

BUTTING HEADS WITH THE DEVIL

Chapter One

The whiskey burned like liquid steel, leaving a raw path down her throat. Her heart hammered as she fought to hold the cough inside. Men who frequented saloons did not choke on whiskey, but how they didn't, was beyond her. A haze of smoke hung in the air. The smell was putrid and burned her eyes. Clearing the cough from her throat, she glanced at the cards in her hand. Two queens and three tens – a very good hand, but the large pile of money in the middle held no lure for her. The hulking, bearded man beside her narrowed his eyes. Had he figured her out? Or, was he trying to read her hand through her eyes? Bianca adjusted her hat lower on her head. He threw more bills on the pile. She matched his bet, making his jaw clench and a vein in his neck pulse.

"How much longer, Isaiah? I'd like to..." One of the saloon's whores whispered the rest into the bearded man's ear. As she bent, Bianca could see all she had to offer. Mesmerized by the large, pale breasts, shame flooded her cheeks. How could a woman show herself like that? Offering flesh in exchange for money was enough to make the whiskey churn faster in her gut. That was one thing she wouldn't experience and write about in her manuscript. A book she hoped to share with the rest of the repressed female population. Isaiah's raspy laugh pulled her eyes from the whore's chest.

"Boy, you ain't had nothing 'til that whore's lips are wrapped around your cock. But you ain't getting what's already been paid for." His raspy laugh bellowed louder, as he tucked several bills between the woman's breasts. "Maybe next time, boy!" His hand slammed the rickety table, and the woman licked his earlobe, keeping her eyes glued to Bianca's. With a wave of her hand, she called another of the saloon's man-pleasers over. Bianca shifted uncomfortably in her chair and looked away.

The hand of a younger, large-breasted woman caressed Bianca's leg, making her shudder. The eyes of all three men were on her. What would happen if she won? Would they expect her to

pay the woman for service? How would she explain that to the whore? God help her if she got caught.

"If I win that pot, son, I'll buy you an evening's pleasure with Annie there." Jack Bartlet pointed a wrinkled hand at the harlot draped on Bianca's chair and threw a larger quantity of bills on the pile. "Now, are you folding or what?" Jack was rich and eccentric and known for his cruel streak. He had shot men in the back for crossing him. Bianca felt her heart slam harder off her ribs. What would he do to her if he knew?

The final man, Benjamin McPherson, sitting across from her, was dark and quiet, his eyes colder than all the others' combined. She felt them on her, chilling her soul, but heating her in other places. His hair fell in untidy curls, and three days' worth of scruff shadowed his square jaw. He took a large swallow of his drink and threw his cards face down on the table. He had folded, and if he had his way, she'd be face down in the dirt. The other men chuckled. Isaiah added more bills. Bianca, confident in her hand, tossed the last of the money she had taken from her father's wallet onto the pile, avoiding eye contact.

Jack eyed both Isaiah and Bianca, squinted, chewed his lip, and then tossed his cards down. "I'm not stupid. I'm out."

Isaiah whooped, smacking his woman's ass and plucking some bills he had placed earlier out of her cleavage. "You'll be sucking my cock for hours, Whore!" He stood and threw down two nines and three fours.

Bianca's breath quickened. Her heart seemed to skip in time with the jaunty piano tune that played in the background. She had won. Bianca Belle Caruthers, the banker's daughter, had won a game of poker against the best of the worst men in town, in the seediest saloon! She allowed herself a quick grin and placed her hand down.

"I'm sorry, but I've had enough!" He was stout and round, and his walrus moustache twitched as he paced. Waving his stubby arms, he looked rather comical. His power and respect came strictly from money. None of the town folk would dare cross her father, but to her, he was nothing but a puppy. Well, at least, he was normally. Tonight, he was angrier than she had ever seen him. She would have to tread lightly to get her footing back.

"You are supposed to be a lady! Your behaviour has been borderline offensive for many years, but since your mother's death, it has become intolerable! Perhaps this will teach you!"

