

## Chapter One

*1885 Texas*

Sheriff Oliver Herring was unhappy when a horse came barreling down the street, causing several people to jump out of the way or be run down. He decided that he was going to give the kid a stern talking to, and if the boy didn't show some remorse in a respectful tone of voice, Oliver just might give the kid a tanning he would recall when he sat his saddle for the next several days. He didn't put up with rowdy behavior in his town of Waterson, and he never would. With determination, he walked down the sidewalk in long strides. The man was big, and most folks respected his size alone, if not the badge he had worn for the last twenty-eight years.

"Son, what the hell are you thinkin' by ridin' like that and scarin' the crap out of folks?" he asked, his deep voice full of disapproval.

"Just who do you think you are speaking to in that rude tone of voice, and using that kind of language?"

A soft, melodious voice assaulted Oliver's senses, and he suddenly realized that he had made a huge mistake. "Beg pardon, miss. I thought you some young cowhand who needed a talking to. Do you have trouble of some kind?"

"Yes, I have trouble, and I will deal with it myself, Sheriff, if you would be so kind as to mind your own business." She gave him her back and marched toward the saloon.

"Now see here, lady," he sputtered in shock as he moved to block her way. "This here is no place for a lady. It's a saloon, and a who— house of ill repute. You can't go in there."

"Sheriff," she said quietly. "I expect you to stand aside. I do not tolerate fools lightly, and I am going inside the saloon, and there is nothing you can say or do to stop me!" Valerie Masters drew herself up to her slightly less than five feet of height, and then she poked him in the chest with one fingernail. She had no idea that her tight jeans made her look like a young girl, and she wouldn't have given a damn if she did know. "Are you going to move, big man?" she asked in an antagonistic tone of voice.

"What I am thinking of doing, little lady, you wouldn't like. I suggest you make up your mind that this saloon is off limits to you, and move along. If I can't help you with your problem, then best that you head on home. Your pa would probably be happy to help you."

"You are too funny, Sheriff. Now move aside." Her voice was firm, and bespoke confidence.

"You have pushed me as far as I will be pushed. Now you move along or I am going to show you what happens to little girls who ride into this town full of sass." Oliver wasn't joking. He was two seconds from putting the girl over the hitching rail and dusting her britches with the palm of his hand.

Valerie was suddenly furious. How dare the big oaf call her a little girl? For God's sake, at forty-three years of age, she was certainly not a little girl! She was a widow! Valerie was strong for a woman of her size, and she gave the sheriff a hard shove, intending to knock him on his butt and walk past him. Instead, the man did not budge, not even one inch. His blue eyes were furious as he glared down at her, and in the next second, he picked her up and plopped her

over the hitching rail where she'd tied Soldier. "You let me go, you big baboon!" Her answer was a spank on the seat of her dusty britches. "How dare you!" she fumed. "I will shoot you dead for this!" she promised, and Valerie Masters always kept her promises. Suddenly, his hands were underneath her, and within seconds, he had stripped her of her gun belt and pistol.

"Now I can do a proper job of this, little girl."

"I am *not* a little girl!" she screeched as he started peppering her behind with spanks that hurt and left her poor bottom stinging like crazy. An audience was gathering, and Valerie was growing angrier by the minute. How dare he treat her in this manner!

"You are not going in that saloon, little girl. Do you hear me?"

"I am not deaf, you big bully. Let me go, or I swear I will make you regret it if it is the very last thing I do!" Soldier was getting upset, and Valerie managed to reach over and untie him. "Go boy!" she ordered, and Soldier did as he was taught. He came lunging toward the sheriff and pushed him away from Valerie. While Soldier held the man at bay, she grabbed her gun, and went storming into the saloon, looking for Blade McCall. "Where is McCall?" she demanded.

"He saw you and flew out the back. Claimed you wanted marriage, but he was just helping out a widow relieve her frustration," the bartender said with a snicker and an obscene grin, until she shot the mirror behind him and sent a shower of glass all over him, nicking him in places.

"McCall stole from me, and I want his ass in jail. If he comes back here, you'd best tell him to turn himself in before I catch him. I'm offering a five hundred dollar reward for him *ALIVE*. Dead will get you nothing at all." She tossed a gold coin at the bartender. "Buy yourself a new mirror, and never, but never, speak to a widow like that." She turned to leave, and the infuriating sheriff was standing there. "It is all your fault that McCall got away, Sheriff. Now get out of my way so I can track the bastard."

"You aren't going anywhere but to jail," Oliver said, and his blue eyes reflected his anger. He no more believed the girl was a widow than he was the man with green cheese on the moon!

"You have already let a thief get away, and now you want to compound your foolishness by arresting me? You can go straight to hell, Sheriff." She tried to walk past him, but the big man was too quick. He grabbed the gun from her hand, and then he bent and scooped her over his broad shoulder. "Put me down!" she yelled, using her fists to pummel his back.

Oliver reached up and smacked her butt with strength in the blow. She gasped in outrage and pain, and then she hit him even harder, using both fists. Oliver started spanking her fanny in earnest then, and by the time they reached the jail, Valerie was crying in pain. He dumped her on the cot in a cell, and then slammed the door shut and locked it.

"I will make you wish you had never been born, Sheriff!" The green eyes were full of fire as she gave him a look of pure contempt.

