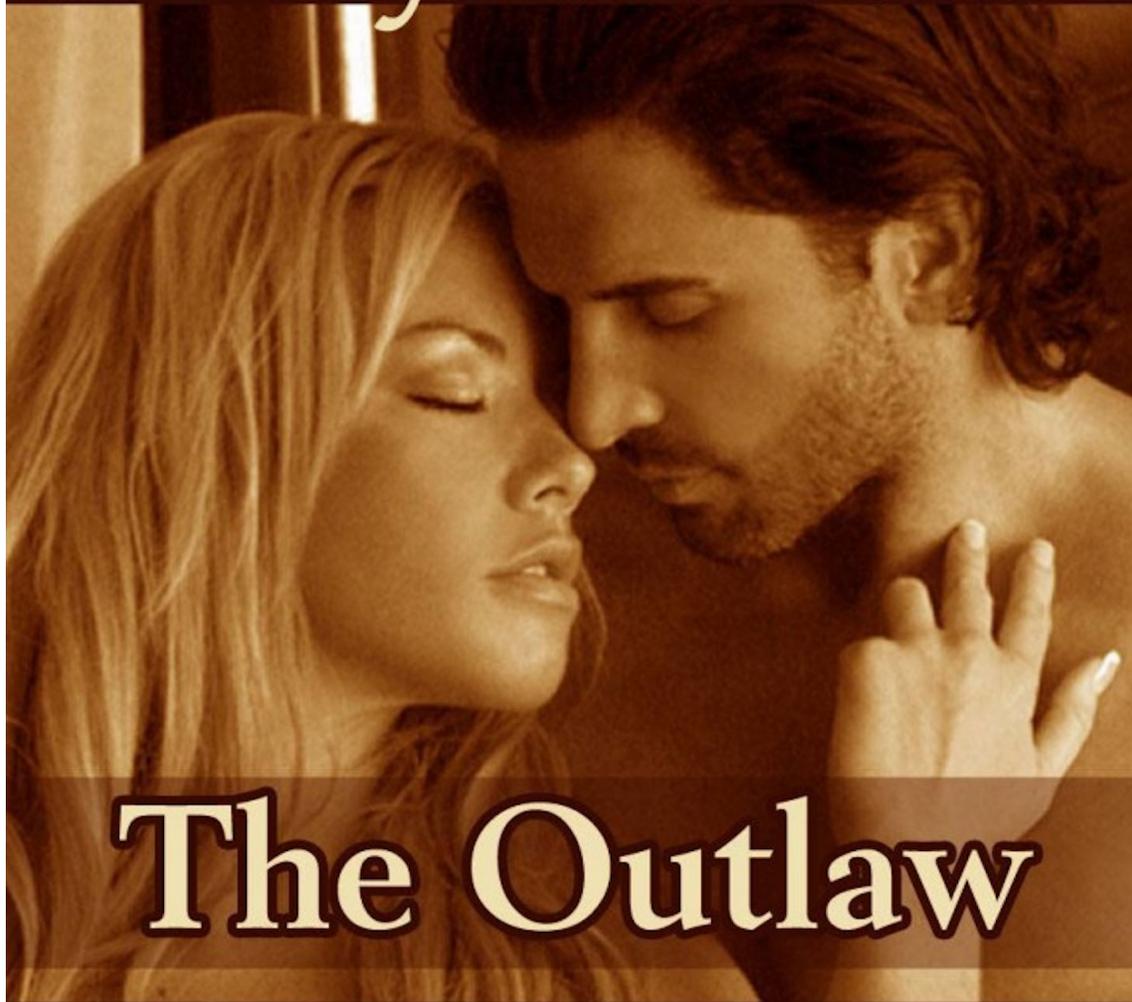


Lily Graison



The Outlaw



A Willow Creek Book

Chapter One

Wyoming Territory - 1869

There were outlaws in the bank. Sarah Hartford sucked in a quiet breath and whispered, "Sweet Lord above not again." Her comment drew the attention of Thomas Jenkins, the clerk working the counter with her. When he looked toward the door and saw the gunmen, he screamed like a little girl. The commotion in the room stopped as everyone inside the building turned to look at each other. When they saw the four armed men at the door, their frightened screams echoed Thomas.

The men stood at the entrance of the bank and Sarah's heart felt lodged in her throat. How many times had she seen this same scenario play out before? Five? Six? She couldn't remember. What she did know, was what they wanted and how they'd go about getting it.

She looked at the four men again and didn't have to be told who led this gang of ruffians. The man still standing by the door did. His presence seemed to suck the air from the room. He was tall and imposing. His shoulders were wide, the dusty, worn trail coat brushing his knees stretched across his frame and made him appear even larger. Or maybe it was the fact the sun was shining in the door behind him, casting him in a ring of brilliant light. He looked like an avenging angel. Well, except for the rifle propped neatly against the crook of his arm. Maybe angel of death was a better description.

His black hat rested low over his eyes, obscuring their color. They looked menacing even from across the room. A red bandana was pulled up over his face, resting on the bridge of his nose, a hint of dark stubble barely seen on the edge of his jaw. Two shiny revolvers hung low on his hips and Sarah was sure he knew how to use them. A gunslinger. She'd bet her inheritance on it. His stance was too casual, too confident, not to be. This was a man who knew what he was doing and she knew, whoever hid beneath that disguise, wasn't a man to be trifled with. He proved it by casually lifting the rifle in his arms and firing off one shot into the ceiling.

Sarah stood behind the bank counter and watched the men without flinching. The women in the bank all screamed again, along with Thomas, before hitting their knees and cowering before the outlaws. She'd done the same thing a time or two. Her father's bank had been robbed countless times and today's robbery played out like all the others. She knew what came next.

