

CAGED



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



1885-WEST TEXAS

“*R*ufus! Shut up!”

Why the dog was setting up such a clatter ever since she'd let him out this morning she'd never know. He wasn't usually like that. Rachel had always thought he had a better, more level head on his shoulders than most of the men she'd ever met.

She set about gathering the eggs first thing, as always, finding comfort in her routine, then headed into the makeshift barn where Cleopatra the cow and Sissy—short for Sisyphus—the old, prone to lameness gelding were waiting to be fed and milked, not necessarily in that order, while Rufus stood outside the barn barking.

That should have been a warning to her, but she'd grown inured to his ruckus.

No sooner had she stepped foot into the small enclosure than she found herself flat on her back, the delicate contents of her basket cracking and rolling on the hard dirt floor.

That was far from the worst of it, however, she soon realized. She found herself in that inherently vulnerable position with

someone who was most distinctly male sitting on her in such a way that his not-at-all-inconsiderable weight landed just below her ribcage, making her “Uff!” in an entirely unladylike manner for the second time since she’d landed. He’d known what he was about, too, because not only had he knocked the wind completely out of her lungs, which prevented her from screaming—not that there was anyone within a several mile radius that was going to come riding to her defense, but the impulse was there, nonetheless—but he’d also arranged himself in the same smooth movement so that he’d trapped both of her arms to her sides, rendering her—for all intents and purposes—completely and utterly helpless.

Despite her desperate situation, her heart didn’t cease beating in fear until she felt rather than saw the barrel of a Colt 45 being pressed painfully up against her chin, and she realized that it wasn’t suffocation that was going to get her as she’d originally thought. And when he cocked the hammer back, she was so terrified that she couldn’t even think enough for her pitiful life to flash before her eyes.

Then he bent down to press his nose to hers. “If you want to live, little lady, you’re going to do exactly as I say, because I promise you that I won’t hesitate to kill you—” As if that threat wasn’t bad enough, a thoroughly evil smile spread across his dirty face as he added, “or worse.”

Rachel could feel her face draining of all color, as she never had before in her life. She had some small, horrible experience of what he spoke, and she much preferred he simply use the gun and get it over with.

“I’m going to get up now and so are you, and you’re going to take me into your cabin. If you value your life, you won’t make any sudden moves.”

He lifted himself off her, the gun moving from her chin to her side. She got up quickly, noticing that he wasn’t anywhere near as spry. In fact, he acted like a man who was in a tremendous amount

of pain, and when they stepped out into the sun, the reason why was plainly visible.

He was wearing thin, worn, dirty pants that looked like something they'd give a prisoner, and a shirt that wasn't in much better repair. But it wasn't the condition of the shirt that she noticed. It was the way it clung to his side—the opposite side from the hand in which he was brandishing the gun at her—and sported an impressively large, fresh bloodstain.

"You're hurt."

"Brilliant deduction," he commented sarcastically as he prodded at her painfully with the gun. "You'd better not be one of those useless females who faints at the sight of blood."

Rachel straightened her back. "I am not."

"Good. You might last through the day after all."

Every bit of her body chilled at how casually the remark fell from his lips, knowing he could—and would—kill her in the exact same vein.

It wasn't too far to the cabin, but even with that short distance, as they walked he began to fall against her. He always seemed to catch himself just before he got to the point of no return. Until the last time, when his legs gave out beneath him and he fell on top of her for the second time in less than ten minutes.

Rachel wasn't sure exactly what she should do, except that she knew she needed to get out from under him in order to breathe. He was the size of a mountain and she was definitely little more than a molehill, if that. More like an ant mound, in comparison to him. It took her several tries to extricate herself from beneath him; he was considerably heavier unconscious than he had been conscious.

When she was finally able to stand over him, looking down at him, she decided that the next thing she needed to do was to disarm him, so she stepped over him to lean down and grasp the gun. But when she pulled, she suddenly found it lodged threateningly against her again, this time into her stomach.

“Get me into your cabin. Now. And if you ever touch my gun again, you’re dead.”

Her entire body trembling almost to the point of uselessness, she bent down and tried to hug him from behind, putting her arms beneath his but he was so big she couldn’t clasp them together over his chest. Her fear was making her so weak that he tended to simply slip right out of them. It was slow, arduous going, even though she knew that he was trying to help her as much as he could; but he also was too weak to really do much.