"I have heard that one too many times to count. Tell me who to send a wire to so they can come and get you," he demanded, determined that he was sending her home with a male family member, father or brother or uncle. It made him no never mind, but the foolish little girl was going to get herself killed, or worse, if he left her on her own.

"Fine. Take your pick. My first son is as big as you are, and he wouldn't raise a violent hand to a woman, but he won't mind tearing *you* apart, limb by limb! My second son is an attorney, and he will have your badge for manhandling me. My third son isn't so polite; he will simply gun you down in the street when you least expect it."

“You expect me to believe that you have three grown sons, little girl?” he scoffed. “Maybe a pa and a couple of brothers, but they can’t be much if they let you run all over the countryside by yourself.”

“My father is deceased now. He was a colonel at the beginning of the Civil War and finished as a general; perhaps you have heard of General Abraham Norton? If he were still living, he would run you through with his sword!”

“I served under him,” Oliver replied, glaring at her.

“So did my deceased husband,” she said, getting up off the cot to rub her smarting rear.

“I am about to paddle you soundly, little girl; husband, father, brother, or uncle?”

“I have none of the above. I have four sons, but the youngest is only twelve years old, and much too young to ride anywhere alone.”

“Fine. I am going out for some dinner. Maybe you can tell me the truth when I come back.” If he didn’t get away from the brat he was going to punish her in anger, and with his strength, he could seriously hurt her if he unleashed his temper on her butt.

“Where is Soldier?” she suddenly demanded.

“Stabled. You’re damn lucky I didn’t shoot the beast.” He slammed the door to the jail and then stomped down the street to Grandma’s Kitchen. He sat there for five minutes, and Marjory still didn’t come to wait on him. “Marjory, I don’t have all day.” He usually received good service, but the young woman was purposely snubbing him, and it hurt his feelings.

She finally walked over and slapped a glass of water on the table, sloshing it all over. “What do you want?” she asked, her brown eyes snapping with temper as she glared at him.

“Marjory, what did I do to make you act like this?” he asked, his blue eyes full of concern.

“I can’t believe you honestly don’t know!” Marjory was not being coy. Her face reflected her disbelief.

“Honey, I honestly don’t know. Please tell me.”

“You humiliated Mrs. Masters, and her a widow!”

“What? That little girl?” He was stunned.

“She isn’t a little girl! She’s tiny, but she has to be at least forty years old, Oliver! I used to live in Kell County, and she and my ma were friends. I can’t believe you spanked her like that!”

“Marjory, I thought her a young girl. I truly did. I was tryin’ to keep her out of harm’s way in the saloon,” he explained.

“That is pure crazy. Val Masters can out draw and out shoot nearly everyone. She taught her boys to shoot. She also can use a knife, and a whip. I saw her beat the daylights out of a man for punching his wife in the jaw one day in the mercantile. She threw him out into the street, picked up a whip, and laid into him until he was blubbering like a baby.”

“How long has she been a widow?” he asked, wondering why her husband permitted that behavior.

“Well, see, Clem was thrown from a horse he was trying to break. Mrs. Val was pregnant then. I reckon it’s been a good thirteen years by now. She took on running the ranch until the eldest son grew up. He loves the ranch. The second boy went to law school, and the third is a U.S. Marshal. They are going to hurt you real bad if you don’t apologize to Mrs. Val and let her out of jail.”

“I need to think on this, Marjory. I truly thought that she was a kid.” He shook his head and then said, “Fix up two specials with two pieces of pie and two glasses of milk, and put it on a tray, honey.”

“That’s a start,” Marjory told him. “I knew there had to be an explanation for why you were so mean to a widow.” She hurried away then, and Oliver waited impatiently for her to get the food.

When he finally returned to the jail, he was shocked to see the cell door was wide open, and there was no sign of Valerie Masters anywhere. He left the food on his desk, and took off running for the stables. “Did Valerie Masters get her horse and ride out?” he demanded of Dan Miller.

“She shore did. I done thought you locked her up, but she smiled and said that you’d changed your mind, Ollie. She done paid me and saddled that stallion and rode out. She was wearin’ her gun belt tied down, and said she had a criminal to catch.”

“Damn! Get my horse ready, Dan. I’ve got to go after her before she gets herself killed.”

“I dunno about that, Sheriff. She handles her gun like a professional killer.”

“She’s a tiny woman, Dan. Get my horse ready while I inform Adam that I am leaving town.” Adam Smith was his deputy, and would have to take over the protection of the town in Oliver’s absence. When he caught up to that woman, he was going to give her a spankin’ that she wouldn’t forget in a hurry. If he’d done it before locking her up, she wouldn’t be able to sit her saddle right now, and it would have saved him a ton of trouble.

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“Was there any news of Ma?” Case asked his brother, who was dismounting by the barn.

“Not a word,” Kane answered. “Nothing from Nate, either. Where is Seth?”

“In the house sulking. I caught him shooting at Ma’s chickens with his slingshot.”

“Did you set his britches on fire?” Kane asked with a grin.

“Worse. I made him take the chickens he killed, and pluck them and clean out the innards and take them inside to Nora and tell her that he was hungry for fried chicken tonight.”

“Lordy! How many did he kill?”

“Four. Then I sat him down at the table with paper and a pencil to write Ma a detailed explanation of what he did and why he did it. He is having a difficult time coming up with something that won’t earn him a tanning when Ma gets home.”

