

Depths of Desire

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Chapter One

Mary Rose laid her cheek on her broom, leaning lazily against it in front of the pile of dust she'd just carefully collected, looking dreamily off into the gritty, brown distance. Dust was the one and only constant in Clementine, New Mexico. Everything else was up for grabs. Clementine was a boomtown. Someone found a tiny mite of gold in the Verde River a few years ago, and since then, she guessed, every man, woman, and child for miles around—and from as far away as the East Coast, where she was from—had descended on the tiny town, stretching both its geographical limits and its fortunes almost to the breaking point.

But Mary Rose hadn't come out here to the desert to find gold, which was a good thing, since no one had found any since that old miner's anemic strike. She'd come out to help her uncle—and her aunt, she supposed uncharitably—run a dry goods store. Uncle Shep had been the sole reason for the couple's exodus from their comfortable but not lavish home in Virginia to the wilds of New Mexico. Aunt Alma had to tag along for the ride, of course, yammering and complaining all the way, Mary Rose was undeniably sure.

Uncle Shep was one of Mary Rose's favorite people of all time. He was unfailingly kind and gentle and saw the humor and goodness in almost anything. He was the exact opposite of the woman he'd chosen to tie himself to, and the family had frankly scoffed when he'd gotten the idea in his head to move his relatively profitable dry goods and general store to the heathen-filled West.

But Shep had known exactly what he wanted as soon as he'd seen the flyer calling for people to come west and make their fortune. What better place to set up a new venture than the frontier? Didn't people out there need the things he had to offer much more so than his current customers, who could go to at least one other merchant in their small town and many more, if they were willing to travel a little to a larger city? He had always had the wanderlust, but he'd never been able to indulge it. He made up his mind that, before he was too old to do it—even though most of his well meaning relatives would tell him that he was already too old—he was going to strike out and cross the country. He crammed everything he could think of that would help seed a store into the wagon—so much so that there was barely room for the two of them and their meager personal provisions.

Less than a year later, Mary Rose's father had received a letter inviting her out to stay with them. Uncle Shep had threatened to do that the whole time he was preparing to leave. He was going to miss his niece something terrible. "As if we're going to let her go and get scalped by those Injuns," her father had surmised before reading the next sentence. "Filthy heathens."

"Read the letter, Al," her mother had admonished, eyes rolling discreetly as their housekeeper, Anna, filled her husband's bowl with hearty beef stew.

"Nothing out there but tumbleweed and dirt and savages..."

"Read the letter, Al," Sarah Caldwell urged gently, but without much hope that her husband would respond to her soft prompt.

Across the table, Mary Rose had grinned. Her parents were so set in their ways. It was funny to watch them sometimes. Other times, it could be incredibly annoying. It was her uncle's next sentence that got them:

"Please tell Al that there are no filthy heathen savages out here anymore."

Uncle Shep knew his brother all too well. The main point of his letter was to encourage Mary Rose to come out. She had always been his favorite niece, and he missed her company—especially considering whom he was left with. Shep and Mary Rose had played chess together—badly—and he had even been able to bully his stodgy older brother into letting Mary Rose sit in on one of his famous poker nights. Well, he'd been able to work around his brother about it, anyway, simply by inviting Mary Rose to stay over at his house on a Saturday night.

At first, Albert Caldwell had been dead set against his daughter making the trip. But his wife knew how much Mary Rose wanted to go. And what better time to go than now? She had graduated from Miss Emily's School for Girls several years ago and dutifully attended all of the dances for which her mother accepted invitations. The family didn't make anywhere quite enough money for her to attend the high society balls that were thrown in St. Regis, Virginia, but they had at least scraped together enough money to send her to a finishing school, for all the good it had done.

But Mary Rose was well on her way to becoming an old maid. It wasn't that she was ugly, thankfully, her mother had often mused when she was of a mood to try to dissect why not one of the men in their small town had taken a liking to her girl. Mary Rose had a long, luscious fall of naturally streaked blonde hair that looked almost like frosted gold in places. Her eyes were big and shockingly blue, her lips and cheeks full and red—without any artifice, which Albert frowned on and wouldn't allow his daughter, anyway. They weren't made of money, but they were fairly comfortable, and her daughter's clothes were pretty and well made, if a season or so behind the current fashions. Mary Rose had a sweet, generous, loving personality—if a somewhat stubborn one. Mrs. Caldwell blamed her husband for that.

There was only one real fly in the ointment, as far as Sarah was concerned; her daughter had a brain.

She blamed Shep for this, directly. He'd doted on his niece and had encouraged her to study and get good grades in subjects other than comportment and poise. Sarah's harshest warning whenever Mary Rose went on a date was that she shouldn't appear too intelligent. Men didn't like girls they thought were too smart.

