

Chapter One

“Hey, Willafred, git out on the floor and flash yer wares ‘afore I take my belt to yer ass. No one can see ya hidin’ in that there corner. Ya ain’t makin’ me any money doin’ what yer doin’ which is nothin’.” Spittle dribbled down the barkeeps’ flabby jowls, splashing fresh spots on his already tobacco-stained shirt. Nathan swore under his breath when the man yanked a ratty towel from the waistband of his pants and wiped his face.

It’d be just his luck the shot glass he held in his hand had been wiped with the same towel. Too damn late if it was. He’d already downed half of the contents. He shifted his attention to the woman dawdling in the corner not far from where he sat. Despite the harsh words hurled at her from across the room, she stayed right where she was. Tension built between boss and whore as they’d stared at each other. It wouldn’t be long before they butted heads and Nathan did not want to be caught in the crossfire. He had a matter to settle and, in order to do so, he needed to stay focused. The barkeep flung the towel on the bar. He propped his meaty hands on his hips. The woman tossed back her head in a show of obvious defiance. Shit. No doubt about it. He’d be getting sidetracked and it pissed him off.

He wasn’t a man who stuck his nose in other people’s business. Call it self-preservation, but when it came to women and children, Nathan was the first to break his own rule. As a boy, he’d been forced to watch his father beat his mother, leaving behind horrific images in his mind. He had been too young to do anything about it at the time, but that wasn’t the case now. This son of a bitch needed to be taught some manners. Working girl, soiled dove, whatever, women deserved respect. If the barkeep attempted to make good on his threat to whip her ass, Nathan was ready to step in and turn the tables on the bastard and he’d do it with a smile.

“The name’s Willow, you jackass.” Her voice drifted from the shadows. Low. Belligerent. Nathan’s mouth quirked in amusement. Sassy little thing. Problem was, her outspokenness would more than likely land her into a heap of trouble.

Nathan eyed Willow as she stepped into the light. He swore under his breath. He’d been mistaken. She wasn’t a woman. A girl stood before him with barely-there bosoms. A girl much too young to be working in a saloon. As if she sensed his censure, she angled her head to one

side. Long brown hair tumbled over one shoulder, one brow arched in defiance. Nathan narrowed his eyes. Beating a woman was out of the question, however, a few solid swats on the backside could accomplish a lot. Christ. He'd gladly throw in a half a dozen more whacks for the provocative way she was dressed and the amount of powder packed on her face. Thick kohl outlined her big brown eyes. Anyone with a lick of sense could see she was just a kid, but men who hung around this bawdy house thought about nothing else but getting their dicks wet.

Her spunk reminded him of his half sister, Charlotte. But if Charlotte were dressed in the same scantily manner, showing off her girly bits to a room full of horny men, he'd rip the place apart with his bare hands. Whatever higher power guided Silas Henry into her life would have his eternal gratitude after her real father, Travis Holt had walked out on her mother, Katherine Potter. Travis was Nathan's father as well and would leave him and his mother alone for months at a time without a word. When he'd come back, he never bothered to explain where he went or what he did, so it was quite possible he had no idea he had a daughter, just as Nathan hadn't known he had a sister.

They both met by accident and once Nathan learned they shared the same father, he swore he'd keep the bastard away from Charlotte. Travis was a ruthless, sick man with a mean right cross and a tongue sharp enough to leave mental scars. A man who took obscene pleasure in the pain of others. Charlotte had been spared his style of parental guidance, but Nathan hadn't been so lucky.

Nathan tossed back the last of his whiskey, embracing the burn as it slid down his throat, taking his mind off the moment. His reason for being in Cheyenne was simple. He was ready to confront his father. The fine hairs on the back of his neck bristled, a warning that what he was about to do might backfire and get himself killed. He immediately shook off the doubts and stiffened his resolve. Travis was here, in this very saloon, and before Nathan left Cheyenne, he'd confront the man who had a hand, or rather, fist in speeding up his mother's death. Even though the doctor insisted she had succumbed to pneumonia, Nathan placed most of the blame on his father's shoulders. Harsh beatings, especially during his last visit, left her weak, unable to fight the sickness that had fallen upon her much later. Either that, or she had given up on life. Nathan held no love for the man, hadn't for the longest time, but he was anxious to close this chapter in his life so he could move forward. To pave his own path and forget about the past. Possible? Yes. Likely? No. But, he'd give it his best shot.

Discovering he had a half sister did make his life a bit more bearable. His heart felt lighter. Charlotte Henry was as fiery as the color of her hair.

