

Sapphire's Surrender

The Red Petticoat Saloon

By

Tabitha Black

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I would like to dedicate this book to the man who inspired so much of the story, and who inspires me every day. Mr. B. – my very own 'Crawford Slade' – my lover, my Sir, my sadist, my Daddy Dom, my friend – my heart. Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and understanding.

I love you.

Chapter One

"Thief!"

Sapphire stared at the man, her fists clenching on her hips. She could feel the familiar bubble of anger begin to develop deep in her belly. "What did you call me?"

"A thief. You stole my daddy's watch. I had it right here in my waistcoat before you started that fancy dance of yours, and now it's gone. Give it back to me right now, or I'm sending for the sheriff!"

There was both scorn and fury in the man's tone, and an ugly rash was beginning to spread from his collar, a livid purple against the wrinkled, tanned skin of his neck.

You should never have taken him upstairs, Sapphire scolded herself. She had been at The Red Petticoat for long enough to develop a sixth sense, an instinct about the men who approached her. And when *Eye brows*, as the gems had dubbed him on account of his thick, beetling brows, had sidled up and asked for one of her "special dances," that instinct had been in full swing.

Unfortunately, not for the first time, Sapphire had refused to heed it. "I never took your darn watch!"

Now he was scowling at her with all the self-righteous anger he could muster. "I'm countin' to five, young missy, and that pocket watch had better be back in my possession by then, or else I'm sending for the sheriff, like I said, and having you arrested."

"I don't have your damn watch! I don't know what you did with it, but I have no reason to steal—from anyone, and that includes you." Taking a deep breath, battling to stay calm, she tried to reason with him. "Now, you had your dance, please pay me and then leave my room."

Reason didn't work. *Eye brows* leapt from his chair and advanced upon her, the furry bushes of hair almost knitting together above his small, blazing eyes. "You want me to *pay* you?" he snarled, his breath sour with whiskey.

"Five dollars. Going rate for my special dance." Sapphire forced herself to lift her chin and meet his gaze head-on. She really didn't want him involving the sheriff, but she didn't want to back down, either.

"That watch is worth a heck of a lot more than five lousy dollars! So if you won't give it back to me, consider yourself paid!" He punctuated his statement with a contemptuous spit; the disgusting, chewing tobacco-filled glob of which landed with a splat far too close to Sapphire's boot.

The gesture broke the dam on her rising temper, and she exploded. "And you have the audacity to call *me* a thief," she yelled, marching to the bell pull all the girls had in their rooms to summon help if it was required.

Eyebrows watched her for a moment. The ugly rash was now all over his neck. "Aw-daa-see-tee. That's a mighty long word for some two-bit whore," he drawled at length. "Why's a little slut like you need such long words when your pretty mouth is occupied with *other things* all day?"

Without pausing to consider the consequences, Sapphire launched herself at him; landing on his back with enough force to wind the man before pummeling him with abandon, her blows landing wherever she could reach as he twisted and bucked beneath her.

"What in the blazes is going on here?" Gabe's Spanish-accented voice startled them both. "Sapphire! Stop that right now!"

Ignoring Gabriel—her boss and the co-owner of the saloon—Sapphire continued to throw punches until Gabe marched over and dragged her off the spluttering miner. Even with his thickly muscled arm clamped firmly around her midsection, she kicked the air, trying in vain to still punish Eyebrows for his evil words.

"Calm down!" Gabe ordered, in the voice he used whenever things got out of hand. "Sapphire! Stop kicking right now or by God you will regret disobeying me!"

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she willed herself to stop fighting and allowed her feet to slowly touch the floor.

Gabe's arm continued to grip her waist like a vise.

"She's a thief," Eyebrows said, slowly. "A thief and a little hellion. She stole my daddy's watch!"

"I am not, and I did not!" Sapphire howled, once again beginning to struggle within Gabe's arms. "He's a liar, Mr. Gabe! Let me at him!"

"Sapphire!" Gabriel barked. "For the last time, calm down. I will handle this."

"Send for the sheriff," Eyebrows said. "I'd like to report a robbery."

"Yes, get Sheriff Justice!" Sapphire knew she was only making things worse for herself but that despicable little man was infuriating and her frustration was getting the better of her, as it so often did. "Tell him that this sonofabitch called me a whore!"

"That's not illegal. You *are* a whore. But you're also a thief. And, as far as I know, that *is* a crime." Eyebrows stared Gabriel down, obviously willing the man to side with him.

