

# Chapter One

*Year 1878*

Clary burst into the Chuparosa diner and sped towards the kitchen, her gaze raking through the brunch crowd as she sought her best friend and owner of the Chuparosa, Tilly Prentiss. "Tilly!" She gasped as she practically fell through the kitchen doorway when Elsa, Tilly's best waitress opened it with a platter of eggs and ham in her hands.

"Oh," squeaked Elsa, juggling the heavy platter and trying to keep her balance.

Clary grabbed the platter until Elsa caught herself and then let go, leaving the waitress shaking her head as Clary darted around her and grabbed Tilly's arm.

"Clary, what's the big hurry?" Tilly asked, amused at the desperate look in her friend's eyes. Usually, only one thing put that look on Clary's pretty face, and that was Thorn. "What have you done now?" Thorn had been gone for the last week, working on a case in Tucson, and Tilly knew that Clary was expecting him back this evening.

"He...he's here already," panted Clary, her chest heaving. "Billy just told me, he saw Thorn and Boxcar at the stables. Thorn gave him a penny to tell me that he was home and looking forward to that blackberry cobbler I promised to have ready!" She pushed her hands into a prayer like pose and begged, "Please, please tell me you have it ready, Tilly?"

Tilly rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Why don't you just learn to bake, Clary? Then you won't be caught in this position, and you won't be lying to Thorn. You do know what's going to happen when he finds out, don't you?"

Clary's face fell. "Does that mean you don't have it done yet?" She refused to become engaged in this conversation. One—she was in a hurry, and two—they had done this before, and Clary refused to budge.

"Of course I have it done, I baked it this morning." Tilly laughed at the relieved expression that flooded Clary's expressive face.

"Where is it? I have to get back to the shop and get it upstairs before he gets there. I have to hurry! Tilly, where is it?" she pleaded, looking around.

Tilly waved her hand at the second stove, where a pan sat with a towel over it. "It's right there, but I still think you're playing with fire by pretending this is your work."

Clary hugged her friend with exuberance. "Oh, thank you, Tilly, thank you, thank you! I'll settle up with you later, okay?" She didn't wait for Tilly to answer her as she grabbed the warm pan and ran out the back door and down the alley. Perhaps, one of these days, she *would* have Tilly teach her how to bake.

Maybe.

She sighed heavily; baking just wasn't her favorite thing to do! She had gotten herself into this deception when she discovered that Thorn had a penchant for Tilly's baked goods. She had been just a tad jealous—make that a *lot* jealous—and decided she should be the only one to put that look of ecstasy on her man's face. She enjoyed cooking, just not baking—and she kept putting off Tilly's offer of lessons.

Too bad Thorn had such a sweet tooth! "It's all his fault I have to lie to him," she grumbled to herself.

She was just putting it on the back of her stove in the upstairs flat above her dress and milliner shop when she heard the knock on the outside door. Quickly, she grabbed a dishrag and a few mixing bowls and spoons and set them on the towel near the sink, as if she had just been washing up. Then she ran for the door.

Her hand froze on the doorknob as she remembered the last time she had opened the door without asking who was there first. Unlucky for her, it had been Thorn, and a trip over his knee with her hairbrush liberally applied to her bare backside had left an indelible reminder. "Who...who is it?" she squeaked.

"It's me, honey. You can open the door."

Clary decided to be contrary. "Is that you, Thorn?" She grinned when she heard the growl on the other side.

"I just told you it was me!"

"I don't know anyone named me." She smirked as she pictured his handsome face. Thorn didn't have a lot of patience at the best of times.

"Clary!" The warning in his tone was unmistakable.

"Are you alone?" Clary was still feeling the sting of him calling her predictable during the Silver Springs ghost case. He'd tricked her! He knew full well that she would come to Silver

Springs when he sent word that he'd actually seen the haunted stagecoach. And knowing this, he had arranged with Mike Cavanaugh to just happen to be in Potluck the morning he sent the telegram and to be ready to accompany her and her cohort in disobedience, Tilly, to Silver Springs. All the way over there, Mike had grouched and complained about how upset Thorn and Boxcar were going to be when they saw the girls. Once she realized that Thorn had made the arrangements and was expecting her, he'd laughed at her and called her predictable. It still rankled.