But he kept a tight hold on that gun; that was for sure. His other arm was tucked tightly against his side, as if he was trying to protect his wound somehow.

Luckily, it was a small, one room cabin. Once she got him inside, she closed the door.

“Bar it,” he ordered gruffly.

“But—”

The muzzle of the gun was leveled right at her head from where he lay on the floor. His arm should have been trembling at least as badly as hers were, but she noticed it was distinctly not. Through some tremendous act of will, he was holding rock steady while aimed at her. Not a twitch or a shudder or even just a case of bad aim.

No, she thought fleetingly, if he was the kind of man she thought he probably was—some sort of desperado outlaw—he wouldn’t have lived very long with bad aim.

Rachel put the bar through the brackets, effectively trapping herself inside with him.

“Help me into the bed.”

She resumed her previous position behind him in order to continue dragging him, but by now time she was almost as feeble and useless as he was.

“C’mon. Put your back into it, woman!”

When she felt the backs of her calves hitting the edge of the wood and rope bed, she couldn’t help but flop down onto it,

making him slide down her skirted legs and onto the floor between them with a tortured groan.

“I said *on* the bed, not on the floor beside it. Do it!”

Rachel took a deep breath and leaned down. Hitching her arms beneath his again, she gave one last Herculean tug—and then dropped him down onto the hard dirt floor again, almost but not quite happy with his grunt of pain.

“Jesus Chris, woman! You’re more worthless than tits on a bull!”

Unbidden tears filled her eyes. She’d been tired before, but trying to lift this who-knew-how-many-pound man onto her bed—after she’d already had to drag him across the yard and while she feared for her life—had her absolutely exhausted. But she bit them back. No matter what he did to her, no matter what happened, she refused to let him see her cry.

She’d already done more than enough of that for a lifetime, and if her life ended here and now, so be it. It was much preferable to the other fates that she now knew could befall her at the hands of an unscrupulous man.

“Stand up. You’ll get better leverage.”

It was the first thing he’d said to her that hadn’t been either rude or delivered at the top of his impressive lungs—or both.

Coming to her feet and grabbing him once again, Rachel immediately felt the difference. And she had no small amount of help in that he used his legs as best he could to aid her in her goal. A few long seconds later, she had succeeded, except that she now found herself pinned beneath him, his broad back to her front.

For a moment she felt that sickeningly familiar panic set in, wanting nothing more than to flail and scream and beg him to get off her like the hysterical woman he would probably think of her as.

But, as with the tears, she refused to succumb to it.

“Are you just going to lie there like a whore, making me do all the work? Get the fuck up!”

She’d never heard such language in her life—well, she’d heard it,

but certainly never aimed at herself. Her father would have killed any man who spoke to her in such a manner.

Those days were long gone, though, and this was life—such as it was—on her own. Niceties, manners, decorum, and apparently basic human decency were things of the past.

It took another bout of struggling to work herself out from under him, but the feat was finally achieved, and before she lost her momentum she reached down and brought his filthily booted feet up onto the bed while he railed at her to do it faster when she didn't want to do it at all. This was her best coverlet, not to mention her only set of sheets, and now they were both probably a total loss.

There were those tears again, prickling at the back of her eyes, but she ruthlessly reminded herself that they were just possessions; they didn't mean anything. She'd certainly grown up with much better, but these meant so much more to her because she'd had to work hard to get them. The coverlet had been a plain, light quilted white summer weight that she had thoroughly enjoyed embellishing—as she could afford it—with embroidered blue ribbons and pink flowers in a pretty pattern that had helped her while away the hours spent alone and cold during the winter. She'd even splurged a bit on some extra material that matched the blue ribbons the last time she'd gone into town and made a matching bed skirt of a fashion and pillow shams, as well.

And now there was manure and Lord knew what all else staining it as well as the rough cotton sheet beneath, she was sure.

She suddenly noticed that his steady stream of profanity and invectives had ceased, and wondered why, venturing a quick look at his face to find his eyes closed. Was he asleep? Dare she hope he was unconscious?

As much as Rachel desperately wanted to make a grab for his gun, she recognized the fact that she was a lily livered coward, who, despite her protestations to the contrary, apparently wasn't brave enough to face possible death rather than the untold

tortures she knew he could visit upon her person if he took the notion to.