"What on earth is going on here?"

Sapphire was unable to suppress a groan. Madame Jewel had appeared in the doorway, her blue eyes dark with concern.

"Gabe?"

"Please send for the sheriff or one of the deputies, *chiquita*," Mr. Gabe addressed his partner. "There's been an accusation of theft."

"I didn't steal his watch!" Sapphire pleaded. It took every ounce of her self-control to grow still but she managed it, eventually standing rigid in Gabriel's hold. "He says I took it, Madame Jewel, but I'm not a thief! I swear it! And then he refused to pay me and called me a whore—"

"And then she decided to beat on him," Gabriel interjected drily. "Go and get a lawman over here now, Jewel."

The tall, elegant blonde turned on her heel and disappeared, leaving the three of them alone in Sapphire's room once more.

"Can I let go of you now, or are you going to launch yourself at Mr.— I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," Gabriel addressed Eyebrows as if they were at a tea party.

"Clark."

"Are you going to attack Mr. Clark again?"

Sapphire wanted to claw the man's eyes out but she was well aware of the methods Mr. Gabe used to discipline unruly gems, and didn't really fancy finding herself on the receiving end ever again. Although it might be too late for that already. "No, sir," she said quietly. "I'll be good."

She hadn't realized how comforting Gabriel's arm had been until he slid it from around her waist.

"Good? *Her*? That thievin' little harlot belongs in jail," Eyebrows huffed.

"That's enough," Gabe snapped, his handsome face hard as he glared at the man standing opposite them. "I won't have you disrespecting any of my girls."

"*Your* girls? How's that? You break 'em in before they start whoring here, is that it? Ride 'em nice and hard to get 'em ready for the paying customers?"

Knowing Mr. Gabe, knowing how deeply and paternally he cared for all the gems under his roof and how absolutely besotted he was with Madame Jewel, Sapphire held her breath, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

But nothing happened. Gabriel stood still, the only sign of his anger a slight twitching of the muscle in his jaw. "Once a lawman has arrived and set this matter straight," he said slowly, "you will leave this saloon and you will never, ever set foot in this establishment again. Otherwise you'll be leaving again—on your back."

Eyebrows didn't have time to reply as a breathless Jewel reappeared in the doorway. "Jeb wasn't available," she said apologetically. "But I brought Deputy Slade instead."

Sapphire had heard about Culpepper Cove's new deputy—her friend and fellow gem Coral had had an unpleasant encounter with him when she'd gone to spring Bo out of jail—but nothing had prepared her for the sheer presence of the man when he stalked into her room. Tall, impossibly broad shouldered, with long, shaggy dark hair which curled over his collar and a piercing glare, he loomed over her and made her bedroom, which she'd always found spacious, suddenly seem small and poky.

"What's the problem?" he said curtly, addressing Gabe straight over Sapphire's head.

"She's the problem!" Eyebrows yelled, pointing at Sapphire. "That no good little wh—"

"That's enough, Mr. Clark!" Gabriel cut him off mid-insult. Taking a deep breath, he put a restraining hand on Sapphire's arm, almost as if he could read her thoughts. "Mr. Clark here seems to be under the impression that Sapphire has taken his watch. She has denied it and, to be honest, I don't think she would ever steal; not from anyone."

Deputy Slade's slate-grey eyes traveled the length of Sapphire's body, from the toes of her boots to the top of her head. She was suddenly acutely aware of her state of undress and felt herself grow hot.

"I'll be the judge of that," the deputy said, once more turning to address Gabriel.

"She also attacked me!" Eyebrows drew himself up to his full height, although even then he barely reached the deputy's shoulders. "I asked for my watch back and she just jumped me like some savage squaw!" He narrowed his eyes at Sapphire. "You got injun blood in you?"

Before she could reply, Gabriel held up a hand. "I *said*, that's enough, Mr. Clark!"

"You need to arrest her. She attacked me." The man was not to be cowed.

"You already said that," Deputy Slade told him. "Young lady, you'll need to come with me."

"What?" A trickle of panic began to slide down Sapphire's spine. "What for?"

"Theft and assault."

"Now look here," Madame Jewel began, "I really don't think that will be necessary. We can search for Mr. Clark's watch right now, and any other disciplinary measures can be handled here if need be. These are our girls and we take responsibility for them."

"You sent for me," the deputy said. "This matter is my responsibility now. And so this young lady is coming with me."