"Of course I'm alone," he gritted impatiently. "Quit being a brat and open this door if you don't want to eat your lunch standing up."

She had to push it just a bit further. "Well, how do I know someone isn't holding a gun to your head just so they can get in here and ravish me in front of you?" When she heard the scrape of the key in the lock and the door suddenly swing open, she almost fell over herself, backing up and laughing at the same time.

Whiskey colored eyes never left her face as he gently closed the door behind him and took off his duster. When he started rolling up the sleeves of his white shirt, Clary turned to run.

Quick as a striking snake, he was on her and lifting her high in his arms as she squealed and gasped with laughter. "Now, Thorn, you know I'm supposed to ask who is there before I open the door—and it could happen that someone would have a gun on you!"

"I think someone's been missing me," he growled, carrying her to the bedroom where he sat down on the bed and turned her over so she was face down over his long hard thighs.

"I just wanted to surprise you; I know you don't like it when I'm so *predictable!*" She turned to stare over her shoulder, a mocking grin on her soft mouth. Excitement raced through her as he lifted her skirts and petticoats.

"I never said I didn't like predictable," he argued amiably, his hand running over her smooth creamy buttocks. She could feel herself getting damp already. "You're the one who didn't like it—and you've yet to let me forget it!" His hand cracked down on her bare skin, lighting a double fire, one within and one without.

"Oh! Thorn...stop," she pleaded quickly. "That hurts!" She was kicking and wriggling from side to side trying to avoid the flurry of hard spanks raining all over her soft nether cheeks.

"You're being a brat, it's supposed to hurt," he said with a chuckle. Just the same, his hand began rubbing across her sensitized skin, soothing and kneading. He put his fingers and thumb between her thighs and pushed, indicating her thighs to open for him.

Clary groaned and let her legs relax and fall apart, enjoying the feel of his hard hand roaming at will all across her backside. When his fingers investigated her womanly core, she gasped with delight, her heart racing and her body yearning for more. "Thorn!"

"You like that, don't you, brat?"

"Maybe," she gasped.

"You're not sure?"

"Keep working at it, I'll let you know soon."

She could hear his chuckle behind her when his long finger slid slowly inside her making her groan with desire. Her legs were trembling, and her fingers scrabbled for something to cling too.

"I think someone is lying," he murmured, rubbing over the little nub of pleasure. "Your body gives you away, brat. And you know what happens to little liars."

Too late, the warning penetrated Clary's world of sensual pleasure. His hand came crashing down on the back of her thighs, blistering spanks that left her squealing and bucking over his hard thighs. "Yes...yes...I like it...I love it..." she screeched. "Please, Thorn...not there!"

"Your thighs are the best learning spot, little liar," he drawled. "Are you sure now?" He landed another flurry of sharp spanks.

Clary's legs kicked up, she couldn't help it. Her thighs were so sensitive, she hated being spanked there. "Yes, I'm positive!"

"That's better," he purred like a satisfied cat. The dangerous kind!

Clary shuddered as he soothed the burn on the back of her legs with his hand and then back up over the mounds of her heart shaped buttocks. Maybe she *would* take baking lessons. The thought of her hairbrush on the back of her thighs made her cringe. And she had no doubt that's where it would land if Thorn were to find out that Tilly was making the baked goods she was taking credit for baking!

Of all the skills Clary had learned in her life, baking just wasn't one of them. Her mother never could figure out how she had let yeast fail. She was a crack shot, knew self-defensive moves taught to her by her father's ranch foremen and could sit a horse with the best of them, but the mysteries of baking eluded her. Her piecrust was inevitably hard as a rock, never light and flaky like her mother's and Tilly's. She could follow her mother's directions to the letter, copy her exactly as they both made the same piecrust and use the same exact ingredients, and hers would still fail!

Frustrated, she had finally given up altogether and now avoided trying to bake like the very plague. She just didn't want to embarrass herself any more. After all, what self respecting woman couldn't make biscuit dough for heaven's sake? Hers? Hard as rocks every time!

