



That Fateful Ride

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Category: Historical

Description: On the trail where danger lurks around every bend, pure love blazes stronger than any heart's desire.

Running a remote Pony Express station is just what Cyrus Spencer needs to discover his inner peace.

Carrying the mail along the perilous remote trails of Nebraska is not for the faint of heart. Yet, when fate takes a turn, his life is upended by the unexpected revelation of one of his riders. Taken by surprise, he struggles with the ramifications.

Rebecca Freeman's twin brother is injured!

In order to save her family, she dons his persona and mounts up to ride. She knows it won't be easy to navigate in a man's world, yet, she did not expect her identity to come to light. Desperate for Cyrus's silence, she swallows her pride and begs him to keep her secret". As their connection deepens, they both understand they live in a world that wouldn't easily accept their love. With their future at stake, Cy is determined to fight for their chance at happily-ever-after after his life changed from that fateful ride

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1 860, Nebraska Territory

“I have to do this, Mama,” Rebecca Freeman insisted. She never paused in hefting the heavy saddle to settle upon the back of her dun gelding, Polaris. Hot dry air flowed over her as the wind picked up, swirling and sending up little dust cyclones and bringing the smell of baked earth to her nose. She blinked a few times, doing her best to keep the dirt from stinging her eyes.

“You’re a girl who’s got no business riding there.” The disapproval was so strong she could taste it. “None!”

Rebecca sighed and flipped up the stirrup to settle upon the seat. She understood the hesitation and reluctance. Heck, she had her own amount of it, but none of that mattered.

“Mama, I have to. We have no choice. We need the money. Robert’s laid up with his injuries. I can do this. They’ll never know.” She refused to budge an inch. This was something she could handle.

Full lips flattened with annoyance and a healthy bit of concern. “You get caught and you’ll be wishin’ you was dead. We can figure something out. Stay home and take in more washing.”

Her mama spoke a hard truth and she didn’t want to think about how much it worried her. best not to imagine what it would be like to be discovered as a lone woman without any protection. Especially one of her skin color.

Cinch tightened, she patted Polaris on the neck as she dropped the stirrup back down and went to stand before her mama. Sally Freeman was a tall beautiful woman who had seen more than her share of difficulties. She could cook a mean meal out of next to nothing or shoot the wings off a fly if she so chose.

She was intimidating and a hard woman to live with as a mother. Still, she'd not raised any wallflower, but a proud young Black woman, so Rebecca lifted her chin and held her mother's sharp gaze, ignoring the dirt and grit whipping around them.

An omen.

A bad one if she was to believe the stories.

"I won't get caught. I ride and shoot better than Robert. Besides, I can't take in extra washing, it won't do enough." She didn't point out that her mother knew that. They both knew additional washing wasn't going to compare to his wages they would be losing out on.

Her mama scowled and crossed her arms. Acceptance slowly pushed into her stare. "You come back in and let me fix yer hair. You done gone and made a mess of it."

She nodded and dutifully followed her back inside their small house. It was as much of a blessing as she'd get. It wasn't much of a reprieve for what was coming next, her mother worked fast. Once her hair had been fixed and wrapped along with her breasts, she peeked in on her brother. Shallow, rasped breaths filled the room and she blinked back tears as she kissed him on the head.

"Stay alive, Robert."

"Becca," he said on a graveled, pain-filled voice. "You can't. I changed my mind. It's too dangerous."

“I know the trail and the oath. I can do this. I am doing this.” One final kiss and she headed out. Her mother waited by the door and handed her a small bag.

They exchanged no hugs or words. Rebecca stepped back outside and did her best to ignore the pile of thick black locks, which lay on the hard packed dirt fluttering around courtesy of the wind. There was no reason to have cut it inside where her mother would have to sweep it up. All the housekeeping would fall on her as well as everything else.

Guilt swamped her and she squeezed her eyes shut one more time. When she looked again, most of her cut hair had blown away.

It was a sign. Another one. However, this one was one she couldn't ignore.

The loss of innocence. The changing of times and it unsettled her.

By Polaris, she adjusted the red neck cloth as Robert always wore. She preferred blue, but from this moment on, she was no longer Rebecca Freeman. Now she was Robert Freeman.

Resting her head on Polaris' shoulder for a moment, she took a fortifying breath. Gathering his reins in one hand, she swung up with considerable ease into the saddle and rode off towards the station to await her first pickup. She spared no looks back. Robert wouldn't, so neither would she. Robert typically rode out of the Buffalo Creek Station, one past the one she headed toward.

She had gone to the station before and had met the station master, Ethan Wilson. A crotchety yet fair old man, which was all that mattered to her. He'd never paid her much mind before and that was going to work in her favor. It took her a good while to get there. Once she arrived, she tied Polaris in some welcome shade and headed up the wooden sidewalk to the door. At the last minute, she remembered Robert walked

heavier than she did and so she stomped a bit harder, ensuring to jangle her spurs.

A bell clanged above her head, announcing her arrival. It all looked the same. Dusty and dirty, her mother would tan her hide if she kept their house like this.

“You’re early.”

Her heart pounded. This was the first test, to see if she could pull this off. “Yes sir.” Sweat glistened on her brow and she worked hard to keep her mouth set in a hard line. Tugging the brim of her hat low on her head, she looked around the darkened interior and found him behind the front counter.

White hair curled around his wide skull. The man’s face showed he didn’t miss meals and his shirt and vest strained at the seams. While she couldn’t see, she imagined his black pants were like they had been the last time she’d seen him.

He lifted his watery blue gaze and looked in her direction. “Delivery won’t be here for about ten minutes, if he’s on time.”

