women be auctioned off on the front steps--and a church. I'm not much of a religious man, but I'd sit in the pews with you once or twice, if it was important to you."

He rubbed his palms together, not yet daring to meet her eyes, afraid of the refusal he might see there. Instead, he said, "I haven't got a whole lot of gold left, but there might be enough to buy up enough land to make a nice spread of our own, with a house. A real one with windows and a door, and a real bed instead of just a mattress on the ground. I grew up farming. I know how it's done. Leastwise, I know about cattle and corn. But ... if you don't think too poorly of me," he nodded, "I was thinking maybe we could start over again. The right way, this time. The way men and wives are supposed to."

He held his breath when she didn't say something right away. And when he finally dared to look at her, she was smiling and crying both at the same time.

"I don't think too poorly of you," Dulcie said. "North sounds like a good place to go. We could build our own cabin, near a town maybe, but not right inside it, so we can have our privacy. I'd like to have a garden, and flowers around the house. I've always wanted flowers. And you can work the river, if that's what you want." She shook her head slowly. "I can't see you as a farmer."

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "No?"

"No."

He crawled out of the chair to lay down beside her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, he pulled her close. "I used to be a right fine farmer, I'll have you know. Hated every minute of it, but I wasn't that bad at the job."

"I wouldn't want you doing something you hated," Dulcie said. "You'd come to resent me for it, and that's no way to start a new life."

"All right." Cody nodded. "We're settled then. Tomorrow I'll see if I can't buy somebody's wagon. We'll pack up and go."

"What about today?" she asked, rolling in his embrace to face him. "Maybe we should work the river one last time. Every little bit couldn't hurt."

Cody shook his head. "No. Today, I want to get to know my wife."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

The burning behind Cody's eyes told him the time was probably somewhere between midnight and dawn when he sat up in bed. Rain and wind battered the tent, soaking through the treated canvas and dripped on him from above. The mattress felt wet beneath him and when he slid a foot off the side of the bed, his toes splashed into cold water.

In all his years by the river that had never happened before, and Cody bolted upright in bed.

"Dulcie, get up!" He tossed the blankets aside and stood up in ankle-deep water, fumbling to light the Coleman lantern.

Still lying in bed, Dulcie grunted sleepily and covered her eyes.

It was as he was reaching down to shake her awake that Cody heart the first low and ominous rumbling sound. The earth seemed to tremble beneath him.

Dulcie opened her eyes. Blinking sleepily, she lifted her head. "What was that?"

Staring straight ahead at the wet canvas walls of his tent, watching as it shook under the force of the pelting rain, every nerve and muscle in his lean body as tense as solid stone, Cody said, "Get up. We've got to go. Now. Right now."

The ground began to tremble beneath them as Dulcie threw back the blankets and stood up.

"What is it? An earthquake?"

"No!" Cody grabbed her arm and yanked her the rest of the way out of bed.

"Oh my God!" she gasped, stumbling when her feet splashed off the soggy mattress and landed ankle-deep in water.

"Move!" He jerked her towards the mouth of the tent.

"My clothes!"

But he shoved her outside without even pausing to grab their shoes.

"I've got no clothes on," she cried as the icy rain pelted her.

Cody stopped just outside the tent flap, but it wasn't so that she could get dressed.

The ground shook beneath her and the rumbling became a deafening roar. Dulcie turned around to look in the same direction he was staring.

"Shit," he said flatly, his curse barely audible over the thunderous sound of a rushing wall of water three men high.

She could barely see it coming in the dark, the black waves following the Yuba, bouncing off the sheer rock walls of the mountains to either side of the river, engulfing the evergreens and snapping the trunks in half. It swallowed up both miners and their camp sites with equal indifference, sparing nothing as it raced straight towards them.

There was no running away.

Cody's hand squeezed tight around her own an instant before the treacherous water struck them, sucking them under the waves and ripping them from one another's grasp.

\* \* \* \*

Dulcie came to lying under the roof of the General Store. There was no sign of the rest of the building, but, oddly enough, the roof seemed almost untouched. Flat on her back, caked in drying mud, she stared up through a hole in the shingle slats and listened to the normal, everyday sounds of birds singing and crows cawing. Rays of sunlight filtered in through the gaps, warming her face, her belly, her breasts. Why didn't she hurt more?

Because she hadn't yet tried to move. That absence of pain reverted itself the instant she tried to sit up. Then everything hurt, deep muscle-aching pangs that left her groaning as she rolled slowly onto her side. She briefly closed her eyes, panting until the worst of the pain gradually dulled.

"Hey."

Dulcie raised her head, peering through the shadows beneath the broken roof. She didn't know the miner who weakly beckoned to her with his one free arm. Poking up out of the mud at a crooked angle, the rest of him lay crushed into the earth under the weight of two thick trees. She could see part of a foot--his or someone else's--sticking up at an impossible angle over the top of a pile of twisted, broken branches, and there was blood around his mouth and in his salt and pepper beard.