When she'd arrived in Potluck, Arizona, her first real home cooked meal had been at the Chuparosa diner with her childhood sweetheart, Thorn, and her brother, Boxcar. A stab of pure jealousy pierced her heart when Thorn had practically drooled over Tilly's homemade blackberry cobbler. It didn't help that Tilly had smooth pale skin, beautiful black hair and the most startling deep blue eyes, which had laughed knowingly into Thorn's eyes. And that delightful laugh had seemed to captivate both Thorn and her brother. She had been instantly envious of the time Thorn had spent with her before she arrived.

When Tilly had set the dish in front of Thorn, Clary could have sworn saliva was going to appear any second and race down his chin to drip onto the steaming aromatic dish that had him sniffing with his eyes closed in adoration to the offering. It was good, no doubt about that, but was it *that* good? She had finally tasted it for herself and realized it really was *that* good! The little devil of jealousy had rammed his pitchfork to the hilt, straight into the depths of her heart, and she'd airily told Tilly that they had a lot in common in the baking department—and they would have to try her cobbler sometime.

Boxcar's eyebrow had shot up so high it disappeared into his hairline, and he'd opened his mouth to refute that information when Clary had shot him a murderous warning look. Lucky for her, he'd just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. Easy going Thaddeus Paul Worthington, alias Boxcar, had let her jealous lie slide away unchallenged. That's what brothers were for, after all. They were supposed to have their sister's back.

She'd admitted to Tilly later, after they became fast friends that she really couldn't bake. But she would pay Tilly, if she would bake for her! Lucky for her, Thorn and Boxcar were gone a lot on assignments for the territorial governor of Arizona so she usually managed to avoid any real commitment to have anything especially ready for him. And of course, while he was gone, she would get Tilly to load her up on baked goods so there would be something there for him when he came back.

Last week, he had caught her in a weak moment, and she had promised him a blackberry cobbler with the blackberries they had picked near Ocher Hollow. They only came into season once a year, thank heavens! And she'd almost been caught when Thorn came back early.

Mercifully, Tilly was an early riser and liked to do her baking in the mornings when it was cooler so the ovens didn't heat up the diner. The hot sun beating down would take care of that as the day wore on.

Now that the charade had gone on for so long, it had become impossible to admit to Thorn what she'd done. And she had a very stubborn streak! She'd firmly avoided all offers from Tilly to take lessons. Those humiliating comments from her family and their furtive looks at each other when she'd put her offerings on the table back home had scarred her for life. Even the dog wouldn't eat her flour and water biscuits! When she'd found a couple of the young stable boys using one of her biscuits for a ball and batting it around with a stick, she'd adamantly refused to ever bake another biscuit! Or anything else for that matter.

The sudden rapping on Clary's door startled them both. "You expecting anyone?" asked Thorn, pulling her up from his lap and standing up.

"No," she gasped, her face flushed and her body still trembling from his roaming hands.

"Miss Worthington, it's me," the young, excited voice said, from the other side of the door. "I have a message for Mr. Thorn!"

Clary smoothed her skirts down and started towards the door. "Oh, it's Billy."

Thorn held her back. "Who's the message from, Billy?" He walked cautiously to the door, always alert like a stalking cougar.

"It's from Sheriff Holden, he needs to see you straight away!" Billy sounded excited, his voice high and squeaky. He always sounded that way because he ran everywhere to deliver messages and telegrams for people and was usually out of breath when he arrived. Clary always rewarded him with a piece of candy or a coin when he'd bring her a message from Thorn.

"All right, son, tell him I'm on my way."

They could hear him fidgeting on the other side of the door and Clary snickered. "He's waiting for a penny or a piece of candy," she said.

Thorn sighed and took a piece of candy out of the jar Clary had on the table by the door. "You spoil the boy," he growled. But he opened the door and handed Billy his reward.

"Thank you, sir, thank you," gushed Billy, barreling down the steps with the candy clutched in his small hand.