But despite everything Sarah tried to do, throwing her daughter at any possible available male, especially after she turned twenty—there were no prospects for a husband in sight. No one. Oh, she'd had dates—more when she was younger, of course—but there were still the few unsuspecting men who could be conned into taking her out—properly chaperoned, of course. Uncle Shep used to volunteer to go out with the prospective couple—a duty that Sarah was only too willing to farm off on someone else. Mary Rose had always claimed that her mother made her nervous when they were out, and so Shep became a surrogate father for that time, which was a task he more than enjoyed.

Mary Rose gave another few useless swipes at the wooden sidewalk in front of the saloon while wearing a big grin at the pleasant memories. Uncle Shep always knew her better than anyone else did. He knew her secret; she didn't want to get married. Not at all. She didn't want some man controlling her life, like her mother's was controlled by her father, and she certainly didn't want to turn into some mean-spirited shrew like her aunt, under any circumstances. Sarah Caldwell didn't seem to be too unhappy about her lot in life, although Mary Rose didn't know if

she could say the same for Uncle Shep, but Mary Rose also knew how her father kept her mother in line.

He spanked her. Now, granted, she had gotten it a couple of times when she was younger for doing foolish things, but her mother got a licking every time she so much as raised her voice or looked somewhat askew at her father. There was no way that Mary Rose was going to put up with that.

Furthermore, she was smart, and she refused to hide it.

So when she and Uncle Shep would have one of their "dates" with some poor unsuspecting man, they would deliberately speak over the man's head. They would begin a conversation in one language and end it in the other. They would argue insignificant philosophical topics to the point where one of her dates actually fell asleep into the nice dinner he'd bought. Now, Mary Rose was too softhearted by far to be really cruel to anyone, but the point was well made.

No man ever asked her out again, which was exactly as she—and Shep—wanted it. Shep had his own agenda for Mary Rose. He and Alma had never had any children. Frankly, she barely let him close enough to her to create any, but that was another subject altogether. He wanted Mary Rose to inherit the store—wherever it ended up being. He didn't want her husband to inherit it, he wanted her to. He'd been carefully cultivating her interest in business and had even shown her how to do his books. She'd picked it up immediately. She had a facility for things like that and soaked up the knowledge he imparted to her like an eager sponge.

So, even if she didn't get married—which Shep frankly hoped she didn't—she'd have the store to support her.

But, as Mary Rose had discovered when she got out there, Clementine already had a dry goods store. So Uncle Shep had sold his wares to the current mercantile owner, a Mr. Seymour, and turned his attentions to running an inn just outside of town, whose owner had just left this world in an unfortunate and rather violent manner—some sort of dispute about cards and money, neither of which were healthy topics in a town like Clementine. The inn itself was highly respectable, and even Aunt Alma couldn't find a fault with it—but it did have a smallish saloon attached, and, no matter how she nattered at Shep, she couldn't get him to close that part of the establishment down.

Alma made sure everyone within earshot knew of her innate disapproval of the bar and its patrons—most especially those girls who would want to take their "acquaintances" up to rooms in her hotel. She staunchly refused to allow anyone she thought looked the least bit suspicious loose to even cross the inn's threshold, denying everyone of many, many profitable transactions.

Partially because of Alma's priggishness, the inn experienced a considerable decline due to lack of funds. Its previous owner had an understanding with the girls and had been making a tidy sum at the time of his demise, by taking both room rent and a cut of their take. But there wasn't quite enough traffic in Clementine to support three hotels, two of which were at better locations in town.

Despite the fact that Shep desperately wanted Mary Rose's company, she knew she was truly only another mouth to feed when her aunt and uncle could barely afford to put food in their own mouths. She had already been making quiet plans to return home when Uncle Shep had taken sick. It was the yellow fever, and he had wasted away in a matter of a week. Aunt Alma, who had been driven to exhaustion taking care of her husband, followed within a month. If she were generous, Mary Rose would say that Alma wanted to follow Shep because of her deep love

of him, and she did have to admit that Alma had taken excellent care of Shep, even as he grew sicker and sicker. They had spelled each other at night, but Alma had been alone with him all day while Mary Rose ran things. She supposed Alma did love him, in her own way, but certainly not in the way Mary Rose would ever love her husband. The only weeping and wailing at Shep's death had been her own, and it had drawn a sharp reprimand from her aunt for making a scene.

Mary Rose took a deep breath, strands of her golden blonde hair blowing into her eyes as quickly as she could scrape them away. She was truly alone for the first time in her life—had been since Alma died two months ago. There was no longer enough money for her to go home. Oh, she could petition her parents for it, she supposed. Her mother would love her daughter to come back to where she could again be tucked neatly under her mother's thumb.