"Look," he rasped hoarsely, and pointed. "Color."

Dulcie crawled up onto her knees in the mud and crept towards him. She felt in the mud until her fingers skimmed a hard lump. To her, in the dark under the roof and with the mud that coated everything, it looked like a rock, but she placed it in his hand anyway.

The miner brought it to his face, peering blearily at it. He worked his mouth a moment before his eyes crinkled at the corners and he smiled at her. "Ain't got no spit."

Dulcie took the rock back. Despite her dry mouth, she worked up the saliva to wet it and did her best to rub off the mud. Only the barest glimmer of gold



shone through. She handed it back to him.

"Thanks." He smiled as he looked at it. "Ain't nothing prettier in the whole wide world. 'Cept maybe you." He blinked at her, his smile turning lopsided. "Hey ... you ain't wearin' no clothes. Ain't that a sight."

Just exactly when he died, Dulcie didn't know. She'd never before watched as the life drained out of another person. But as his head sagged forward on his pinned shoulders, his eyes seemed to grow dull and after a while she realized he wasn't breathing any more.

Dulcie turned away and crawled slowly out from under the roof.

Nothing of Mudhole Mill remained but broken bits of lumber, jumbled piles of trees, scraps of tent and scattered articles from the daily lives of the two hundred men who'd lived here. She picked up a muddy blanket to wrap around herself, and crawled over the top of a log to make her way down to the swollen Yuba some twenty yards away.

The odd cluster of sticks she stepped over became an upturned hand, the lifeless fingers broken and bent and Dulcie felt her knees go weak. She sank down into the mud and tried to dig out the rest of the arm. She moved slowly feeling numb until she uncovered an unfamiliar tattoo on the forearm.

It wasn't Cody.

Dulcie stood up again. In the distance, down the washed away river bank, she could see three men upright and moving.

"Cody!" she called out.

Not a one of them turned around. Dulcie turned in a full circle, but nothing else was moving. Nothing human anyway. Now and then a branch on one of the few remaining trees or unflattened bush waved as the breeze swept over them, the calm after the storm.

She looked back down at the hand then bent over to pull a small sack out of the mud. From the weight of it, she could tell there wasn't much in the way of dust and pebbles inside.

But it would be enough to make a new start.

Without Cody.

The world teared before her, and she had to blink and swallow hard, turning in another full circle, looking away from the hand only to have her eyes land on a squashed hat and then a boot that was upside down in the mud. It was still attached to its owner's leg. Cody had been barefoot when he'd pulled her from the tent.

"Dulcie!"

Dulcie turned around, hoping her eyes were lying to her, but saw Cully waving at her from across the swollen river. She shaded her eyes from the sun as he cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed, "He's o'er here!"

He gestured down river.

Dulcie broke into a run.

"No!" Cully waved her back. "Don't you go jumping in the water, girl! Down there!" He waved her downstream. "Ya kin cross down there!"

She slipped in the mud as she tried to turn. She fumbled back to her feet, slipping several more times, before running along the soggy riverbank until she found a bridge of broken and fallen trees. Created by the flood, the makeshift dam was doing its precarious best to hold back the torrents of muddy water, which seeped through the cracks between the mangle of trunks and branches and flowed over the top of it all at the lowest points along the uneven length.

Dulcie paused only a moment before gathering her muddy hem around her legs and climbing up onto the dam. She crossed quickly, sparing less thought to what would happen if she fell into the rapid flood-waters and more to what she would find when finally she found Cody once more.

Halfway to the opposite bank, she lost her balance on the slippery wood and would have fallen into swollen Yuba, but for her skirts which caught on a splintered branch. Instead she landed on the uneven "bridge," bruising and scraping both her knees and hands. She carefully got to her feet and continued on to the other side, gasping as her aching knees protested each step. Her hands reached out to grasp at branches for balance and blood from the scraps in her palms made the already wet wood slippier.

As she came closer to the other shore, she sped up her steps as her eyes traveled back upstream to where Cully had been.

She took off running once more and could feel his name raising in her throat. "Cody," she gasped and felt the first twinge of pain in her side. When she was sure she was standing where she'd seen the old miner, she turned around. He was no longer there and couldn't see any sign of where he had gone. She swallowed back a sob and turned again in a full circle. Blinking away tears, she gazed from the river to the wilderness. On instinct she turned and headed towards the flatted and muddy ground that had been the town of Mudhole Mill.

"Cody," she called and pulled up short as she saw a bare foot sticking out from under a fallen tree. For a brief moment she thought he was dead. He was gone and she was on her own. A howl of pain started in her breast and she lurched forward. But it stopped before she could give it voice as she realized it wasn't him. Looking over the tree she stared down at an unfamiliar face. It wasn't him.

"Dulcie."

She whipped around and saw Cully waving at her several yards away. She ran toward him and he hobbled a few steps to one side. Before she could ask he pointed and she saw Cody. He was unconscious, one arm dangling at an odd angle over a mat of flattened evergreen branches. His face was smeared with blood and mud. Looking him over, she was surprised to see boots on his feet.