“Poor kid.”

“Poor kid, hell. If we did that, Ma would have blistered us raw. I felt that it was better to leave the tanning to her.”

“Yep.”

“You know you’ll defend him, brother. You won’t be able to resist.”

“It is what I do for a living.”

“Not right now, you don’t. Go change out of your dude clothes. I need some help with the corral. You are elected.”

“I have a brief to prepare.”

“Too bad. You can do it after the corral is fixed. I really need your help, bro. With Drury down sick, and Pledge gone home for a visit, I am shorthanded and I need you.”

“Where the hell is Nate?”

“Chasing after Ma. Please, Kane. Give me a hand so we can eat supper early. I have plans for tonight.”

“Seeing Rachel?” Kane asked with a grin.

“I plan to. We need to have a talk and settle a few things between us.”

“Uh oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

“Go and change out of that suit, and meet me by the corral. It won’t take long, but I need a hand.”

“Did you think of asking the kid? Seems to me that he would be big enough to give you a hand. We were doing lots of stuff at his age.”

“We had no choice if Ma was going to make this ranch work.” He paused to consider, and then nodded. “Send him out to me. Tell him I’m waiting for him in the barn,” Case said with a snicker, “and see how many excuses he makes to not come out here.”

Kane chuckled and went inside. He found Seth sitting at the kitchen table, a miserable expression on his face. “I heard you are in disgrace, kid. How is the letter to Ma coming along?”

“She is going to kill me,” Seth muttered darkly.

“Shooting chickens for fun is wrong, young man!” Nora scolded, and Kane was pretty sure it wasn’t the first time.

“Yes, ma’am,” Seth said, his cheeks red.

“Kid, Case wants you out in the barn right now. You’d better get going.”

“Aw! He said he wasn’t going to tan me, but I would rather he did than to make me write to Ma and tell her,” Seth explained.

“Get on out there and tell him how you feel. If I’d caught you, you wouldn’t sit for a week.”

Seth got up and headed out of the house, stopping only to grab his hat from the peg by the door.

“Case isn’t going to spank him, is he?” Nora asked with a frown.

“Nope. He’s putting him to work.” Kane picked up the letter, and was surprised as he read it. Seth had taken the time to think things through, and the letter was pretty darn good. He told their ma that he was sorry, and felt sick inside for doing something so awful. Kane picked it up to save to give to their ma to show her that Seth was truly sorry, and had learned his lesson.

“He is upset and feeling guilty. It would be more merciful to give him a few smacks on the backside, and send him to bed early a couple of nights,” Nora suggested, voicing her opinion.

“It’s between Case and Seth, and I think it best to stay out of it, Nora. A spanking would soon be over, and Seth needs to think about this for a while. Ma may take a switch to him, but by then, he will have given the matter some serious thought. Case loves Seth, and if he decides to tan him, he’ll probably use a strap, and won’t go as easy on him as Ma would. Besides, the poor kid will still have to tell Ma, and he could get another tanning,” Kane reasoned the entire situation, arguing both sides clearly.

“I can sure tell you’re a lawyer,” Nora muttered, and then patted him on the back. “Would you like a snack before you hole up in the study to work?”

“Yes, ma’am, especially if you baked sugar cookies.”

“How did you know that?”

“I can smell the vanilla, and the rest was pure hope on my part,” he admitted, grinning. “May I have coffee instead of milk?” Kane asked politely. Sometimes he had to remind Nora that he wasn’t Seth’s age. It wasn’t just him, either. Case and Nate were also treated like small boys by their grandmotherly housekeeper. She came to work on the Circle Bar M when their pa died. Ma said it was easier to find a housekeeper who could cook rather than hire someone to run the ranch and who could possibly cheat them. They all loved Nora.

## Chapter Two

Valerie Masters hoped that the stupid sheriff stayed in town and didn't come after her. He was about as smart as a turnip, and she hoped never to see him again. She was so lost in her unflattering thoughts about the man who dared to spank her that she wasn't prepared for a rope to drop over her, suddenly tighten, and jerk her from Soldier's back! She hit the ground hard, and the world went black.

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"How is the letter coming along, kid?" Case asked when his youngest brother walked into the barn looking for him.

"It's hard to write," Seth answered. "It seemed like a fun thing at the time, and now I feel sick inside. What made me do something like that, Case?" he asked, his voice filled with emotion. "Am I going to be a killer when I am your age?"

"I sure as hell hope not, Seth," Case answered with feeling. "I guarantee Ma isn't going to let something like that happen, and you've got three big brothers who will do our best to knock some sense into you before we let you go off to be an outlaw."

"You promise?" Seth looked up at him, and his green eyes were blazing.

"I promise." Case offered the boy his hand, and Seth shook with him. "This is not just a promise, kid. This is a brother's promise, the kind that won't be broken for any reason at all. I won't give up on you, ever."

"You don't hate me now?" Seth needed the answer.

"I couldn't hate you for any reason, Seth. We are brothers. I don't like what you did, but I damn sure love you. That is why I am bein' so hard on you right now. You earned a serious lesson."

"I would rather you tanned me right now."