But Mary Rose was not the same young woman who had come out to the West just a short six months ago. She had learned how to handle her uncle's business, had learned how to deal with drunks and women of ill repute—most of whom she found acted no better or worse than the upper class women she'd been forced to hang around with in finishing school—and had two relatives die in her arms. As much as Uncle Shep did his level best to keep her fairly sheltered, it was a hard row to hoe out here. The West was truly a wild place, where lawmen only arrived in time to clean things up—never soon enough to prevent them from happening in the first place.

Clementine had no full-time sheriff, although there was always a notice tacked up on the door of what was supposed to be his office, letting everyone know that the town council—such as it was—was looking for someone to fill the bill. There was a judge who roved around the territories, Silas Neville, but his stops were few and far between, as his attention was more drawn to the bigger towns—Santa Fe and Albuquerque, to the south. If they truly needed justice in the town, a rider would have to be sent to try to track him down, and that could take months—if the man survived.

The Texas Rangers made the occasional appearance, usually because they were looking for some outlaw or another. Technically, they had no jurisdiction as of the boarder, but they were well respected and carried a lot of weight with the locals—and any potential nuisances—by their mere presence. Mary Rose had nearly been run over by a posse of them, one of the first days she was in Clementine. Sometimes, although it really was a small town, just crossing the street was taking your life in your hands, but then, sometimes, just inhabiting this place was deadly enough. The only merchant who was sure of his future was the casket maker. He had more business than he could handle.

After finishing with the sweeping outside—well, she grimaced, as close as she could tell, given that a thin layer of dust persisted on nearly every flat surface, despite all of her valiant attempts at preventing it—Mary Rose walked slowly inside, noting with a sinking feeling just how grubby and grimy everything was. She sighed heavily and picked up a rag, polishing each of the chairs and tables methodically, until her arm hurt.

"That ain't gonna do you no good," came a husky, hoarse voice from just beside the bar. One thing Uncle Shep had done when he ended up as a barkeep was to make sure that the bar was as elegant as possible—hoping to deter the lowlier elements, not that it had worked. It was pure mahogany, with padded leather bumpers and a glowingly polished brass foot rail. The bar was huge—there were twelve matching stools in front of it. Its size was rather ridiculous, considering that it stood dead empty most nights. Despite that fact, it was fully stocked, with everything from absinthe to zinfandel. There was the occasion when Mary Rose had seriously

considered drinking her way from one end of the bar stock to the other, but, luckily, those moments were generally few and far between.

The owner of the voice was one of the working girls—speaking of few and far between. As the bars and hotels in town became more and more popular, the Tenderfoot Saloon and the Lilac Rose Inn had been less in favor with the women of the evening—which had made Alma absolutely ecstatic. Now Mary Rose had to deal with the financial fallout.

Penny, who wasn't that much younger than Mary Rose, but was certainly more mature in the ways of men, sauntered around in front of the bar, leaning her elbows back against it, making her breasts jut out and strain against the barely-there lace that had been hastily stitched into the front of her soiled dress. "It's just gonna get dirty again. I don't know why you keep a-cleanin'. Just a waste of time, you ask me."

Mary Rose—who really didn't have a problem with Penny plying her trade, as long as she used a modicum of restraint in dressing, which was why her breasts didn't just pop entirely out of their worn fabric constraints—gave the other woman a withering glance. "Because it'll get ahead of me if I don't. You could always grab a rag and help me."

Penny pulled the tattered embroidered shawl over her rounded shoulders. "You know I can't be seen doing that. Why, men don't want women with rough servant-girl hands touching them."

It was in her mind to question Penny about why she thought she was too good for cleaning, yet not too good to lay down for any man who had a dollar in his pocket. But Mary Rose decided that she wasn't sure she wanted to get into that with Penny again—and she wasn't sure it was even a whole dollar that was charged.

Mary Rose shook her head. Living out here had certainly changed the way she thought. Back home in Virginia, she would never have thought of wondering exactly what a harlot charged a man and for what. But she was growing up really quickly out here. Much more quickly, she was quite sure, than her parents would care for.

As the pleasant, tart scent of lemon oil wafted into the air while she polished, Mary Rose faced the fact that she liked being out here on her own. Oh, she definitely missed Uncle Shep—Aunt Alma, not so much, she admitted to herself with a half-smile. Now she had no one to boss her around—no one to tell her what to do. Her parents were across the country, and her father couldn't lay down the law from that far away. She could do anything she pleased.

As long as it didn't cost money.