As his big, warm hand clamped around Sapphire's upper arm, she felt such a tingle in the pit of her belly that the breath almost left her body. She was barely even aware of Eyebrows's snort of satisfaction.

"Good riddance. You throw her in a cell and lock that little thief up, Deputy."

"Please," Sapphire whispered. "He still owes me five dollars. He got his dance and he never paid. If anyone's a thief, it's him!"

The deputy raised an eyebrow. "His *dance*?"

"Yes!"

"I've heard it called a lot of things in my time, but never that," Slade said.

"What? No! No, I swear, it really was just a dance! Do you really think I would... with that—"

"Sapphire!" Gabe's voice easily carried above hers. "It seems as though you have no choice but to accompany Deputy Slade to the jailhouse. However, Jewel will go with you—"

"No she won't," Slade cut in. His lip curled up in a mocking smile. "Why? You think Sapphire needs a chaperone?"

"That jail cell is full of drunks and real criminals!" Jewel protested hotly. "Of course she needs to take someone with her. If not me, then Mr. Vasquez can surely—"

"No-one is going with her. And there's no need to worry. She won't be harmed. It's a quiet night and she'll get her own cell. I'll send for you when she's permitted visitors."

"Visitors?" Sapphire was unable to stop herself from squeaking. "How long will I be there for?"

"As long as it takes," the deputy said.

"I hope you rot in there," Eyebrows spat. Only the searing iron grip Mr. Slade had on her arm stopped Sapphire from trying to land another punch to his smug, ugly face.

"Well, I hope you rot in hell!" she snarled back at him.

The deputy seemed amused. "She's got a temper, this one, huh?"

"Only when I'm accused of things I didn't do!"

"Are you absolutely sure we can't simply settle the matter here?" Madame Jewel tried again, her exquisite features drawn into an expression of almost motherly concern.

"Ma'am, I can assure you that the girl will be quite safe. Like I said, I will send for you when it's time. Mr. Clark, I'd appreciate it if you could please come to the sheriff's office tomorrow at your leisure and give a statement."

Once more the despicable little critter drew himself up to his full diminutive height. "I will, sir, you can count on it."

As the huge, inscrutable man began to drag her away, Sapphire turned to Gabriel. "Please, Mr. Gabe, make sure he doesn't leave without paying."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I have everything under control," Gabe said, although the tension was still visible in his jaw. "We'll have you back home in no time, and I'll make sure Mr. Clark here settles his accounts. Deputy?"

Slade paused just outside the door, his hand still clamped around Sapphire's upper arm. *His fingertips are actually touching his thumb, his hand is so big*, she realized in wonder.

"Yes?"

"If we don't hear from you within two hours, either Madame Jewel or myself will be visiting the sheriff's office to see what the delay is. Please don't forget that Sheriff Justice is a good friend of ours." His eyes flicked to Sapphire. "And a good friend to *all* the girls."

"Understood." Slade tipped his hat and set off at a brisk pace, with Sapphire trotting along beside him to keep up with his long stride.

The sick, churning excitement in her belly turned to sheer mortification when the pair descended the stairs. She'd been so focused on being unjustly accused and having to go to jail and deal with the law that she hadn't even thought about the fact that they'd be leaving through the saloon itself, in full view of all the guests and, even worse, the other gems.

Once again, a prickling heat suffused her face as countless pairs of eyes swiveled to take in the sight of the big deputy escorting her through the room, his grip on her arm seeming to grow tighter by the second.

"Saph! Are you all right? What's going on?" Opal's beautiful dark eyes were wide with concern as she rushed up to her friend. Emerald and Dottie were right behind her.

"It's a misunderstanding," Sapphire said between gritted teeth. "I'll be back soon."

Opal looked her over. "They didn't even let you put on a shawl?"

Following her friend's gaze, Sapphire looked down and grimaced as she realized her black corset was loose and only half-laced, exposing far more of her bosom than she usually did when she was downstairs, working the room. "Anyone you catch looking at these owes me a dollar," she said, trying to make light of her complete humiliation.

Opal grinned. "Split the proceeds fifty-fifty and we have ourselves a deal," she shot back.

The deputy's deep, gravelly voice was loud enough to carry above the general clinking of glasses, murmured conversation and barks of laughter always prevalent in the saloon. "Come along now, miss, I don't have all night."

"Can't afford it!" someone shouted, to bellows of mirth.

"Ouch!" Sapphire squealed as Slade's hand tightened yet further on her arm and he steered her swiftly out into the night, leaving Opal, Emerald and Dottie huddled together, staring after them.