The man by the door glanced around the room, his cold eyes landing on every person before he looked back up. "Ladies and Gentlemen, if you can give me just a moment of your time, I'll make sure this little inconvenience don't mess with your supper plans." He took a step, the spurs on his dusty boots clicking on the wooden floor as he walked farther into the room. His gait was slow, sure. The butt of his rifle was propped on his hip and he moved like a lethal predator. His whole demeanor matched his voice. Hard, deadly. A shiver raced up Sarah's spine as her pulse leaped.

The gunslinger nodded to the man on his right before looking over at the counter. "If one of you fine bank tellers would be so kind as to help my friend here empty out your safe, I'd be much obliged."

Sarah straightened her spine and leaned forward, knowing Thomas would soil himself if he had to look at these criminals, let alone speak to them. “The safe is empty. The stagecoach left early this morning with most of the money.”

The man with the red bandana turned his head toward her, tilting it a fraction. He studied her for long moments. Too long. Her skin heated, her cheeks warming under his intense stare. Did he know she was lying? The skin around his eyes crinkled and she didn’t have to see his face to know he was smiling at her. “Well,” he said, moving the shotgun to lie across his arm again. “That’s mighty disappointing, Miss...?”

Sarah didn’t answer his unspoken question. “There’s enough in deposits to get you out of town. Take the money and go.”

“I intend on doing that, along with what’s in the safe.” He thumbed the front of his hat up a fraction before those crinkles around his eyes were seen again. “I know for a fact the stage hasn’t been through here today and there’s a wad of cash in that vault big enough to choke my horse. Now hand over what you got. Everything.”

Bile rose up quick, hot and thick in Sarah’s throat but she met the robber’s eyes briefly before reaching under the counter. She heard Thomas, the other bank teller, gasp when he saw what she was doing and threw him a look, hoping he’d keep his mouth shut. When her fingers wrapped around the shotgun her father kept under the counter, Sarah prayed this wouldn’t be her last day on earth.

A glance at the leader as he directed one of his men to go get the money was all the distraction she needed. Pulling the gun from under the counter, she raised it, aimed at the leader, and pulled the trigger.

The screams echoed in the room again and Sarah was shocked to see the gunslinger look toward the wall behind him. He was smiling again when he turned back to face her. The crinkles around his eyes told her so. "You missed."

Sarah swore under her breath. She'd aimed at his middle and still missed him? And the arrogant man didn't even flinch. When the other three men pointed a gun at her, she lowered her shotgun, glancing at everyone in the room before looking back at the leader.

"Take her firearm." The man to her left walked forward and snatched the gun from her, tossing it to the man she couldn't seem to take her eyes off of. He caught it with one hand and laid her shotgun across his arm with his own. "Now, we're wasting valuable time here. Get those deposits in the bag, and what's in the safe, and we'll be on our way."

Sarah glared at the man who stepped up to the counter and thrust the bags at her. She snatched them from the outlaw's hand, scowling as she went about her task. When the bags were full she handed them back to the waiting man.

Looking back at the leader, she raised her chin, meeting his hardened gaze. "You'll not make it out of town. I'm sure the marshal is waiting for you outside as we speak."

"I doubt that. It'll take him a while to get out of the jail, especially after I went to the extra trouble of trussing him up so nicely." He ordered his men out and sat her gun down on the table by the wall. "Much obliged, ma'am." He

tipped his hat to her, staring at her for long moments before walking back out into the bright sunlight, the echo of his spurs against the wooden floor ringing in her head long after he disappeared from sight. A collective sigh went through those in the bank and Sarah wanted to join them. Instead, she cautiously walked out from behind the counter.

Her blood was near boiling point now that the immediate danger was over. Her outrage burned like acid in her stomach that these scoundrels would saunter into her father's bank and steal what little these people had.

There wasn't a sound from outside. No outcry from anyone. What was wrong with the people of this town? These bandits had robbed them blind and they weren't going to lift a finger, or their voice, in protest?

Seeing the shotgun on the table, Sarah crossed the room and snatched it up before running to the counter and reloading it. "Thomas, run out the back and try to get to the jail." He looked at her, startled, and protested but she ignored him and ran to the front door, ignoring those in the bank telling her to stay behind the counter.

Stepping out on the newly laid wooden sidewalk she set her sights on the outlaws, all sitting on their horses now, looking for one in particular. She found him moments later. He was shouting orders for the others to go. Lifting the heavy gun, she sighted on him and pulled the trigger.

The outlaw's hat flew over the top of his horse's head. The animal reared up on its hind legs before the rider was able to get control of him. He turned the beast back to the bank and Sarah lifted the gun again. It wasn't loaded but she hoped he would think otherwise.

His black hair shone in the noonday sun. It was long, curling over the collar of his coat and fell over his forehead to lie across his eyebrows. He lifted his hand to push those fallen strands away from his face and her breath was cut short when he locked eyes with her. She was finally able to see them. They were the palest blue she'd ever seen. They held her in place, taunting her inability to handle the gun. The skin around his eyes wrinkled again and she knew he was smiling. She'd nearly shot his head off and the arrogant man was smiling.

"You missed. Again."

Sarah lifted the gun another inch. "Maybe, but not by much. Shall I keep trying?"

He laughed, a deep rumbling sound that Sarah felt to the soles of her feet. She glanced down the dusty street at the other end of town. The townsfolk were stirring, some running toward the jail.

If this outlaw had indeed tied William, the marshal, up it wouldn't be long before he was loose. Looking back at the outlaw, she noticed he seemed in no hurry to leave. He was still watching her, his arms now folded over the pommel of his saddle, his hat abandoned on the ground. She lifted her chin to him when he did nothing but sit there and stare at her. "What are you waiting for?"

"I thought you were going to shoot me."

She swallowed. He knew the shotgun was empty. He was taunting her. Lowering the gun, she rested the barrel on the sidewalk. "The marshal will be here soon. Stay where you are."

His laughter followed her curt demand. He sat up suddenly, swung his leg over the horse's back, and jumped to the ground. Sarah tensed and took two steps back.