"That is because you are feeling guilty as sin, and do you know what that means?" Case asked seriously. Seth shook his head no. "That means that you aren't a killer. A true killer wouldn't feel the remorse that you do." His words snapped the last barrier that was keeping a hold on Seth's emotions. The youngster started crying, and Case wrapped his arms around him, pulled him close and held him while he cried. Seth never saw the tears on his brother's cheeks, and he didn't know that Case hurt for him. Seth had learned a painful lesson about killing for sport, and Case knew that it would never happen again.

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Valerie's head hurt, and her body was jarred. She recalled falling from Soldier's back, and then she recalled the rope that pulled her off and to the ground. Valerie tried to open her eyes, and was startled to see that it was already growing dark.

"It's about time you woke up, Val." It was Blade McCall and he was looking at her warily. "Look, lady, you have got to stop chasing me over the countryside. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you don't back down. I have never hurt a woman, but I am going to make an exception for you if you keep trailing me."

"You stole from me, McCall; six hundred and forty-two dollars and sixty-eight cents, to be exact. I want my money back. No one steals from Val Masters."

“You don’t understand,” he said. “I needed the money. I had no choice, and I knew I wouldn’t be hurting you or the ranch. You can afford the loss.”

“I won’t lose the ranch over that piddling amount, no, but if I let you get away with stealing from me, two or three more will try, and I am not going to let that happen, You owe me, McCall.”

“Damn it, woman! Listen to me. Do you honestly think I would have taken from you if I had a choice?”

“You had a choice and you made the wrong one.” Her voice was cold.

“You just don’t understand.” He stood up, took out his gun and pointed it at her, but his hand was shaking, and she continued to glare at him. Anyone watching wouldn’t have known that she was scared to death of dying and not being there to raise her youngest son. Seth still needed her, even though she knew that her adult sons would take good care of him, he still needed his mother. She prayed, and suddenly McCall holstered his gun, tears shining in his eyes. “I just can’t shoot you; you have been good to me, Val. Please don’t follow me. I promise that I will send the money to you as soon as I can. You have my word. In the meantime, I am sorry. Someone will come along and untie you soon. Please, Val, don’t make me hurt you; don’t follow me.”

She said nothing, but there was no way in hell she was going to let the matter drop! Val Masters would go after McCall and put him behind bars, where he belonged, She tried to wiggle free of the rope holding her hogtied, but the knots were tight, just like she’d taught him when she hired him four years ago. He had earned her trust and then betrayed her; Val wasn’t about to forgive that. She wouldn’t be made a fool of. The longer she lay there on the hard ground, the angrier she became. The approaching horse and rider did nothing to improve her mood. McCall had left her defenseless, and she would kill him for that!

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It was hard tracking at night, but Oliver had done it before, and the full moon was giving him ample light, He finally spotted a horse ahead. He pulled his gun and approached slowly. He recognized Soldier, but didn’t see his owner. He dismounted and checked the animal for any sign of blood or injury, and there wasn’t any. The animal was agitated, however, and kept nudging Oliver gently. Oliver knew the horse was well trained, and he asked, “Where is she, Soldier? Help me find your owner. Where is Valerie?” The animal reared slightly and led him through the brush and straight to where Valerie lay on the ground, a good distance by foot away from the road. Oliver could see that someone had tied her, and he feared what else they might have done to her.

“Let me get you out of this, Valerie,” he said softly as he knelt on the ground beside her and took out his knife to cut the ropes, careful not to let the blade slip and hurt her. “Do you know who did this?” he asked in a grim tone of voice.

“Of course I do. It was Blade McCall, and I am going to flay the hide off his carcass when I catch up to him. This is all your fault, Sheriff!” she angrily accused. “If you wouldn’t have been so dunderheaded about my going into the saloon, McCall wouldn’t have escaped!” she insisted.

“Listen, lady, I left you locked in jail, where you were perfectly safe. How in hell did you escape?” he demanded.

“I am not going to tell you anything.” The circulation started returning to her arms and legs, and it hurt. It hurt really badly! Val bit her lower lip, trying not to cry, but she was only

human, and she couldn't help it. The pain was extreme, and all she could do was suffer through it. She automatically leaned toward the big sheriff, needing human contact.

"Let me help you, honey," Oliver said, rubbing her legs and arms and trying to ease the pain he knew that she was feeling. He had been left tied like that a time or two and it hurt when the circulation came back. "It's all right to cry; in fact, it helps. Try to relax your muscles and don't fight the pain. Breathe deep, in and out. Let the pain happen and it will be done that much sooner." He pulled her into his arms and simply let her cry until finally the pain was over, but she still continued to cry. The fear that she had felt at being helpless was very real, and she simply needed a good cry. This was the side of Val Masters that she didn't share with anyone. Oliver continued to hold her, patting her back, and whispering that it was all right to cry, and that she would be fine. "Let it all out, honey. I'm right here and I won't leave you like this."

Finally, Van managed to pull herself together. She felt a bit foolish, but the real problem was that she felt shaky when she moved. Oliver got to his feet, then helped her to stand and steadied her while she found her footing again. She had been tied for quite a while.

"I am fine now, Sheriff," Val whispered. "Thank you for helping me." She hated to say the words, but he had earned them and she was an honest person. "Thank you for being so kind to me; I am grateful. How did you find me? I thought that it would be morning before someone came along."

"Soldier led me to you. He's a fine animal."