Clary smiled. "Probably. But it keeps him eager and ready to do whatever I ask when I need it," she replied. "He checks in with me all the time and hangs around the telegraph office and

the hotel just waiting for someone to need him. Plus, it helps his mother out. You know she's a widow, right?"

"I know," he replied, running his palm down the side of her soft cheek and tipping her chin up. "But I also know you have a soft spot for children." His eyes were gentle as he leaned down to kiss her. "Someday, we'll have some kids, I promise."

She nodded, eagerly lifting her mouth to accept the firm lips that claimed hers, trying valiantly to ignore the ache in her heart. "I know," she whispered against his sensual mouth. "Someday."

She leaned against the door after he left, making sure it was locked. She sighed with longing, the ache he had left unassuaged burning between her thighs. She tried to ignore it and turned her mind to other things.

The only reason Thorn had let her stay in Arizona with him was because she could never have children. A riding accident and a long recovery of some broken bones and internal injuries had seen to that. And neither one of them was ready to get married and settle down, especially Thorn, with his restless blood.

Thorn had hated her following him out to Arizona from lush green Pennsylvania. Both of their families had horse ranches in Pennsylvania, and he and Boxcar had grown up as friends together. And he had fallen in love with Clary at an early age and swore she would always be his girl. Then he had taken a job with Wells Fargo, and it had taken him west into uncivilized territories, leaving his childhood sweetheart behind. He'd always planned to return, but three years later, he was still gone.

Clary had tried to see other beaux and usually always had someone dancing attendance on her, but her heart belonged to Thorn. When she had turned twenty-one, she had defied her father and made the decision to go west, whether Paddington Jersey Thorn liked it or not! And even if he refused to be with her, she intended to stay in the west because she had grown restless feet herself. She'd wanted to experience the excitement of new places, face dangerous situations and open her own business, a dress and milliner shop. She figured the new territories would be hungry for what she had to offer. And Clary's sewing and creative skills with materials more than made up for her lack of baking skills.

The west needed her!

She'd made up her mind that wherever Thorn was, she'd find some way to stay near him, no matter if he spanked her six ways from Sunday! Clary was a very determined and stubborn young woman, and what Clarice Allison Worthington wanted, she usually got.

She drifted back to when she had first arrived and she'd used her feminine wiles on Thorn, and it had backfired. Once he had taken her to his bed, he decided they had to get married and move back to Pennsylvania because she could be with child, and he wasn't having her in these uncivilized lands trying to raise their children with him gone all the time. He was going to give up the life he loved—and she knew he would always resent her.

She didn't want him like that.

She'd finally been able to make him listen to her, she'd told him what the doctor had said and assured him that she wasn't ready to settle down either, she just wanted to be near him. He had finally relented and allowed her to stay. Which was just as well, because she certainly wasn't going anywhere!

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Thorn shook his head decisively at the tin badge Sheriff Holden shoved at him. "No, I'm not taking that badge—I'm not going to be a sheriff. I'm an investigator for the governor and that's my job," he declared.

The stale smell of unwashed men, burnt gunpowder and overheated coffee assailed him, making his nostrils flare. In one corner of the jailhouse sat an old potbelly stove with the coffee pot still warming. The spittoon bucket sat beside it, the wood floor around it stained black with missed tobacco spit. The window on his right facing the street had the wooden doors shut on the bottom three fourths of it and the small upper window open to let in what air might be moving outside. Other than an old filing cabinet, a few chairs and the sheriff's desk, there wasn't much else in the room.

"I know that," growled the sheriff. "This is just temporary. He was leaning forward, the chair creaking slightly beneath his tall rangy frame as he laid his arm across the desk to hand Thorn his badge. "I've cleared it with the governor, and he's on board with you doing this."

Thorn still wouldn't take the badge. His eyes narrowed as he took in the beads of sweat on the other man's forehead, the pale look of his sun-leathered face and the frustration glaring in his steel gray eyes. In spite of the neck length black hair with the silver at the temples, you'd be hard pressed to put an age to the man, but Thorn knew he was somewhere in his fifties. He also knew



that Holden had no plans to retire, so why had he practically thrown the badge at him as soon as he stepped through the door, telling him he was going to be Potluck's new sheriff?