Hopefully, he was too sick and tired to do so.

Well, there was no hope for it. He was here. He had a gun, and she would just have to keep her wits about her. She was so remote that even escaping wasn't much of a plan—there was nowhere to escape to.

So she set about doing that which was practical for her to do. He hadn't so much as moved since she had gotten out from under him. His chest was rising and falling evenly. She needed to go back out to the barn—Cleo wanted milking and both animals needed to be fed. She wanted to see what, if any, of the eggs she'd dropped were still usable, and they could stand to have some water on hand.

But what would happen if he awoke and she wasn't there?

She decided that the rewards were worth the risk. She'd explain to him why she'd done it, and it wasn't as if she didn't intend to come back—there was nowhere else for her to go within many more miles than she could get to on foot or even taking Sissy, who she knew would go lame within less than a mile.

Her chores were accomplished in record time, and she slipped back into the cabin, noting with a grateful sigh that her captor/patient was still asleep or unconscious. He never even needed to know that she was gone.

But now she couldn't put off doing what she knew she had to. He needed to be seen to; it was the Christian thing to do.

She'd refilled the water she kept in a pail by the door, into which she dunked a rag that wasn't quite clean, but was much more so than he was and set about washing him as best she could. It wasn't a proper bath by any means, but then she didn't own any semblance of a tub anyway—she washed herself in the stream. She didn't even remove or even try to just move his clothing out of the way, but, with shamefully trembling hands, she did dampen his hair and wash his face as well as the hand that *wasn't* holding the gun.

He was an impressively large man. If he hadn't been such a

bastard, if circumstances had been different between the two of them, she would have felt very safe with him just because of his size. His shoulders were almost as broad as her bed. His arms were heavily muscled such that they strained against the flimsy material of his shirt, which was so large she was sure it would have come to her knees on her—not that she would ever have the absurd need to wear it. His thighs were the same way, huge and heavy and imposing. Everything about him was that way, although she had to admit that he had a pleasant—if ruddy—sun baked face with more about a ten o'clock shadow on it, the color of which reflected his full head of black hair.

Rachel shook herself out of her reverie about him. She could see that his wound was seeping blood—also onto her prized quilt—and she bit her lip. She didn't know much about doctoring, but she knew the wound would need to be cleaned to avoid infection, so she found a better rag and procured more water, setting the rag in the bowl and the bowl on what functioned as a crude nightstand. Then she took a deep breath and moved his hand, the one with the gun, to his side so that she could get at the buttons of his shirt. She made short work of them and laid open just the side necessary to get to the affected area.

It was an ugly sight that made her want to turn away, but she forced herself instead to clean up as much blood as was around it, and then very, very gingerly, to try to clean the gash itself. She thought it might be a gunshot wound, but wasn't sure, but it was definitely still actively bleeding, so she got up and scrounged up a pillow case that was old and holey but clean. Tearing it into strips, she saved a large square, which she folded several times to make a pad to place directly over the area.

Then she had the problem of how to get the strips of material around him to hold the pad in place.

It took another tremendous effort, but she managed to do it by threading it beneath the slight arch of his back, working her fingers

beneath him to catch the end, and then pulling it through under him and up into place.

Thank God for small hands.

When she had pretty much done everything she could think of for him—why, she wasn't exactly sure—she washed her hands and stood staring down at him. Cleaned up a bit, as he was, he wasn't as ugly as she wanted him to be. Someone who spoke as crudely and nastily as he did should be ugly, like his words and his attitude. He was obviously a horrible man—good men didn't end up with gunshot wounds—and horrible men ought to be uglier than homemade sin. They shouldn't have shiny, closely cropped jet black hair, strong jaw lines, tanned skin—classical features that belonged more on a portrait in a museum, rather than on a wanted poster, which she'd bet he was most definitely and prominently featured on somewhere.

As she gazed down at him, she wondered if she shouldn't try to protect herself against him now, while she could. He was obviously out. He hadn't so much as moved a muscle the entire time she'd been working around and on him.

Well, he'd moved one muscle in particular, but she refused to consider that. The moment she'd begun to wash him, leaning her arm a bit over his hip, she'd felt something moving beneath it, and before her eyes, he'd grown to enormous proportions behind the now straining buttons of his pants. Rachel had done her best to ignore it, making scrupulously sure that she didn't go anywhere near it again.