Bianca stood stonily before her father, holding her composure as best she could. What had he meant? What was *this*? Her heart hammered. He was practically purple with rage. So she dressed in breeches and went gambling in a saloon. Yes, she won a lot of money from some of the most dangerous men in town, but they didn't know who she was. Well, all but one didn't know. When Isaiah started throwing punches, Benjamin McPherson took one square on the jaw for her before laying out the drunk and exposing one of Bianca's long, brown ringlets. He had dragged her out roughly, straight to her father's office at the bank before anyone else had figured her out.

Benjamin had just been turned down for a loan, but once he returned with Bianca as leverage, he had been able to renegotiate. Unfortunately, he was just as ornery after securing the loan as he had been when he'd walked into the saloon after having been turned down. Perhaps it was the other condition he'd had to agree to before her father signed the papers.

"Now then, Bianca, if you choose to act like a boy, then you shall be treated as such and be taken out to the woodshed, so to speak. Go on up to your room. I will deal with your punishment after I finish packing." He waved her off with his sausage-like hand and waddled away. "Mr. McPherson will be here shortly to get you. Be sure you're packed."

"Yes, Father." She pulled her skirts up and climbed the grand staircase, holding her rage inside. He wouldn't! He couldn't! She really had pushed the limit this time, but corporal punishment? It was downright barbaric! Surely, he'd change his mind. He had less than twenty minutes before his coach left at three. Since her mother had died and he had to pack for himself, he ran late every time. As he was such an important man, they always held the coach, but he wouldn't push it by being extremely late, at least not over a barbaric punishment.

Spending the month at Mr. McPherson's ranch was punishment enough. He was nothing less than a surly bastard, intent on terrifying any woman who came within glaring distance. Of course, there was something else about Benjamin that she dared not admit. He was like fire on a cold night. She was drawn to him – mesmerized, even. Stupid, really. Who didn't know that fire burned you if you got too close?

She'd be his slave. He couldn't keep even the most patient housekeeper for more than a few days. How was she going to survive? She threw herself onto her four-poster bed. Her things were already packed, and there was nothing left to do but wait. She didn't believe in crying. Crying was for silly girls, but she wished for a moment that she did. Maybe then, her father

would feel sorry for her and forget about his plan. She wondered if she even knew how to cry. Bianca could usually get her way with a sound argument and if all else failed, a pout, but crying?

She kicked her suitcase over angrily. Crying or not, she'd take a thrashing every day for the rest of her life if it meant she didn't have to spend all month with Mr. McPherson. She would cry for an hour straight to avoid that!

The twenty minutes flew by as she sulked on her bed, plucking the frilly lace of her spread. When her father's small feet thudded up the stairs, her heart fluttered. He'd had time to cool down and reconsider. He had to see that staying with Benjamin would be wrong in every way, didn't he?

The door opened, and she batted her eyes innocently. Her hands folded neatly in her lap, she bit her cheek to keep from gagging over her girly ploy.

"It seems I've run out of time, Bianca." He sighed, shoving his pocket watch back into its place and splaying his hands across his massive belly.

Was that it? No thrashing, no Benjamin? He wasn't here yet, and her father had to leave.

"I will not forget about this, though," he said, turning to the door.

Of course, he would. A month away was a long time, and he would miss her terribly, as always. She allowed herself a sneaky grin, only to choke on it when he turned back. His face tightened, and his eyes flashed a look fit for a bull.

"I'm afraid you're going to regret that." He thundered out of her room. Her heart dropped. The ringing door signalled the arrival of her nanny, Mr. McPherson. How had everything fallen to pieces in seconds? The maid's voice twittered as she announced him. His six-foot-plus height and stormy expression scared her, as it did every other female. Bianca heard their muffled talking a minute before her father's footsteps pounded back up the stairs.

"Mr. McPherson has agreed to take over for me."

Bianca's head snapped around sharply, and she watched in wide-eyed horror as her father turned briskly and walked out the door. She stood quickly, stumbling after him, only to see his bald head disappear. He meant on the business trip, right? Surely, her father wouldn't let another man carry out a punishment in which her bare bottom would be exposed! She was of marrying age! It was uncivilized!

Her head felt as light as air, and her heart skipped a beat. She felt her legs weaken, and she collapsed in a heap of frilly skirts onto the hardwood floor. What had she done?