"I raised him from a colt and I trained him, but he is smart and I didn't teach him to think," she said with a smile. "I swear he can read my mind. Good boy, Soldier. You did a good job. Thank you, Soldier." She praised the stallion, walking over to pet him and speak to him directly. He understood, and nodded, and then rubbed his head against her, nuzzling her with his soft muzzle. She took a sugar cube from her pocket and gave it to him, and actually kissed him.

Oliver was amazed at the way that Soldier responded to Valerie, and if it wouldn't have sounded crazy, he would have sworn that he could see the love for Valerie in the horse's eyes. It was probably just the moonlight, he decided. He gentled his voice to ask, "Did this McCall force himself on you, Valerie? If he did, you can tell me and I will get you back to town and have Doc treat you."

She heard something in his voice that surprised her. It was a repressed anger, and perhaps fear for her. The big man did not like rapists, and she would stake her life on that. "No, Sheriff. McCall isn't a rapist. He wanted to kill me, but he didn't have the heart for pulling the trigger. He warned me to give it up and left me tied so that I couldn't come after him. He was sure that he would have until morning to get away, but now I can be after him and I will find him and personally take him to jail."

"Why are you after him? What did he do, and why isn't the law chasing him?"

"It is personal to me, Sheriff. I am the one he wronged. Believe me, son number three has offered to handle this, and he would prefer that I stay home and let him deal with McCall, but it was me who hired McCall, me who taught him to be a good ranch hand, me who trusted him and gave him more responsibility, and it was me that he robbed. I am the one who is going to arrest him and haul his ass to jail and I want to close the door on his cell and lock him in. I want him to know that no one steals from Val Masters and gets away with it." Val wasn't used to explaining herself, but this man had gone out of his way to help her, and she considered him a friend now.

"I wish that you would have told me this in town, Val. I would have helped you." Oliver felt ashamed of himself. "I owe you a big apology for treating you so badly. I got my dander up when I thought that you were a reckless kid, endangering people by riding into town the way you



did. And, forgive me for saying this, you have the body of a young girl. I thought you were lying to me and sassing me. I wouldn't let a hotheaded little girl go into a saloon, of all places. It wouldn't be safe, and learning that too late isn't my way of protecting people. You just don't look old enough to have grown sons. Marjory Pritchard at Grandma's Kitchen gave me hell for treating you the way that I did. She said that you are a friend of her ma."

"Yes, of course. Marjory is Anna Pritchard's eldest daughter!" Val acknowledged the relationship.

"I came back to the jail with food for us, intending to face the music and apologize to you, but you were gone. I am not going to lie to you, I feel like spanking you soundly for breaking out of my jail and riding out after McCall. He could have hurt you badly, Val, and that would give me no pleasure at all."

"Let me get this straight, you apologize to me in one breath, and then want to spank me again in the next, and it's because you *really* don't want me hurt? I don't know how to take you, Sheriff!"

"My name is Oliver, and the most important thing is that you know I really don't want to see you hurt. If you would please come back to town with me, I will get a posse together and go after McCall. I will bring him back, and you can put him in the cell and close the door," he magnanimously offered.

"Oliver, I think it is your size that makes you a dunderheaded fool. I want to go after McCall myself. I am not your typical female who stands aside and lets the man do the job. I stick up for myself."

"It's obvious that you haven't had anyone looking after you for a long while, but now you have met me, and I am not going to allow you to get in over your head and get yourself killed. I could take you back and put you in jail for breaking out, but it wouldn't be fair since you didn't do anything except rile me. I left my deputy in charge of the town, and he'll do a good job. I am comin' with you, Valerie. Someone has to keep you safe from harm, and I reckon the job falls to me."

"You don't need to be my nursemaid, Oliver!"

She used his name for the first time and he loved how it sounded on her sweet lips. The woman was purely beautiful, and the one or two gray hairs he saw mixed in with the red only made her more beautiful. "I'm no nursemaid, honey. I'm a man who knows how to look after a woman. I'll see you safe while we track McCall. We'll spend the night here; we both need food and sleep, and then we will head out before sun up in the morning. We'll get him tomorrow, but what we won't do is sneak up on him in the dark. He could start shooting wildly, and we don't want that. Do you have anything to eat in your saddle bags?" he asked hopefully.

"Not much," she admitted. "I would have taken the time to shop before I left town, but I knew I only had so much time before you returned, and I didn't want to risk another dustup with you. My rear hurts, buster!" she admitted with a dirty look for him.

"Good," was his succinct reply. "I don't have much food, either. A can or two of beans, prob'ly, but that will fill our bellies."

"I have some peaches, so we'll feast," she said. "I have had worse."

"So have I," he admitted. "We'll stop in Waverly and get supplies. I know McCall won't be there, but he might have stopped in the general store to get supplies, or a bottle of whiskey. We'll figure out which way he's headed pretty easy." By the time he stopped talking he had a small fire going, and the open cans of beans were heating on the coals. He had coffee, too, and fortunately there was a small stream a short walk from their camp.

Val was tempted to ride out while he was getting the water, but he would just come after her, and given his mood, her poor butt would regret being so impulsive. She decided to stay put and eat and rest for the night. The longer McCall spent looking over his shoulder the jumpier he was going to get, and what Oliver had to say about sneaking up on him in the dark made sense.