Picking up his hat, he dusted it off and placed it on his head, lowering the front as he turned back to her. "It's been a real pleasure, ma'am, but I'm afraid I'm out of time." In an act that spoke of his arrogance, or complete stupidity, he raised his hand and lowered the bandana that covered his face. Sarah stared at him and knew she'd never see another man who looked as he did. Hard, cold and completely heart stopping.

The dusting of stubble on his chin made him look rugged. His square jaw, firm and strong. Full lips and high cheekbones that only accentuated his eyes more. They were mesmerizing. He was mesmerizing. She blinked and looked back down the street. They were coming. The townsfolk had finally snapped out of their daze and were coming. She didn't see William, her soon to be fiancé and town marshal, among them.

Turning back to the outlaw, Sarah saw him watching the men down the street. "Looks like they'll catch you after all," she said, smugly.

When he turned back to her, he smiled. "Maybe."

The curve of his mouth caught her attention. The whiteness of his teeth. All straight and he actually had them all. Something she wasn't used to seeing, especially in those who lived a life as rough as he probably did. Such perfection shouldn't be given to a rogue the likes of this man. He was too handsome by half. Too handsome for her good sense.

A ground-shaking explosion rocked her on her feet moments before a fireball lit up the sky. Screams and shouts followed, the sound of wood

splitting echoing in the distance before burning embers rained down onto the ground. She stared toward the old smithy in stunned silence as the fire grew. Hearing a horse snuffling, she turned back to the outlaw. He was in the saddle, staring at the chaos. With a final glance at her, he tipped his hat, smiled, and turned his horse, heading in the opposite direction of town.

Sarah dropped the gun and ran out into the street, watching him ride away with his stolen money, knowing no one would catch him. A man stepped off the sidewalk at the saloon at the end of the street and fired one shot at him. The outlaw's horse reared before he got it under control and he fired a shot back.

More gunfire from behind startled her and she turned. Another masked man was riding toward her. When she realized he wasn't slowing down, she turned and ran for the bank. She wasn't fast enough. A strong arm wrapped around her waist and she let out a startled scream as she was scooped from the ground and laid across the outlaw's thighs, belly down.

"Let me go!" Sarah struggled, kicking her feet and screaming. He smacked her hard on the bottom, laughing when she yelped, before snaking one arm around her waist and holding on. His grip was painful and her heart raced when the man from the saloon raised his gun at them when they neared. Thankfully he saw her and didn't shoot.

The outlaw drove the horse at a punishing pace and Sarah was powerless to do anything but shield her face from the onslaught of wind and dust. Her stomach rolled from the rapid jarring as the horse raced across the plain and from seeing the ground pass by in a blur under her. She turned her head to the man behind her and glanced up at him through her lashes. The lower half of

his face was covered, his eyes unreadable as stone. He stank to high heaven and his grip on her was this side of painful.

They left the town behind and rode for what seemed like hours through wide-open plains, the sun dipping down behind the mountains in the distance. The area was barren except for the sagebrush painting the horizon. The sun was hot and sweat trickled down her spine. He slowed the horse enough to sit her up. She was thankful as the blood that had collected in her head finally started traveling where it was supposed to go but this new position wasn't much better. The man behind her was felt more intimately against her bottom with every step of the horse. She shuddered at the thought of what he'd do with her when he reached where he was going.

As time passed, Sarah kept looking over her captors shoulder. She saw no one, no dust cloud signaling the approach of other riders. It meant William wasn't coming after her. Did he even know she'd been taken?

An hour later, at the base of a rocky outcrop, the outlaw slowed his horse and gave a whistle that pierced her ears. An answering call sounded in the distance and he nudged the horse into a gallop. Riding through a maze of solid rock, and into a small gorge, Sarah saw the others. The men who'd robbed her father's bank. They were sitting on the surrounding rocks, their horses off to one side grazing on the sparse grass growing in the small enclosed space. She looked for the man she thought was the leader, the man she'd tried to shoot, repeatedly, but missed. She didn't see him and puzzled over the fact.

She counted eight men total. There hadn't been that many inside the bank. Where had these extra men come from and were there more of them? Her initial fear grew as they all seemed to notice her at the same time. One

man stood, grinned and threw his head back and laughed. “Hot damn, Virgil. Where’d you find that piece of tail?”

The man at her back laughed and dumped her none too gently to the ground. “Standing in the middle of the road outside the bank. Figured since she was there, might as well have her.”

Sarah scrambled to a nearby rock, flattening her back to its rough surface and watched as the men laughed and gawked at her. Her knee ached from the fall off the horse and seeing so many men surrounding her, the fear she’d felt since being abducted grew.

Her hair, once pinned pristinely to the back of her head, had fallen to dangle around her face. She lifted her hand, pushing the mass of curls away so she could see and noticed her hand was shaking. She clamped it between her knees and let her gaze roam the entire area.

The scraggly group of men lounged in small groups, each one interested in her all of a sudden. Her heart started racing as she took them all in and she wondered what they were going to do with her. The images that came to mind caused a shiver to race up her spine.

A tall man, his long stringy hair hanging halfway down his back stood and took a few steps closer to where she sat. He stared at her, spit out a black stream of tobacco juice that dribbled down his chin, and shook his head. “Colt won’t let you keep her.”

Virgil, the foul smelling man who’d taken her, jumped from his horse. “Fuck Colt. He ain’t the law around here.”

Sarah listened to them argue, Virgil, the loudest. The majority of the conversation was about her but it soon turned to the money they’d stolen and

to Colt, the man Sarah now knew led this gang of ruffians. Her thoughts turned to him as she stared at the men around her. If tobacco guy said Colt wouldn't let Virgil keep her, did that mean he'd let her go? Somehow she didn't think so.

Long minutes ticked by and they seemed to forget she was there. While the men were occupied in their conversations, and heated arguments, Sarah slid along the rocks, inch-by-inch, careful to not make any sound. She was halfway to the small opening they'd ridden through by the time Virgil noticed her.

He cocked his head to one side, grinning at her. "Where you think you're going?"