Nearly two years ago, he had the bright idea of stopping a stage. Just his way of blowing off steam after a long cattle drive. Josh and Billy Fallon, his boss's two sons had joined in on the melee. Fun and games, no one would get hurt, but how could he have known the brash young boy who had given him the most grief in a matter of minutes had been a female in disguise? He'd seen red when she delivered a sharp kick to his shin and, determined to teach 'Charley' a lesson, he threatened to bare the boy's ass for a whipping.

Tension and regret over the incident made his head throb. His careless actions still disturbed him even though he had no intention of carrying through with his threat. Subjecting the boy to some much-needed humiliation by stripping him naked would have been sufficient. In hindsight, the timely arrival of the esteemed Sheriff of Swiftwater had been a boon. Nathan might have paced in a cell for a few days in a pissed off state, but it would have been a hell of a lot worse if he had stripped 'Charley' naked and discovered her true gender.

The other woman who came to mind drove his emotions further south, swelling his cock near to bursting. Pretty, blonde haired, blue-eyed Bonnie Blakely. She had stopped by the jail to deliver his last meal before he was released. He'd caught her scent of vanilla and sex when she stepped closer to the bars and slid the tray through the opening. He longed to toss up her dress, sink to his knees and appease his more earthy appetite by delving his tongue through the slit in her bloomers straight up inside her pussy. Her round curves had tempted his baser male instincts and he had cursed his predicament. Any opportunity to explore the delightful hills and valleys of her body were way beyond his reach. Upon his release, he was to leave town. The ruling seemed rather strict for simple disruptive behavior. No one on the stage had been seriously harmed, still the sheriff had been adamant, offering no explanations.

But sweet Bonnie held the answers as to why the sheriff wouldn't budge from his decision and she was very willing to share only if he promised to punish Charlotte for stealing away the attention of a man she claimed to love. The slew of hatred that poured from her pink lips stunned him. Surely this angel standing before him had no idea what she was asking him to do. Never in his life had Nathan deliberately set out to hurt anyone, especially a female. He was not like his father.

Disgusted, he had lashed out, mouthing in explicit detail what he'd do if he got his hands on this woman named Charlotte, only it was the image of the blonde beauty in front of him that filled his head and spurred him on. He'd fuck her. Spank her ass. Take her body in every way possible. His deliberate use of crude words made her cringe. Could she live with such guilt on her conscience if he agreed to do as she had asked? Bonnie had become distraught and her blue eyes welled with tears. Nathan regretted being quite so harsh, but felt it was what she needed to hear. Life wasn't a bowl of cherries. There was only one way to truly hurt a woman. A way that would leave her scarred. Broken.

Bonnie Blakely immediately showed remorse. She wasn't as mean as she pretended to be. Her face had blanched and she had practically begged him to forget her plan. Her show of compassion impacted him more than he thought it would. Before he could reassure her that he wasn't the monster he made himself out to be, the sheriff burst inside, interrupting their conversation. Tom Davis openly ignored him and scolded Bonnie as he marched her out of the room. A jailhouse was no place for a lady. Shortly after, Nathan was set free and warned not to show his face in Swiftwater again. As Nathan mounted his horse, he covertly glanced around, hoping for a glimpse of Bonnie, but she was nowhere in sight. Perhaps it was for the best. He had nothing to offer a lady. With no other choice, he left the town of Swiftwater behind.

It was near the outskirts of town that he had caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. Despite his better judgment, he turned directions to investigate. Beneath a cluster of trees, he saw a woman crouched on the ground. She appeared frightened at first, then her eyes narrowed in anger as he drew closer. He couldn't find any fault in her reaction. He was, after all, the man who nearly had her stripped bare and beaten. This was the woman Bonnie had asked him to hurt. Charlotte, aka Charley, rose to her feet and faced him squarely, belligerently. A couple of minutes passed. He played cat to her mouse, then they began to talk. That was when he learned the truth about her parentage. Both were shocked at the news and although Charlotte had asked him to stay, Nathan knew what he had to do. He had to turn his back on the chance to settle down in one place, get to know his new family, perhaps explore the possibility of a relationship with Bonnie, all this in order to keep track of Travis and steer him away from the peaceful town of Swiftwater. Far away from Charlotte.

But, as Nathan soon learned, Travis never overstayed his welcome. Danger lurked wherever the professional gambler went. Rumors of men seeking vengeance on the man who had

taken their money would reach his ears and he'd move on, leaving a weary and ticked Nathan with no other choice but to saddle up and follow. The constant traveling wore thin. He needed money and did odd jobs, keeping an ear out for information on Travis and where he went. His last job landed him quite a bit of money and that was when Nathan decided he had had enough. He didn't care about the threats against his father. He'd thank the man who ended his father's life, but sometimes things didn't go the way one wanted. Nathan waited for the right moment. Now the wait was over. The man who killed his mother was here in Cheyenne. In this saloon and, as far as Nathan was concerned, much too close to Swiftwater for his peace of mind.