Luckily, she pleased to work as hard as she possibly could, determined to make a go of this place, as a legacy to Uncle Shep. If it took having working girls around, then that's what she'd do. If it took hanging naked from the rafters, she'd seriously consider it. She wanted to make this little town her home, and she did her level best to make sure they drew all the business they could from the other two hotels. Her prices were already slashed to the bone in both establishments. She offered hot baths for two bits to the cowboys coming in off the range, letting them use an old tub that Uncle Shep had dragged outside. Bathers were given a modicum of privacy by sheets that were hung all around the tub. Towels, soap and shaving accessories were, of course, all available for an extra fee.

During cattle drives, this made a fair bit of money. But the drives were a ways off yet. She needed money now. The inn was empty—except for Penny's infrequent use—and the saloon was empty more nights than not.

Sometimes, she thought she might have to follow in Penny's footsteps, and the idea made her cringe. She'd never much liked men—her Uncle Shep and, sometimes, her father excluded—

never felt any sort of interest in swooning over them like a lot of her contemporaries did, debasing themselves in order to snag that all important husband. It was bad enough that if she did get married, she'd be expected to let her husband have his way with her body...and just what the specifics of that were, she wasn't sure. But letting some stranger see her nude? Put his hands all over her? A painful shudder wracked her body. She'd die before she let that happen.

* * *

Hours later, as she was washing dishes in the makeshift sink at the back of the saloon, Mary Rose heard the patter of large feet which had been wedged into stylish button up boots at the expense of the wearer's comfort and pocketbook. Penny's, no doubt. Just to make sure, she wandered into the bar, drying her hands on a dishtowel and looking at the panting girl expectantly.

"Rumors are flyin' in town."

Mary Rose pursed her lips and turned to go back to the dishes. "Rumors are always flying in Clementine. There's never any substance to them. Remember the one about President McKinley coming here? As if that man has the time to stroll through this grubby little town."

Penny huffed indignantly. "Well, if you don't want to know about it..."

Despite the fact that she generally didn't indulge in gossip as a matter of course, having been raised by a mother who disdained it completely, Mary Rose found herself looking for an excuse to hear what Penny had to say. Then she took herself to task within her own mind. She was alone out here. There was no one to oversee her behavior, and she could, within reason and good sense, of course, do as she pleased. If she wanted to hear about whatever prattle was going on in town, then she could. Mother would never find out, thankfully.

She turned and fussed with her skirts, edging her hip up onto a barstool, which she would never have done if the bar hadn't been completely deserted. "What? Did Mrs. Jenkins swear she saw an Indian war party on her evening stroll again?"

Penny's eyes rolled right along with Mary Rose's. "Not that I heard tell. Not that she didn't, you understand...it's just that no one was talkin' about it right then."

Mary Rose laughed softly. Mariah Jenkins' reports of Indian activity were always to be taken with a grain of salt. Most people in town thought she was an out and out nut, but Mary Rose preferred the more charitable description of eccentric. Mariah was a widow, who owned a lot of land in and around town, and she had her own concerns about it, Injuns being among her foremost worries, even though there wasn't a hostile Indian for miles around and hadn't been an out and out attack in more than a decade.

Penny leaned closer to Mary Rose, her ample bosom squashed into the bar in what looked like a painful manner. "No, what they're talkin' about is that outlaw, El Diablo. He's been spotted not too far from here."

Mary Rose's eyebrow crooked. "By someone more reliable than Mrs. Jenkins, I assume?"

"Yep," Penny breathed, nodding vigorously. "You heard about the trains?"

There had reportedly been several instances of a gang of thugs stopping and robbing trains as they entered the territory. The engineers, as well as any passengers who resisted in any way—and even some that didn't—were shot and left for dead as the thieves galloped away with anything of value they could take.

"I did."

"Well, they've been robbing banks in Texas and the territory, some of them not too far from us. They say the Rangers are on their tail, but the crooks seem to always be a step ahead of them." Penny's voice was reduced to a near whisper. "Word on the street is that they're completely ruthless and that they'll shoot you as soon as look at you, then laugh while you writhe and gasp your last breath in the dirt."

Disliking that particular mental image, Mary Rose stood and headed back to work. "That doesn't sound like anything out of the ordinary for an outlaw."

Penny shivered behind her, staring at the door to the saloon as if the apocalypse was about to burst through it. "I don't like it, Miz Caldwell. I don't like it a-tall. They hit the bank in Clearwater and killed everyone in it—men, women, and children."

That gave Mary Rose pause. Clearwater wasn't but an hour or two away by horseback. That was, she had to admit, uncomfortably close. She shook off the fissure of fear that ran down her back, spiking her nipples tightly against her chemise. "I still say there's nothing here to draw them."

Penny let the topic drop, but neither woman was completely at ease for the rest of the day.