Sarah froze, her eyes wide as she stared at him. When he took a step toward her she leaped to her feet and ran. He caught her before she could make it to the opening of the outcrop they were hiding in. When he picked her up, her feet dangling in the air, she screamed. Her shrieks only caused them more glee, their taunts of what they'd do with her spoken with more certainty.

Virgil yelled for a rope as he carried her to a nearby tree, the spindly branches sweeping low to touch the ground. The trunk was small and lashing her to it was done in a matter of minutes. With her hands behind her, fastened around the tree, she could move nothing but her feet, which she used whenever one of them came near her.

"She's a hellion, Virgil. Be hours a' fore we can break her."

Sarah's eyes burned and she blinked to erase the tears trying to form. "You come near me and I'll break your nose!" When Virgil walked toward her, his hands on his belt buckle, she gritted her teeth and hoped to God she'd have the strength to fight them all off.

“I can break her. Ain't no woman around who can resist me.”

Laughter from the others was blocked out as Sarah's gaze fell to Virgil. His belt was undone and when he reached into his pants, pulling out his erection, she turned her head.

The sun was going down, the sky painted in hues of purple and orange. Small puffy clouds dotted the horizon and she again wondered where William was. Of all the people she expected to come for her, he was the first on her list and not because he was the town marshal. He'd asked her to marry him. She should have given him a definite answer instead of telling him she wanted to think about it. Plain stubbornness had made her wait. That same stubbornness would probably be the death of her.

Virgil closed the distance between them and it wasn't until he was right in front of her that Sarah turned to look at him. And planted the toe of her boot in his groin. His womanly scream was followed by another as she kicked him again when he fell to his knees. Three more kicks followed the first two before he rolled far enough away she couldn't reach him. She was panting for breath by then, those tears she'd been fighting filling her eyes.

Watching the others, she waited for them to come at her but they were too busy laughing at Virgil's failed rape attempt to bother. The sun crept lower on the horizon and by the time Virgil was able to stand again, the air had cooled.

The look on his face when he turned toward her would have scared her on a normal day but after what she'd been through since noon, it didn't faze her much. He was angry, that was a given, and the taunts from his friends only made it worse.

He came at her again, knocking her foot away when she tried to kick him and backhanded her for her trouble. Her face exploded with heat from the brutal hit. When he grabbed her by the hair, slinging her head back into the tree, her vision blurred, her knees went weak, and her body slumped as pain shot through her head. His heated words were harsh next to her ear as he told her what he was going to do to her and she fought the dizzying need to close her eyes and slip into oblivion. He was pulling her skirts up when the laughter she heard in the background stopped. A small clicking sound in front of her forced her eyes open. The noise had come from a gun, its barrel lying against Virgil's temple.

“Let her go.”

Virgil stilled, his watery eyes fixed on hers. When he smiled, Sarah saw his rotten teeth and looked away, up at the man she'd tried to shoot at the bank. Their leader, the blue-eyed man she knew she'd never forget.

Colt, they had called him, glanced at her briefly; his eyes held a lethal calmness that caused a shiver to dance over her limbs.

Fixing his gaze back on Virgil, he took a step closer and pushed the barrel of the gun harder into the side of his head. “I won't ask you again, Virgil. Unless you want your brains splattered across this pretty lady's face, then I suggest you let her go.”

Chapter Two

Keeping the gun still was nearly impossible; Colt's rage was so intense. Riding into camp to hear laughter, to see the girl from the bank tied to a tree and Virgil's filthy hands on her had caused something inside him to snap. He'd wanted to shoot the bastard on the spot. The only reason he hadn't was because he was afraid he'd hit the girl.

Looking into her terrified face and seeing blood on her lip, along with a red handprint on her cheek, he knew Virgil wouldn't live to see morning. He'd make sure of that.

Virgil was slow to move but finally let go of her, backing away. Colt took a step in front of her, his gaze landing on the others scattered amongst the rocks. No one seemed inclined to dispute him. "Get ready to head out. The longer we stay here the more likely the chances of them finding us."

Wade stepped away from the rocks, spitting out a wad of tobacco before wiping his mouth with the back of one hand. "What took you so long to get back?"

Something in his eyes told Colt to tread carefully. "Had a few men follow me when I left town. I didn't think leading them here was a wise choice but correct me if I was wrong."

The others mumbled something he couldn't hear before they all stood and walked to their horses. Virgil flashed a scathing look toward him, and the girl at his back, before doing the same. When they were occupied seeing to their mounts, Colt turned around.

She didn't look as daring as she did back in town. She looked frightened now. Upon entering the bank, he'd done the same thing he always did. Count heads and locate the idiot who would try to be the hero. He'd never slapped that title on a woman before but the moment she pulled that shotgun out from under the counter, pointed it at him and fired, his heart had lodged in his throat. She'd missed, thank God. She had guts, he'd give her that. She didn't look as if she could handle a gun but shooting at him a second time proved him wrong. Luckily for him, she couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.

When the smoke cleared and he saw her standing there, barrel of the gun pointed at his head, some twisted part inside him had wanted her. Wanted to see if she was as feisty in bed as she was out of it. Something told him she was regardless of her slight frame.

His gaze roamed over her now that he could look his fill. She was finely built with a delicate bone structure with high, pert breasts shoved into the tight bodice of her gown. Her hair was the color of honey with streaks of pale yellow mingled throughout. It was down now, falling in waves across her shoulders, the ends swinging around her hips, and his fingers itched to touch it. Her lips were perfect and plump, like sweet strawberries waiting to be tasted. His groin tightened thinking of doing just that. Too bad he didn't have the time. Chances were, he'd never see her again.

The thought snapped him out of his musings and he reached for the knife in his boot. Cutting the rope tying her hands, she slumped and he barely caught her before she hit the ground.

Her waist was tiny and she was light in weight. A mere slip of a girl. Her hand rose to his shoulder, those large green eyes rising to look at him before she tried to jerk away.