Dulcie knelt beside him and ran her fingers over his brow.

"We're gonna 'ave ta set that arm," Cully said gently.

She nodded. "Just tell me what to do."

"Hold him down, case he wakes up."

She pushed on his other shoulder with her knees while she held him just under the dislocation with her hands. Cully knelt down and grabbed Cody's elbow to rock it a few times back and forth. She could hear the bone grinding before he gave a wrench and there was a pop as the shoulder went back into place. Cody never winced. And he didn't wake up.

"His leg is broke, too," the old miner said. "That bruising there says he ain't comed outta this without at least one busted up rib."

Dulcie nodded, caressing Cody's face with both hands before bending down to press her forehead to his. At least he was alive. They both were. And really, what else was needed for a brand new start?

\* \* \* \*

Dulcie found her stepfather's wagon exactly where her family's killers had left it. One wheel was broken. Cully scavenged a new one out of the wreckage of the town and helped her fit it to the wagon. In exchange, Cody signed over all rights to his claim.

It took three days of scrounging before Dulcie found enough blankets, washed and dried them, and formed a bed of sorts in the back for Cody to lie on. She scavenged cans of beans from both sides of the Yuba. Nothing else was fit to eat.

The night before they were ready to go, Dulcie returned to Jenkins's broken store roof and gathered up every hard lump that she could find in the mud. Most were rocks, but some sparkled in that coveted color of gold when she washed them in the river and held them up to the sun. She wasn't greedy. She left one behind, clutched in the hand of the dead miner who'd found the washed up ore in the first place.

On the day they left Mudhole Mill behind, as Dulcie was stepping up into the driver's seat, from the back of the wagon, Cody said, "I'm sorry, Dulcie."

She looked back at him, lying in the bed with both legs and his ribs bandaged as best as she'd known how. "For what?"

"I was kind of looking forward to building you a cabin."

"You will," she said.

"With what?" he laughed drily, holding his ribs and wincing. "Our stash is gone. Even if I am walking again before winter, we've got no money."

"Reach under the mattress by your head," Dulcie told him.

A corner of his mouth went up. "I hurt too much to reach anywhere. Why don't you tell me what's there?"

She cast a knowing smile back over one shoulder. "Let's just say, I've paid you back. With interest."

His half-hearted smile vanished. Hurt or not, he reached up over his head to feel beneath the make-shift bed. He pulled out the first small pouch he touched and felt the weight of it in his hand. "All that damn water uncovered a vein," he said incredulously. "How much do you have?"

"Enough to ensure our nice, new start begins in comfort." She clicked to the horses, lightly slapping down the reins to get them moving. She smiled back at him, a coy look coming over her. "And enough to ensure that things work just a little bit differently this time around."

Cody winced as the wagon lurched and began to roll over uneven ground. "What does that mean?"

"It means since I found the gold and since one of us has two broken legs, I guess that puts me in charge for a while."

Cody laughed again, even more drily than before, and put the bad down. He folded his hands gently over his ribs. "Is that a fact?"

"Absolutely. First store we come to, I'm going to buy myself two nice dresses, ready made, and I don't ever plan to sew another dress again."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Cody said.

"No, it doesn't," she agreed. "I also think, since the fall's almost gone, we should rent a house over the winter. A nice house, with curtains in the windows, a table to eat our suppers on--no more beans--and a bed. A real bed. One with a fancy headboard."

"And don't forget the footboard," Cody added. "I'm going to need a place to bend you over when you start getting too big for those fancy new underbritches you'll likely be wanting to buy."

"And that's another thing," Dulcie said. "Now that I'm the boss, I've decided that there won't be any more spankings."

Closing his eyes, Cody only smiled. "If I were you, darlin', I wouldn't go holding my breath."

"You're wounded," she pointed out. "There's not a whole lot you can do about it, if I say no."

Dulcie lifted her chin, taking a deep breath of air and smiling fairly smugly. Right up until she felt his hand catching the back of her skirts. With a shrill shriek, Dulcie was pulled over backwards into the back of the wagon. She hit the mattress beside him, and he switched his grasp from her clothes to her wrist.

Without her to drive them, the horses stopped walking and everything became very quiet as Dulcie and Cody stared at one another. Although his mouth was still smiling ever so slightly, there was a hard glitter in the depths of his blue eyes.

"Have you ever tangled with a wounded bear?" he asked pointedly. Growled, really.

Between the look on his face and the sound of his voice, every ounce of self-preservation came to life inside her. Dulcie shook her head, swallowing a nervous giggle. "No."

"Do you want to?"

She bit her bottom lip and shook her head again. "Not really."

He let go of her wrist and reached up to catch the back of her nape instead, drawing her head down to his. "Kiss me, Dulcie."

That was one edict of his that she really didn't mind obeying.

THE END

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