Bianca didn't know how long it was before Mr. McPherson opened her door, but it wasn't nearly long enough. His dark, long-lashed eyes held a twinkle of amusement as he inspected her, still lying on the floor. His brows rose and the corner of his mouth twitched upward. He seemed to be enjoying her predicament a little too much for her liking. She suddenly was glad about the angry-looking bruise he wore on his face.

She scrambled to her knees and smiled at him. "I've lost a button," she lied, reaching under the bed. There was no way she was letting this man know how badly the situation had unnerved her. He nodded, still smirking, and picked up her luggage. His muscular arms, exposed by rolled-up sleeves, made her swallow hard. He was obviously well conditioned from years of ranch work. She glanced at his large, callused workman's hands. Her heart fluttered double time and her bottom tingled. She remembered her metaphor about fire and realized she felt more melted than burned.

"I think your father's request can wait until we get to the ranch."

Bianca's stomach flip-flopped.

"The wagon's out front, waiting." His eyes lost their amusement and flashed a warning. "Don't make me come back for you!"

She wanted to stand tall and yell that no one rushed Bianca Belle Caruthers, but her quivering insides held her back. Mr. McPherson was not to be messed with. She looked up at him through her lashes, licking her dry lips quickly, and nodded. He turned abruptly and walked out, leaving her to exhale the breath she hadn't known she was holding.

The wagon ride was bumpy and dusty but did nothing to distract her from the thought of his callused hands touching her delicate skin. He didn't even try to initiate a conversation, but she was sure she wouldn't be able to talk, anyway. She kept a look of boredom plastered on her face, so he wouldn't know her insides were quaking, and that took every ounce of her concentration.

When the wagon pulled up the rutted, dirt road to his ranch, she thought she saw him smile. A hot jolt poked her insides. The wagon stopped and he threw her bag effortlessly over his shoulder before hopping out. She didn't have feeling in her legs but kept willing them to move. He walked around to her side of the wagon and put his free hand low on his narrow hip. He didn't offer her a hand like most gentlemen.

"I'm not going to carry you, princess."

She cleared her throat. "Of course not, Mr. McPherson. I am perfectly capable," she said, sticking out her chin. She stood, praying she wouldn't collapse onto the ground. He snorted and walked toward the modest log house that occupied a small portion of his vast property.

Bianca stumbled slightly on her skirts as she stepped down from the wagon but caught herself before falling. She quickly caught up to him, refusing to drag behind like a frightened mouse. She would face her punishment with dignity.

His home was bright and tidy. It smelled like country air, with a hint of coffee and leather. The work surfaces and tables were free of clutter, the boots in neat rows, and the coats hung on hooks by the door. She had assumed that since he was a bachelor, he would live like a farm animal.

Mr. McPherson tossed her bag on the crisp bed in the room closest to the kitchen and then put a pot of water on the stove. Bianca stood just inside the doorway watching him add wood to the stove. He seemed quite capable of taking care of himself. Would her father be as competent? She shuffled her feet and played with the lace of her dress. What did Mr. McPherson need her for?

"Make some coffee. I like it strong. I'll be back." He strode past her through the door. "After that, we can get down to business." He rubbed his hands together and winked at her before walking toward the barn. Bianca swallowed hard and watched his confident strides. A weakness vibrated through her middle.

Removing her boots and coat, she went to inspect her room. Small and windowless, it held only a dresser, nightstand, and a single bed. She sat upon it, wondering how she'd ever sleep under the same roof with Mr. McPherson. A noise from the kitchen startled her to standing. Was he back already? A nervous wave flushed through her. She hadn't made his coffee yet. Would he be angry?

Her legs finally moved into gear, and she saw it was just a dog moving under the table. She stooped to pet its glossy head. The old dog moaned and rolled onto his side, letting his tongue loll. She scratched his black ears.

"Aren't you a pleasant boy?"

"I thought I told you to make coffee." Mr. McPherson's voice was faster than the slamming door. Bianca's head shot up. His eyes were hard and cold.

"I-I was," she stammered. "I was just about to." She hated herself for stuttering, but she couldn't deny he scared the hell out of her. Bianca's eyes dropped to his hands, which began to unbuckle his wide, leather belt. Swallowing hard, she pointed at it. "I-I don't think my father would approve of the use of a weapon." She licked her lips and fought to control her shaking hand.