Finally, Thorn reached out and snaked a chair leg with his foot, set it out of range of the badge, and slammed himself into the seat. A growing frustration was chewing into his gut. What in the hell was the governor getting him into now? Something odd was going on, and it made him very uneasy. He was man of instinct and, right now, his instincts were telling him he wasn't going to like what was coming. "I think you better tell me what this is all about," he spat out.

Thorn's time in Potluck was never very long, and he and the sheriff just didn't cross paths much. His work for the territorial governor almost always took him to other towns and far reaches of the territories to work on whatever sort of problem the governor wanted fixed or investigated. He and Boxcar worked together—so where was Boxcar now?

"Told you he wouldn't want the badge," drawled the voice of the missing partner that had just crossed his mind.

Thorn whipped his head towards the doorway leading to the cells to see his erstwhile partner grinning and leaning indolently against the doorframe, a cup of coffee in one hand and a hunk of bread sandwiching a huge wad of meat in the other.

"Why didn't he offer you the badge?" Thorn snarled, his stomach suddenly feeling very empty on top of uneasy.

"Because if I get killed, too many women would miss me," responded Boxcar cheerfully, pulling up another chair to dump his long lean frame into and tilting it back against the wall. He grinned at Thorn, that lazy grin that usually got him around any woman—and that was age eight to eighty as far as Thorn had seen. His brown eyes were dancing with mischief right now but then Boxcar was always easygoing and harmless looking—until he wasn't.

"You get that from Tilly's?" Thorn snapped abruptly, eyeing the food.

"Yup, she makes the best bread. You eat at Clary's?" Boxcar took another big bite, making Thorn want to snatch it away from him.

"No, I didn't have time," he snarled in disgust.

"What did she do this time?"

"What do you mean?"

Boxcar chuckled. "I can tell from the lack of dust on a certain strategic area of your pants that it's probably now on the front of my sister's dress, which means, from my elite powers of

observation, that you must have hauled her over your lap for something as soon as you walked in the door."

"Mind your own business."

"You were the one coveting my sandwich," Boxcar pointed out between mouthfuls. "You could have had your own."

The sheriff's hand slammed into the top of the wooden desk. "You two finished?" he gritted.

Their bickering interrupted; they turned back to the sheriff. Thorn resumed his study of the man's trembling body. He looked as if it had taken most of his strength just to get their attention diverted back to him. "Get on with it, Sheriff," he growled unhappily. "But this better be good."

"He gets really crabby when he's hungry," pointed out Boxcar, finishing the last of the bread and meat and casually leaning forward.

Thorn knew Boxcar was taking in every detail, just as he was. In spite of his flippant tongue, his friend was a master at observation and details—and he never forgot anything.

The sheriff's eyes swiveled from one man to the other. "There is trouble coming, and I can't do anything about it," he replied, his whole body tense. "I got in a shoot out last night at Fanny's with a couple of men who were looking for a girl. One of the whores from a house in El Paso, who robbed and killed a man, so they say. They were tearing up the place, slapping Fanny's girls around, and one had a gun on Fanny, demanding she give up the girl. I finally got one of them arrested but the other got away. They left me with a broken leg and a bullet hole in my side."

"Is he in the cell right now?" queried Thorn.

Boxcar broke in. "Yup, but he's dead from a gunshot to the forehead. Must have taken it through the window bars when the partner came back."

Thorn frowned. "Why would he kill him instead of just breaking him out of jail?"

The sheriff leaned heavily on the desk. "Because it was cleaner to just kill him than risk a posse," he replied. "Whoever these men are, they must be working for someone else."

Thorn nodded. "Did he say anything last night when you put him in jail? Did you question him?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No, I didn't have time. By the time Charlie took me to Doc, and he fixed me up, the man had already been killed. Didn't even know his name." His eyes narrowed. "But who literally executes someone over a whore? And where is she now? If more of

these types of killers are coming to Potluck, I need someone who can handle them and figure out what's going on." His gray eyes bore into Thorn's, their steely gaze never wavering.

"The governor appointed you."