Oliver wondered if Val would try to make a run for it while he was getting water, and he knew it would be the final straw if she did. He really would set her cute little tail on fire. He was pleased when he returned to find her stirring the cans of beans so that the bottom beans wouldn't burn. "Thanks for watching the food, Val," he said pleasantly.

"I'm hungry, too, Oliver. These are almost hot enough to eat, but I like my food really hot, so a few more minutes?" she asked.

"Sure. I like my food hot, too. Do you cook much, Val?"

"Some, but I hired Nora to come and live with us and cook and clean after my husband was killed. Someone had to run the ranch, and I wasn't going to give someone I didn't know control over the ranch. I didn't have much besides the land and the cattle, and I needed to support my sons. I ran the ranch, and Nora ran the house. I was still there for my boys, and the older ones worked really hard in order to help me keep the ranch. Case, my oldest son, runs the ranch now, for the most part. I advise, but he does the day-to-day management. He loves the ranch and the land the way his father did."

"What about your other sons? Won't they be jealous?" Oliver asked.

"No, I don't believe so. Kane has never liked ranching, and even when Case asks him for a hand, he always has a brief to prepare, or a new client to meet. He is an attorney. My other adult son is a U.S. Marshal. Nate does not wish to be a rancher. He said that he might settle into one town sometime down the line, maybe when our local sheriff retires, so that he can be close to family. But he does not like ranching. He will give Case a hand now and then, however. Seth is my baby, but my baby is now twelve years old, and smart as a whip. I am not sure what he will choose to do when he is older. He may want to take his place with Case." She was smiling as she discussed her sons and Oliver could see that she loved them very much. "What about you, Oliver? Do you have children? A wife?" she asked curiously.

"No, Val, I'm not so fortunate. I came close to getting married once." His mind went hurtling back in time. He was on a summer picnic with Janie, she was smiling at him, and he was lost in her eyes when a shot rang out, hitting him, and knocking him unconscious. The Bentons thought that he was dead, and they used Janie, and then shot her between the eyes. It was in retaliation for him bringing in their youngest brother, Horace. Help came, and when Oliver was well, he went after them. He didn't often allow himself to remember those days. It hurt too much, and he wasn't really sure what God was going to have to say to him on the other side.

"Oliver. Oliver?" Valerie said again, worried about the sudden look of pain on his face. "Are you all right?"

## Chapter Three

Remembering hurt like hell sometimes. Oliver shook his head to clear it. "It was a long time ago, Val. I don't talk about it much. We'd better turn in and get some sleep if we want to be after McCall in the morning." He got to his feet and asked, "Which side of the fire do you want?"

She answered, and then set up her own bedroll. It was a relief to lie on her side and not sit on her behind. Val was very sore, and she couldn't help but think about the last time that she was spanked, a very long time ago.

*"You deserter!" Val screamed at the man, recognizing him as one of her father's men. In fact, she had danced with him just a few weeks ago at the ball the colonel, her father had held in her honor when she'd returned from attending finishing school. She remembered because she had felt so attracted to the lieutenant, and was constantly nagging her father to give the lieutenant duties closer to the fort. One day her father was quite irritable with her scolds and said that the lieutenant had disappeared without his express permission. In the wisdom of her seventeen years, Val decided that the man was a deserter. When the stagecoach she was traveling on was held up, Val easily recognized him, and she was furious with him for ruining her romantic plans to marry him!*

*"Be quiet!" Clem hissed at her, but that did nothing but inflame her quick temper and instead of stepping from the coach as she had been ordered to do, she literally threw herself at Clem and started punching him as hard as she could. Clem subdued her, but she had drawn the attention of their leader by that time and he was full of questions.*

*"Who ess this woman, eh?" he demanded of Clem in his accented English.*

*"The spoiled daughter of my former employer," Clem answered, and then added, "He fired me when he caught me flirting with this little girl."*

*"I am not a little girl!" Val screamed at him.*

*"She is yours, mi amigo. You will tame her, no?"*

*"With pleasure," Clem answered, pinning Val against him. Under his breath, he whispered in her ear, "Shut your mouth, Val. I am undercover, and you are going to get us both killed if you don't settle down." His answer came in the form of a bite she aimed for his arm! It was the final straw for the normally patient man. He flipped her through the air to land face down on the saddle in front of him, and then he started spanking her, over her traveling skirt. It was heavy enough, and the petticoat and drawers she wore underneath also provided padding, but she could feel each and every spank through the fabric. Three more times he spanked her, and then asked, "Will you settle now or must I bare you and finish this lesson here and now?"*

*"I'll settle," she'd quickly answered, tears filling her green eyes. They left the other passengers behind, after robbing them, of course, and they took the chest containing the army's payroll! Val found herself riding double with Clem, up into the hills and on and on until they reached an armed compound.*

*He then put her in his small cabin with orders to stay put. The minute he left the cabin, Val tried to escape, and luckily he found her before any of the others did. Clem took her back to the cabin, barred the windows and door, and then he advanced on her until her legs backed up*

against a small bed built against two of the walls. "You have yourself to thank for this lesson, Val."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that every last man in this camp is waiting to see if I am man enough to deal with you as you deserve. If they think that I am being kind to you, they could very well break down the door and volunteer to teach you a lesson themselves. You can go ahead and scream, because I guarantee that I am going to make you wish that you had controlled your temper!" He reached for her, and Val put up a fight.