"Listen, princess, your father has given me permission to treat you as if you were my own, and that includes the use of whatever the hell I feel like, when it comes to your pampered, princess ass!" He took two big strides and was in front of her, clutching her arms. "And that means this probably won't be the last time I whip you. You'll learn real quick that I have no problem showing you your place."

He reached behind her and clutched her bottom with his large hand, pulling her close. His face was only inches from hers. His breath was moist and sweet. "And by the amount of ruckus you cause in this town, you'll need to be put there often."

She stood wide-eyed and trembling, incredibly aware of the belt he held at her side, but even more so of his hand and the heat it stirred in her. She wanted to push away from him but didn't dare. His eyes still bored into hers dangerously, his silky dark hair falling in wavy chunks across his forehead.

"Didn't I say I wanted a coffee before I take you in the bedroom?" His voice was raspy and low.

Was it just her, making up the double meaning in his words? Moistness grew between her legs, wetting the silk of her undergarment. His eyes narrowed when she didn't move. "Want to test me?"

Bianca scrambled away from him to the stove and began fumbling with the coffee grounds. She felt him come up behind her. The heat and smell of him made her breathless.

"I don't like waste or mess." He walked away toward her room, taking his belt with him. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he threw the belt on the small bed, *her* bed, and rubbed his hands together. Sick bastard, he was enjoying this way too much!

She didn't know how she managed, but she was able to make his coffee perfectly, strong enough to put a real smile on his hard, straight mouth. He set the cup down on the table and sat in one of the wooden chairs. She felt a sigh of relief escape, which made him chuckle. She was tempted to ask him what he found so amusing, but kept her lips clasped tightly.

"You've never had a spanking before, have you, princess?" He leaned back, propping his chair on two legs and looking at her intently.

She could only manage to shake her head and swallow. She wished he'd tip the chair just a little farther and fall on his ass.

"Well, now, I just feel bad prolonging it when you've no idea what to expect. That's just cruel." His chair clunked as he let it fall back onto all four legs. "All right, princess, go on into my room. I'll be right there, and we'll get this over, so you can cook us some dinner in peace." His face looked sympathetic, as though he was actually doing her a favor. Anger charged through her.

"Thank you, Mr. McPherson!" She curtsied. "You're so kind. Perhaps, on my way, I can get the belt for you, to show my gratitude?"

He stood, flipping the chair onto its back. The crack of the wood made her jump and yelp, but she held her ground. He flew to her and clasped his big rough hand on her chin.

"You can just stew in your juices now, sweetheart. You can think about it all day. Wonder obsessively how the first stinging blow will feel on your delicate, pampered hide. I'll do it later, and every little thing you do to irritate me in the meantime will just add up." He bent to pick up the chair. "Shall I have the horsewhip ready, just in case?"

"Horsewhip?" Anger surged again. "I am no horse!" Her small hands balled into fists.

"You're right. My horses are more obedient." His cold, brown eyes bored into hers.

Fear sizzled inside her. She hated him. He laughed coldly and went to grab the belt off her bed. She watched intently as he slid it through his belt loops. When she saw him look at her, she turned quickly and began gathering things for his supper. He was the most cantankerous, contemptible, ill-tempered man she'd ever known! She loathed even the air he breathed.

He walked up behind her, smacking her on the buttocks hard enough to sting, even through the many layers of fabric in her dress and petticoat. She yipped in surprise. If that stung, what would it feel like with nothing to protect her skin?

"I'm going out to get feed. I expect dinner when I get back." He walked to the door, grabbing a silver flask and whistling for the dog to follow.

She watched him over her shoulder, relieved that he was leaving.

He paused to say, "Oh, yeah, since you enjoy wearing men's clothes so much, I put some in your dresser. Put them on; they'll be more appropriate for farm work, anyway."

Bianca's jaw went slack as he walked, laughing, to his wagon. She wouldn't wear his breeches no matter what he said; she'd rather get the horsewhip! She walked to the door to tell him just that, but the words were stuck.

"Hey, princess, I'm an angry drunk." He held up the flask. "You'll probably regret not taking advantage of my earlier offer." He pulled up the reins and rode off down the road.