It was still there, though, proud and big as ever.

The sight of it prompted her to admit to herself that she definitely needed to restrain him somehow. What remained of her precious stock of hemp rope was hanging from a nail on the wall and she retrieved it, coming to stand over the bed and biting her lip as she tried to decide what the best approach was. Logic dictated that she secure his right hand—the one that still clung to the gun like a lifeline—first, but she also thought that there was much more

of a chance that she'd wake him up trying to divest him of his weapon and stretching his arm up to the bedpost.

So she opted for his other arm first.

It wasn't the first or last time she'd be seriously wrong.

Almost the second she had begun trying to secure his hugely thick wrist, with parts of her body hanging over him in a very unladylike position, she knew she'd miscalculated.

In the silence of the small room, she heard the gun being cocked before she felt it pressed—not to her side, not even to her chin—but to her temple.

“Just what in the Sam Hill do you think you're doing there?”

And there was no viable explanation she could give him. What he thought she was doing was exactly what she *was* doing, so Rachel didn't say a thing.

After a long, torturous silence, he ordered, “Untie me, then give me the ropes and lie down on the bed beside me, against the wall.”

Her eyes widened in alarm, but it wasn't as if she had any choice. Very few seconds later he was in possession of the same lengths of hemp that she was going to use to tie him up, and she fully expected that he was going to do the same thing to her, once she complied with his order for her to take her place beside him. With that enormously dangerous gun trained on her the entire time, her mouth dry as the ever blowing wind outside, Rachel carefully, gingerly did as she was told to do, cramming herself into the small space between the mountain of flesh that was him and the wall of her cabin.

She couldn't possibly have been more shocked at what he said next.

“Strip.”

It was the first time she'd really tried to look him in the eye. “What?” she asked automatically, knowing she sounded like an idiot. There was no way she couldn't have heard his low, firm command.

The gun poked painfully into her side.

“All of your clothes—even your skivvies. Take them off and hand them to me.” When she hesitated, he reached over and grabbed her chin in his hand. “Now.”

There was no stopping the tears anymore, try as she might and she did. They poured down her cheeks as she did as he commanded, however reluctantly. Her motions slowed as the pile of her clothing where she’d begun laying it on his stomach grew. Soon, she was down to just her thin, threadbare shift, bloomers and stockings.

“Please,” she whispered, horrified that she’d been so effortlessly reduced to begging, “please let me keep the rest of my clothes on. I promise I’ll—”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep. You’d do anything to get away from me, and I intend to see that you’ll think twice and then think again before you decide to do something stupid.”

He put his big paw out. Her stockings landed there first, then her bloomers, and, when she could delay it no longer, she sat up enough to tug her shift over her head, placing that into his hand, too. Her fingers clung to it and he pried them away as he tucked her clothing beneath him for the moment, and then turned back to her.

As fuzzy headed as he was, Cage still thought had never seen a more beautiful woman in his life, and he’d seen quite a few of them. Her skin was like fine bone china, so fair it was almost translucent, like a baby’s. Her hair was yellow gold and scraped back into a bun that had—by dint of what she’d had to do for him—begun to loosen and he could see by the straggly hanks that it wasn’t curly but definitely wavy. He wanted to wrap it around his hand as he took her, hard. Her eyes were a bright, intelligent blue. She was a tiny woman, something that had always appealed to him, usually bringing out his protective instincts, but in this situation he forced himself to set those highly ingrained feelings aside.

He preferred to live rather than to worry about offending or even—he was ashamed to admit—hurting her, so he allowed

himself to imitate his bastard of a grandfather, which had ended up being much easier than he would have liked.

She was afraid of him and that was what he had to want. Her hands were desperately trying to hide her nakedness from him, but he pried first one then the other away from her body, resolutely using one of the hemp lengths to bind her wrists together while she wept pitifully, and then, as she tried to fight him for all she was worth, he brought them above her head and secured them there to the wooden bed frame.

Afterwards she lay trembling next to him, practically shaking the bed in fear, weeping softly, and all he wanted to do was to comfort her. In the condition he was in, that was about all he could do—although he wasn't about to tell her that.

Unable to prevent himself from doing so, he reached down and pulled the coverlet out from under her, covering those perfect, mauve tipped mounds and the light, golden fleece that covered her womanliness, calling himself all kinds of fool for having done so even as he did it.