"Don't you dare touch me, you liar! You traitor!" Val yelled at him, her nails tearing the skin on his hands as he did indeed touch her. "Stop this at once! My father will have your hide! He'll shoot you down for the traitor that you are!"

Clem wrestled the tiny spitfire across his lap, and he flipped up her skirts, and then tore her drawers from her backside, baring her to his gaze. "Damned if you don't deserve every last spank you are going to get, you fiery vixen." Val treated his ears to curses he was pretty sure that she didn't learn in that fancy finishing school she went to in the east. It gave him all the incentive he needed to start spanking her with hard spanks meant to punish and chastise.

"Stop! Stop!" she screamed, shocked at the pain that his hand was giving her sensitive bottom. Why, the last time that her father had spanked her with her hairbrush it hadn't hurt nearly so much, but then her father did not bare her first, either. Valerie was humiliated. She had thought that the lieutenant was infatuated with her, but now he was treating her worse than the lowlife thief that he was. "Stop this at once!" she insisted. He ignored her and then spanked lower, which was even more painful. "No, not there!" she screamed. "No! Ow! Owww! OWWW! You can't do this!"

"I am doing it, Miss Smarty Mouth! And you richly deserve it!" He continued to redden her sit spots until she was sobbing for mercy. "Why should I stop? Are you going to run again?"

"Of course I am! I will not remain here with a gang of thieves who would rob my father's payroll! You know how much those men look forward to receiving their pay. They work hard for every last dollar they get, and you are lower than a skunk for stealing from them!" Val didn't know when to keep her mouth shut. He resumed the spanking, not about to stop until she was sorry.

Val kicked and fought, but the fight finally left her. "I'm sorry!" she finally bawled. "I'm sorry! No more; I give up!"

Clem knew that it was a hard admission for the proud girl to make and he almost felt sorry for her. "Val, I am going to stop spanking your butt now, and pretend to rape you; you are going to need to scream, and scream a few more times, or I really will have to rape you to keep them from forcing you. They will consider it a just punishment." He clapped his hands, and then hissed, "Scream." She looked at him and shook her head no. This time he slapped her, and she did scream, mostly in anger since he didn't slap her hard. He clapped his hands again and she understood that he was pretending to slap her, and she screamed louder. "Tell me you hate me."

"I hate you!" She wasn't acting then, and he laughed at her, mocking her. She started sobbing again when he slapped her sore ass, and he finally let out a low moan. There was satisfied laughter outside the cabin, and Val continued to cry. Twice more through the night, he had her scream, and Valerie was shamed to know that the outlaws thought her properly beaten and raped. Her reputation was forever ruined.

Morning finally arrived, and with it, her father and his troops. They arrested the bandits that they did not shoot in self-defense, and the colonel was shocked to find that his daughter had

*been on the same stage as the payroll. He took in her tearstained, bedraggled state and looked at his lieutenant in dismay, arching an eyebrow questioningly. Clem reported to the colonel, and was completely honest in the telling, including the fact that he had spanked the headstrong little redhead on her bare hind to the point where he was positive that she would not wish to sit a saddle for several days. He then shocked Val by asking her father, his colonel, to marry the willful Valerie. Val was shocked when her overprotective father readily agreed.*

*“Do I have nothing to say in this matter?” she furiously demanded.*

*“Daughter, given the state of your clothing and your appearance, it should be obvious to you what the answer should be. I am not blind, and neither are my men. I insist that you permit me to perform the ceremony at once.”*

*“Sir, if I might have a moment alone with your daughter?”*

*“From the looks of her, you have already had too much time alone with her.”*

*“No, sir. Not in the way that you mean. I did not take advantage of her, only pretended to force her so that those men wouldn’t offer to help me tame her. Val is an innocent young woman.” Clem insisted that the colonel hear him.*

*“Is this true, daughter? You are still pure?”*

*“Clem did not actually force me, Father. I did not realize that he was working undercover for you. I thought that he was a traitor, a deserter! I was horrid to him,” she confessed.*

*“Is there a reason why this wedding must take place?” the colonel asked the lieutenant.*

*“Yes, sir. Those men will all swear I have lain with her. As my wife it shall not matter what others say, but I would ask Valerie properly if she will have me.”*

*“I would be honored,” Val spoke up. She knew her mind, and now that she knew he was not a deserter or a traitor, she was happy to know that Clem wanted her as much as she wanted him. The wedding happened before they left the camp, and Clem was right. She did not wish to sit her saddle.*

It had been many years since Clem had spanked her that one time. Oh, he’d threatened to quite a few times, but he never did – mostly because she was pregnant and then caring for young children during those early years, and because motherhood brought with it a maturity that turned her into a good wife for a rancher. Oh how she had loved Clem, but now he was gone, and the burn she was wearing now came from one Oliver Herring! Could there actually be another man who wasn’t afraid to stand up to her temper?

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Case was glad when he could get away from the ranch. He’d left Seth in Kane’s care, knowing full well that his brother would see to comforting the lad. Case hated tanning his little brother, but not tanning him would have been even crueler. The kid needed to get rid of his guilt, and spanking him for killing the chickens was necessary. Seth would still have to talk to their ma, but Case would make sure that she knew the boy already paid for his misbehavior. Knowing his ma, she wouldn’t be too happy with Case for taking his belt to him, although he was gentle as he could be under the circumstances. He had to make the strapping serious enough that Seth would feel punished and lose the guilt that was making him wonder if he was destined to be a hired gun who killed without concern or emotion. Case was sure that he’d settled the matter. Now he had another matter to get settled.