“Easy now. I’m not going to hurt you.” He helped her to a nearby rock, dismissing her claims she could walk. When she was sitting he pulled the bandana from his neck and blotted at her lip. “It’s not the cleanest but it’ll stop the blood.”

She flinched and reached for it, giving it a dainty sniff before scowling. “Smells like outlaw to me.” She gave him a sardonic look before glancing past him to where the other men were. Colt followed her gaze, seeing everyone was on their horses and waiting.

Pulling one of the pistols from the gun holster around his hips, he handed it to her, folding her skirt around it. “Keep that. I’m sure someone will be along for you soon.”

Her eyes widened as she stared down at the gun. “You’re brave handing me this.”

“How so?”

She narrowed her eyes and leveled him with a look that promised violence. “I could shoot you the moment you turn your back.”

Colt grinned and leaned down, bracing his hands on his knees, to be eye level with her. “You could. Of course, the others will probably kill you once you do. Well, after they’ve raped you repeatedly, that is.”

Her color turned a funny shade of white before he saw her shudder. “Fine. I won’t shoot you.” She looked toward the others again before turning her attention back to him. “Am I to assume you’re leaving me here, then?”

“Have no choice, sweetheart. You don’t want to be around that bunch, now do you?” He glanced at the others. “Just sit tight and shoot anything that comes near you.” He grinned and lifted one eyebrow. “Assuming you could actually hit it, of course.”

She scowled and wrapped her hand around the gun. “I could have hit you if I’d really wanted to.”

Colt wasn’t too sure about that. “If you say so.” He stood to his full height and stared down at her. He loathed leaving her there but he didn’t have a choice. What he was about to do was too dangerous to involve her. She’d be safer there alone than she would be with him.

Giving her one last look, he turned and walked to his horse. The others were watching him but he ignored their stares. When he was in the saddle, he gave the order to ride out. He waited until the others were through the opening before turning to look back at the girl. She was standing, his gun clutched to her chest. She looked so tiny standing there, so young. Leaving her to fend for herself tore at his conscience but he had no choice. He couldn’t take her with him regardless of how much he wanted to.

Tipping his hat at her, he turned his horse and rode out, leaving her alone to find her own way back home.

* * *

Sarah gaped at his back as he rode away. How could he leave her in the middle of nowhere? Sure he was an outlaw who robbed her father’s bank but

he saved her from Virgil. That proved he had to have a heart, right?

“Apparently not.”

She shook her head. “What do I do now?” She glanced around the clearing, lost. She’d been kidnapped, almost raped, and now left stranded in the middle of the desert with nothing but an old bandana and a gun. She wasn’t even sure how to get back home and wandering the desert would get her nothing but dead.

Tears filled her eyes and she wiped angrily at them. Crying wouldn’t do her any good. She was still lost with no way home and the possibility of someone finding her was slim.

The more she thought about her current situation, the angrier she became. Regardless of who did what, it all came back to him. Colt. He was the cause of all this. It was probably his stupid idea to rob the bank in the first place. He was the reason she’d been taken and he was the reason she’d been left behind. He was to blame for all her troubles.

She should have known the moment he pulled that bandana away from his face in town, and she’d felt her heart flutter at the mere sight of him, that he’d be her downfall. Her father always told her to not get suckered in by a pretty face. Just because someone was pleasing to the eyes didn’t mean they weren’t trouble and she knew Colt was trouble down to his spur-embellished boots.

Clenching her teeth, she forced herself to not scream in frustration. If that man set one foot back in that rock gorge, she’d shoot him just to prove she could. “I’ll see you hanged for this, Colt!”

Hot, tired and thirsty, she started for the entrance and spent the next half hour navigating the labyrinth of rock the outlaws had used as their temporary hideout. Once she cleared the mountainous maze, she inhaled a deep breath and stared in wonder at the vastness before her. There was no way she could walk all the way back to town. "You could have left me some water," she said, to no one. "This gun will do me little good out here."

Sweat trickled down her back as she stood there. The sun was low in the sky, darkness only a few hours away but a case of nerves caused her stomach to ache and fear to crawl up her spine. She didn't want to be out there alone in the darkness.

Leaning against the rock wall, she considered her options. Sit and wait for someone to find her and possibly get eaten by some wild animal or try walking back to town and hope she didn't die on the way or get eaten by some wild animal. Either option was idiotic.

Blowing a strand of hair out of her face, she stuffed the gun into the inner pocket of her skirt. She looked at the bandana Colt had given her. It was the same one he'd used to cover his face during the bank robbery. The same one he'd pulled down so she could see his face. She bit back a smile and shook her head. Definitely arrogant. And every bit as handsome as she'd first thought. Her pulse leaped thinking of him. She scowled at her traitorous thoughts and tied the bandana around her hair to pull it off her face.

Seeing a dust trail in the distance, she walked toward it. It was probably the outlaws making their clean get-away but she hoped it was a rescue party coming for her. Surely William knew she was missing by now. He'd come for her. She was positive.

An hour later, the sun had sunk below the horizon and Sarah stopped when a strange noise caught her attention. She hadn't made it far from the rocks and the dust trail she'd seen in the distance was swallowed by the coming darkness. The rumbling noise grew and it didn't take long for her to realize it was the sound of horses running. A lot of them from the constant beat of it.

Squinting into the darkness she made out a faint shape. It was headed straight for her. She didn't know what it was but wasn't going to wait around to find out. Turning, she ran back the way she'd come. The noise grew louder and a glance over her shoulder showed a horse and rider. She couldn't make out who it was but her first thought was of Virgil. He'd probably shot Colt—the no good scoundrel—and had come back to finish what he started with her.

Picking up her skirts, Sarah ran faster, her breaths panted out in sharp gasps. Moments later, the horse was right behind her. Something touched her back, the contact fleeting before she felt an arm wrap around her waist and she was picked up and swung into the air. She screamed, clinging to the arm around her waist as she was placed on the horse. A look behind her showed Colt, the expression on his face unnerving. A glance over his shoulder and she knew why. More riders, their dark shapes darting out of the darkness before they'd form a single blur on the horizon.

“What's going on?”

“Trouble. Hold on.”

She did. Sitting sideways across his lap, Sarah wrapped her arms around his neck and kept her eyes on the riders behind them. Something had happened after they left. “Are those your friends following us?”

He laughed. "Never were my friends, sweetheart. But yes, that's them."

"What do they want?"

"Me dead most likely."

Sarah looked at him. "You dead?" At his nod she rolled her eyes. "So why did you pick me up? So I could be dead with you?"

He grinned. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but now you mention it..."

"You ass! Why couldn't you just leave me? Haven't you caused me enough trouble for one day?"

His smile grew before he glanced at her. "Gets lonely way out here by yourself. Figured since you had nowhere to be at the moment, you'd do as good as any for company."

Sarah scowled at him before giving him a small punch to his shoulder. "I dislike you very much, outlaw. You've been nothing but trouble since the moment I clapped eyes on you. What makes you think I'd want to spend five seconds in your presence, let alone hours?"

"Intuition."

She snorted a laugh. "You are insufferable."

"I'm a lot of things, sweetheart, but insufferable isn't one of them. I'm the best thing that could ever have happened to you."

Laughter came unbidden then. This man's arrogance knew no bounds. He may have been handsome, roguish even, but she doubted he was the best thing ever to happen to her. So far, he'd been the very worst of hell.

As the riders at their back grew fainter, their shadowy figures disappearing into the dark, Sarah settled into her abductor. Her body felt fatigued and the day's events were catching up with her. She hadn't eaten since

breakfast, her stomach grumbling as she thought it. A yawn escaped her and it wasn't until Colt pulled her closer that she looked at him, his profile a muted outline in the darkness surrounding them.

Since walking out of that rock maze, she'd thought of nothing but going home but she had to admit, some twisted part of her enjoyed being in this man's arms, regardless of what she told him. He was an outlaw, a gunslinger, probably, dangerous to his core, but it felt good to be held by him. She felt safe and with a gang of ruffians running loose, odds were in her favor that she'd come out all right being with this man.

If only her silly pulse would stop fluttering every time he looked at her.

His arm was still around her waist, his hold tight, and he held her close enough to his chest she could feel every muscle pressed against her as the horse jostled them. She glanced at his face, his bristled jaw line where his beard was growing in, his lips, outlined so perfectly by that dark shadowing of hair and she swallowed against the sudden thought of how those lips would feel against her own. Even though he was dirty, sweaty and downright scruffy looking, she didn't think she'd ever seen a more handsome man.

She blinked, turned her head and mentally kicked herself for even thinking such things. Colt was a dangerous man, in more ways than one. She'd do good to remember that.

Thoughts of William invaded her mind and she wondered why thinking of him didn't cause her heart to beat just a little bit faster. Why touching him didn't make her think things no decent woman would dare to think but with her arms around Colt, her body flush against his, she couldn't think of anything else.

This man was an outlaw and she'd do good to remember that. Lord only knew what atrocities he'd committed. He wasn't the keeping kind regardless of how much her pulse leaped to think it. He was dangerous and she needed to keep her distance.

A yawn caused her eyes to water and her last thought was erased as fatigue stole the last of her strength. She'd keep her distance later, when she was on her own two feet. For now, all she had was Colt and being trapped in his arms wasn't as unpleasant as it should have been. Laying her head on his shoulder, she snuggled closer to him, smiling to herself when his arm tightened around her waist.

Chapter Three

Colt jostled the girl awake, waiting until she sat up before climbing off the horse and reaching up for her. Her eyes were sleep groggy, her hair a wild tangle of blond curls where it fell down her back. He noticed his bandana wrapped around her hair at the base of her neck and bit back a smile.

The dress she wore, expensive from the look of it, was dirty, the white lace around the collar dingy and the shiny blue material had a small rip in the skirt.

She was a mess but he didn't think he'd ever seen anything more alluring.

When she was on her feet, he left her standing by the horse and cleared out a small spot by the boulders. It wasn't the best accommodations but they'd have to do. Walking back to the horse, he grabbed his bedroll, spread it by the rocks and turned to face her. "Get some sleep. We'll have to cut out before first light and I want to make it to the Montana border by midday tomorrow."

She crossed her arms under her breasts. "You've got to be joking."

He grinned and walked back to the horse. "Afraid not. Now either use that bedroll or I'll use it myself."

Pulling his saddlebags off the horse, he tossed them aside before unhooking the straps on the saddle. He unburdened his horse, running his hand over his back and talking softly to him before leading him to the spindly tree behind the rocks and looping his reins around a low lying limb.

When he walked back around to where he'd left the girl, she was still standing there, arms folded under those enticing breasts he couldn't seem to

stop thinking about. He gave them a brief glance then thumbed the front of his hat up. "What's the matter, sweetheart?"

She raised one sculpted eyebrow. "First, I'm not your sweetheart. I have a name. It's Sarah, if you must know. Second," she turned and pointed at the bedroll he'd laid out. "You can't possibly expect me to sleep on the ground like some... common criminal. I need a bed. A soft one, preferably. And food. I haven't eaten since breakfast. Nor have any of you scoundrels offered me a thimble full of water. Who kidnaps a woman and then lets her starve to death?"

Colt listened as she started to ramble off a list of complaints until he thought of gagging her and tying her to the horse. She may have been small and timid looking but she was anything but. Once she got going she barely even paused for breath.

He walked to the saddlebags, ignoring her tirade, and tossed the bags to her. "There's a bit of jerky in there. Best I can do at the moment. Water's in the canteen."

She stared at the bag near her feet for long moments before looking up. "Well, you're just as gentlemanly as they come, aren't you?"

Colt flashed her a smile. "When I need to be."

Rolling her eyes, she snatched the bag up and walked to the bedroll, sitting down before digging inside. He watched her, wondering what she'd find in there. He hadn't looked in so long, it was hard to tell.