Rachel was testing him, and using Ben Wilson to do it. Case wouldn’t put up with it, and it was time she learned that right now. He rode up to her house, and saw that nearly every window in the house was lit up. He went up on the porch and knocked on the front door. Tom

Anderson, Rachel's father, answered with a big smile on his face. "I figured that you would be coming by after that little set-to you had with Rachel in town this morning."

"You've got that right, sir. Is there anything I should know before I talk to Rachel?" Case gave the man the opportunity to speak his mind.

"The durn gal reminds me of her ma. Alice pulled a stunt like that one on me while we were courting. I gave her a choice, just as I 'spect you're plannin' to do. Allie chose me, and I paddled her proper for tryin' to make me dance a jig to court her."

Case grinned, and then said, "Thanks, Mr. Anderson. It's good to know you have my back."

"Son, women'll drive you crazy iffen you let 'em!" He winked, then cupped his hand over his mouth and called out, "Rachel, you come on down here right now." He put his pipe back into his mouth and said, "I reckon I'll keep Allie comp'ny in the kitchen while you and Rachel have a discussion in the parlor."

Rachel came down the steps, caught the look in Case's green eyes, and turned up her chin, prepared for a fight. "I was so embarrassed in town this morning, Case Masters! I hope you came here to apologize and ask forgiveness."

"No, Rachel, I came here to ask you to make a decision. I won't have my girl flirting with other men; if you want to see Ben Wilson, then say so and I won't come around again." He saw her blue eyes flash in disbelief, and then hurt, and it went a long way towards mollifying his feelings. "I love you, Rachel, but I won't permit you to use my best friend to make me jealous. If you have a problem with me, then speak up and say so."

"All right, I will! You asked to court me nearly a year ago, Case Masters! I am tired of courting. I want to know if you intend to ask me to marry you or not? I'm not getting any younger, and I want a husband, my own kitchen, and children. If you don't know by now if you want to marry me, then you never will know!"

"Your pa told me I had to court you for a full year before I could ask you to get married, Rachel. I am obeying the rules he set for courting you."

"Pa said that?" she questioned in disbelief.

"He did. However, I am pretty sure that he just gave me permission to ask you to marry me."

"I will, Case! I surely will!" She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him excitedly.

"Darn it, Rachel, I haven't asked you yet!"

"Oh." She made a face of disappointment.

"And, I'm not going to ask you tonight after the stunt you pulled this morning. You need your skirt dusted proper for that, and that is what is going to happen tonight."

"No!" she argued, trying to run from the room, but Case was too fast and easily caught her by the wrist and tugged her over to the sofa. He took a seat and then hauled her over his lap and started spanking her, quick and hard with the palm of his hand. "Ow! Ow! Stop it, Case! Stop!"

"You do not flirt with a man's best friend, hear me?" he demanded, spanking her repeatedly while she kicked her legs up and down. "I won't marry a woman unless I know that she intends to be true for the rest of our lives."

"Let me go!" she cried out, but when he didn't release her, she started crying. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Case! I didn't mean it! Please! I'm so sorry!"

Case stopped, and sat her up on his lap, and let her cry while he patted her back. “Don’t doubt my feelings for you, sugar. I can’t blame your pa for wanting us to make sure that we love each other before we get married. He’s just trying to protect you. Now, no more cryin’. I’ll be by to see you soon, and we’ll discuss marriage, I promise.”

“You aren’t mad at me now?” Rachel asked tearfully.

“Not now that I know why you did it,” he replied. “I think you’re kind of cute to try and make me jealous, but don’t ever do that again, hear?”

“Yes, Case,” she replied, sounding contrite.

He gave her a kiss, and then headed for the door. He needed to buy a ring and put it on Rachel’s finger before he lost her.

“You get things worked out with my girl?” Tom asked as he fed the dog the table scraps from supper.

“Mr. Anderson, Rachel’s upset because we’ve been courting for several months and I haven’t asked her to marry me. I know that you said a year, but do you think you could lift that condition so we can get engaged?”

“I reckon I’m satisfied now, son. Go ahead and ask. It’s up to her ma how soon the weddin’ can take place, however.” Case nodded, happy as could be.

Once he was home he saw that Kane was still working in his office. “How’s the kid doing?”

“He’s sound asleep. You went pretty light on him, huh?”

“Seth thought that he was going to grow up and be a killer. I promised that we wouldn’t let that happen. Tanning him was the right thing to do, but I swear I would rather have had the strapping myself than give it to him. I don’t know how Ma is going to feel about it, either.”

“I reckon she’ll understand. She’s raised three of us already, you know.”

“I sure wish she was home,” Case said thoughtfully. “I thought Nate would send word about her by now. What do you think is going on?”

“Knowing Ma, she’s caught up to Blade by now and is raising hell all over him. I can’t believe that he would turn on us like that, and Ma took it real hard. I just don’t know, Case. It doesn’t seem right. I hope that she hears what he has to say before she condemns him outright.”

“Ma’s pride is wounded. He’s going to have to do some fancy talking to get himself off the hook with her.”