He finished getting the horse settled then crossed to where she was and sat down, his back against the rocks. She removed everything from his bag. His extra clothes, his shaving kit, the pouch of money stuffed into the bottom and

the food. She laid the beef jerky aside and shoved everything back in, wadding his clothes into a small ball before tying the flap back.

When she picked up a piece of the jerky and turned her head to him, sticking the dried meat into her mouth, she smiled and made an ‘mmm’ noise. “Delicious. Best meal I’ve had since—well, breakfast.”

Colt laughed. “You’re a sarcastic little thing, aren’t you?”

“Only to outlaws who kidnap me, neglect my basic need for sustenance and expect me to sleep on the ground with bugs, spiders and snakes.”

“I didn’t kidnap you. Virgil did.”

“Really?” She looked around her. “Because I don’t see Virgil. Do you?” When she faced him again, her eyebrows lowered a fraction. “All I see is you.”

“I could have left you back there, you know.” He shifted his weight, unhooked his gun belt, and laid it beside him. “And if I would have, you’d be with Virgil now, facing Lord only knows what, instead of sitting here eating my food and berating me for something I didn’t even do.”

She opened her mouth, to spit out another round of vengeful words at him, he supposed, but closed it with a snap. She went back to chewing her jerky, ignoring him.

Colt lowered the front of his hat and closed his eyes, crossing his feet at the ankles. He hated sleeping sitting up. Killed his back but at the moment, he had no choice. Crawling onto the bedroll with her would have found him snoozing happily in a matter of moments but even suggesting it would earn him another round of biting remarks and honestly, he wasn’t in the mood to hear her talking. He was tired, his nerves still a bit frazzled, and being even this close to the girl heated his blood.

It had been too damn long since he'd had a woman in his bed and the one sitting beside him was round in all the right places. He could only imagine how she'd feel in his arms, her naked flesh heating his own. Those sweet strawberry red lips circling his cock, her breathy moans music to his ears. His cock stirred thinking about it.

He heard her long minutes later, her skirts making a swishing noise. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She'd lain down, her head pillowed on her hands.

The moon cast a light glow over her face and caused shadows to fall under her eyes to brush her cheeks. He let his gaze roam her face, her plump lips snagging his attention before he moved on, following the line of her throat to her shoulders and down over her breasts to her plump bottom, which was pointed at him. The desire to run his hand up under those skirts caused a smile to curve his lips. He could imagine her outrage. Of course, it wouldn't last long. There hadn't been a woman yet he couldn't make squirm with a few flicks of his finger.

He smiled again and shut his eyes. Soon, he thought. Before this adventure was over, she'd be eating out of his hand.

* * *

"Let's go, sweetheart. I want to be well to the border before the sun cooks us in the saddle."

Sarah sat up, pushing her hair out of her face. Colt already had the horse saddled and ready to go and was checking the cinches. "My name is Sarah." She lifted her hand to her mouth as she yawned.

"I heard."

"Then use it. I'm not your sweetheart."

He turned and grinned at her. "It's just an expression. Besides, you're too prickly to actually be sweet."

The sun was barely up and he was bathed in shadows but Sarah could see the mischief in his eyes. Outlaw or not, he at least had a sense of humor. "I'm not prickly."

"You don't look like a Sarah, either."

She shot him a confused look. Standing, Sarah grabbed the bedroll and shook it out before attempting to fold it. "How does someone with the name Sarah look?"

He finished with the horse and turned to take the bedroll from her, unfolding it. "Sweet. Mild tempered and accommodating. Forgettable, for the most part." He bent, refolded the blankets and rolled them before tying them into a bundle. When he stood, tucking the roll under his arm, he shot her a look that caused her pulse to race. "And you, sweetheart, are far from forgettable."

Sarah wasn't able to do anything but stand there and blink at his back for long minutes after that. He thought she was unforgettable? Her cheeks heated at the thought. When he stowed the bedroll and turned toward her, that wicked smirk was on his face again.

"You coming or not?"

Taking that first step toward him took effort. It was hard to look at him and think about a task as simple as walking. Especially when he looked at her like he was thinking naughty things. His gaze lowered to her breasts and her nipples tingled just thinking of him looking at her like a man who wanted a woman. William certainly never looked at her that way. Thinking of William, she gasped. "William!"

Colt raised an eyebrow at her. "Name's Colt, not William."

"I know that." She looked across the desert in the direction she thought home was. "William is my fiancé." She saw Colt move toward her out of the corner of her eye and looked over at him. The smirk was gone, replaced with a look of distaste. "He's the town marshal. The one you supposedly tied up."

He stared at her for long moments before he laughed, only stopping when the horse shied. When he looked back at her, he shook his head. "You're going to marry that cowardly troll of a man?"

Sarah lifted her chin. "He's not a coward. And he's of average height."

Colt snorted. "Yes, to a child." He shook his head and chuckled again before turning and jumping onto the horse. He sat looking down at her, grinning, holding out his hand. "Let's go, sweetheart. I don't think your rescue party will ride this far out looking for you, so you only have two choices. Stay here and wait for Virgil, who will come this far, or come along with me. You can wire a telegraph home once we get to the next town."

Her options weren't many, Sarah knew that, but staying with this man wasn't a very smart thing to do. He made her uneasy and he was far too handsome. There probably wasn't a woman between here and Mexico he hadn't charmed out of her bloomers. Would she be next?

If she were honest with herself, she'd know she wanted to be. She couldn't help being drawn to him. He made her think things she couldn't even put a name on. Just a sly look from him and her traitorous pulse leaped and danced under her skin like a trapped bird fluttering for release.

Staying with him would be dangerous in more ways than one. Her virtue may not survive it.

The thought caused her stomach to clench. She was twenty-one years old and had only shared one brief, sloppy wet kiss with a man, but looking at Colt, Sarah wanted more than kisses from him. She wanted what his heated glances promised. She wanted his arms around her, to be surrounded by him and feel his skin next to hers. She wanted the bliss she knew waited wrapped in that devilish package and knew she'd crave it until the day she died.

Looking toward home, she debated on what to do. She could always hide if Virgil came this way but then what? She had no food, no water and what if William never made it this far, just as Colt said. What would she do then? Walk home? It could take days to do that, assuming she even walked in the right direction.

Seeing Colt shift in the saddle out of the corner of her eye, she knew if she stayed with him, it would be no less than an adventure. Just being in the man's presence was more exciting than anything she had waiting for her at home. Long days of working in the bank to have something to do. Talking to strangers to keep from going crazy while directing the house servants in their daily chores. The chance of seeing William, while he ignored her in favor of asking where her father was.

Shaking her head, she turned and walked to the horse and let Colt swing her up to sit behind him. She'd stay with him and distance herself the best she could. As long as Colt never found out how being near him affected her, he'd more than likely be a gentleman. He had so far.

She scooted her bottom on the horse, trying to find a comfortable position, before laying her hands at his hips and looked up at him. "Just so you know, when we get to the next town, I'm turning you in. Are there any bounties on your head?"

Colt chuckled. "Probably."

"Good. After all the torment this ordeal has caused me, I deserve some sort of compensation. Seeing you behind bars will do wonders for my spirit."

He nudged the horse into a trot before looking over his shoulder at her. "You are one spiteful little shrew. Does William know of this character flaw?"

Sarah bit back a smile and hoped her tight hold on him didn't give her away. "I've no reason to be so shrewish with him. He's a perfect gentleman at all times."

"And boring, too, I'd imagine." He turned his attention back to where they were going. He moved his shoulders a bit, settled onto the horse, and sat for long minutes in silence before clearing his throat. "What's so special about the marshal that you'd agree to spend the rest of your life with him?"

Sarah wasn't about to read things into his voice but if she didn't know any better, she'd swear he sounded almost jealous. She stashed that bit of information away for later examination. "He's kind," she said, answering his question. "Earns a decent living, unlike some people I know, and he owns his own home."

"I've my own home."

"Really?"

"Yes. I'm also kind when I need to be and I make more money than that potbellied marshal of yours."

Sarah barked out a laugh. "By stealing it! That's not the same thing at all. Did you steal your home as well?"

"Nope. That's mine by birth."

"A rich outlaw's prodigal son, then?"

He grinned, Sarah saw, when she looked over his shoulder. "No. My Pa's a rancher. Or was. He's not been himself in a while though." He grew quiet, a solemn look on his face, and Sarah realized there was more he wasn't telling her. She sat quietly behind him and didn't ask, giving him the privacy in the matter he obviously wanted.

They rode half the morning in silence, stopping for brief rest periods before moving on again. By midday, sweat was rolling down Sarah's back, her hair was plastered to her head and her back ached. She was miserable but held her tongue. The less she talked to Colt, the better off she was. She couldn't ignore him if she constantly engaged him in conversation.

Crossing over into Montana Territory, Sarah knew the chances of William finding her were slim. He wouldn't come this far. He'd never been out of Wyoming as far as she knew and never traveled far from home. Riding through the countryside to find her would be hard on him and for some reason, she didn't think he would bother. He'd send someone else to look for her before he'd do it himself. The thought saddened her. If William loved her, he'd move heaven and earth to find her himself, wouldn't he?

A distant roar of thunder caused her to look up. The sky was blue and cloudless and she puzzled over the fact. The sound was muted once they descended the next hill but soon grew. Looking behind her, her eyes widened as her fists clenched in the material of Colt's shirt. "We have company, Colt."

He turned his head to look behind them. "Damn it. Hold on." Spurring the horse into a run, Sarah wrapped her arms around his waist and held on for dear life. The wind whipped her hair into a mass of tangles that obscured her vision. Lowering her head, she buried her face into Colt's back and hoped she wouldn't fall off the horse.

The rumble of horses running grew louder and Sarah dared a glance back at them. One man had broken free of the approaching riders. She couldn't see him clearly but she imagined it was Virgil. He lifted his right hand and it took Sarah a moment to realize what he was doing. The blast from his gun forced a scream from her throat. "He's shooting at us!"

Colt nudged the horse faster and Sarah's hold on him tightened. Another blast from the gun exploded, the sound so close sweat broke out on her brow. When Colt yelled a string of curses before saying her name, she peeked up at him. He was holding out his arm, the butt of his pistol pointed toward her. "Shoot him, Sarah, and for god's sake, don't miss this damn time."

Sarah took the gun and stared at it. Another blast from behind her and she gripped the pistol, turned best she could while still holding on to Colt, and fired. She missed. Every shot she took she missed but the rider was slowing. With the last shot, Sarah focused on her target and fired. He flinched. Her eyes widened. "I think I got him!"

"Miracles never cease."

The rider's horse came to an abrupt stop before the rider slumped forward, his left hand rising to his shoulder. "I did! I got him." She laughed before turning back to Colt. "I told you I could shoot."

"That you did."

They rode hard for hours, not stopping to rest the horse, or themselves. When the sun was lowering, its heat starting to dissipate, Sarah saw a forested area ahead of them. Colt steered the horse there and within the hour she was ensconced by the shadow of trees. The smell of moss on wet rocks tickled her senses. Dead tree limbs and leaves overpowering everything.

She groaned when Colt held up one arm to help her off the horse and nearly fell to her knees when her feet touched the ground. He helped her to a nearby tree, nearly dropping her before tending to the horse. Sarah watched him from the shade until her eyelids grew heavy. She dozed, opening her eyes some time later when she heard Colt hiss out a string of curses.

He was sitting a few feet away, his back to her. A small fire burned in front of him but it was the sight of him shirtless that drew her attention. The muscles in his back flared and moved as he leaned over the fire and reached for something. She watched for long minutes before standing. "What are you doing?"

"Heating a knife."

Puzzled over his statement, she walked around him to see what he was doing. Her eyes widened when she saw all the blood. "Dear Lord! You've been shot?"

End of Excerpt

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