“I’ll be outside.” She tugged briefly on the brim of her hat before heading back out.

Despite it being hot and unpleasant, she breathed a bit easier. Test one had been passed. He never even assumed she wasn’t Robert.

The wind had picked up again and she leaned against a pole of the shelter over Polaris. Simply being in his presence, calmed her. Behind them sat the barn, which housed The Pony Express horses.

Off in the distance a cloud of dust grew closer and closer. Like a lightning bolt piercing the sky, the air changed. Crackling with energy, it skated up and down her spine. Even Polaris must have felt it for he lifted his head, ears swiveled toward the

incoming rider and snorted. She untied him and double-checked her saddle. She looked up to see Ethan nearing.

“You know you’re supposed to use our horses.”

Yeah she knew, but she trusted Polaris with her life, so she’d ride him. “This is my sister’s horse. He runs like the wind.”

Ethan stood beside her. He was a large man and she watched him run sure hands over her mount. A grunt of approval before he patted the horse’s side.

“Good and sturdy. Looks like one of those Injun horses from the Blackfoot region. Saw some of them a whiles back. Good stock. Keep an eye on this horse, people are liable to want to steal him.”

She hesitated, she’d not expected him to know the region she’d acquired him. Thankfully, the approaching rider made it so she didn’t have to. She mounted, the familiar feel calming her nerves. This was it. The time had come.

Polaris sidestepped beneath her, feeling her anxiousness. Absently, she patted the muscled neck. Easy boy, it’s almost time. She shifted and relaxed a bit more at the accustomed creak of leather.

Ethan hurried out into the sun yet she hesitated. Two deep breaths before she touched her heels to Polaris and moved him out. Butterflies swarmed in her belly and she sought to keep her doubt hidden.

You’ll be fine, she told herself. She knew the route, had gone over it numerous times until she was confident. Yet, all that assuredness slipped to a hiding spot back in the dark recess of her mind.

The hoof beats grew louder and she felt the tingle race up her spine again. Excitement began to replace the uncertainty. A brown horse thundered into view, wet with sweat and blowing hard. The man sawed back on the reins and the animal slid to a halt, almost sitting on the ground.

Ethan ran and grabbed the delivery and waved at her. "Let's get going, boy!"

She moved Polaris near, ensuring to keep her hat low over her eyes. The moment he secured the mochila, the mail pouch, she set her heels to Polaris and they shot off. Part of her almost sent him off in a dead run, but she knew that would be stupid. He would exhaust himself. Therefore, they loped. Polaris had a large stride and they would make good time. Also, if they ran into any hostiles, he would have some speed left in his reserves to get her out of danger. As they headed out of sight, she cast a glance over her shoulder.

She'd done it!

Managed to fool them into thinking she was her twin brother and had set out on her first leg of running the Pony Express.

Cyrus "Cy" Spencer paused in the act of checking over the horse tied to a hitching post as a new sound broke through the fresh morning. It sounded like an incoming rider but surely, it couldn't be. Overnight rides usually took longer and Robert had never been this early. If it was Robert.

The station, Stuart's Station, was still recouping from the attack from a group of Indians, which had killed the old station manager along with stealing the horses. Stu's death was why he had come on in replacement. He'd served with him in the Army. When he'd heard what'd happened and that needed someone to replace him, he'd stepped up and taken the job.

As close as I'll get to being part of the Pony Express.

Shaking off his uncertainty, he ran to the bunkhouse and woke the next rider before hurrying to the stable. He knew he had about five minutes before the rider made it all the way in. The horse was saddled in half that and ready when Bill stumbled from the building, food shoved in his mouth buckling his woolen pants.

The riders who did this were amazing. Anytime day or night they were ready when called upon. Bill was no different from the others. An orphan, he'd joined the Pony Express when it started and was one of the more trusted riders.

"The boy's early."

Cy didn't do anymore than grunt. Bill and Robert had a strenuous relationship, but it always remained professional. He handed over the reins and Bill swung up. Together they watched the dust cloud grow closer.

A large dun pounded into view and came to a halt. Gloved hands deftly undid and extended the pouch. Cy took it. He looked up and found himself staring into Robert's eyes.

"Robert," he said with a nod. "Made good time."

No response so he glanced back up to find him still watching him. With a shake of his head, he turned to Bill and attached the delivery. Bill wheeled his horse around, said, "Boy," and then took off.

Cy turned back to see Robert heading for the stable which thankfully hadn't been burned completely to the ground during the attack so repairs hadn't taken too long. Crossing his arms, he observed them. Something was different. He just couldn't quite put his finger on it. True, he didn't know Robert all that well, but he was a man who

paid attention to the small things.

Most obvious was the horse. Yes, the Pony Express had plenty of mounts. Still most men he knew had a favorite. And Robert's favorite was a roan not this dun. This horse looked barely winded as it continued to move easily. And, it wasn't shod.

"Where's Reaver?" he called out.

"Lame."

The voice sounded a bit graveled as if he'd been sick. "So who's this?"

"Polaris."

He blinked. Robert had mentioned Polaris. His sister's horse. She'd gotten him as a yearling from some Indians. Cy didn't know much more about it than that but he knew the horse was strong, fast, and everything to the man's sister.

"She let you take her horse?"

A slight stiffening followed by a brief nod. "After a fashion."

He chuckled. Siblings. "I can take care of him." It was part of his job. More hesitation before Robert slid free of the stirrups and hit the ground with a spur jarring thud. "There're about four over there now sleeping but I reckon they'll be getting up soon."

Saddlebags slung over one shoulder, Robert walked off without a word.

Something still bothered him but Cy shook it off and went to take care of the mount. After he stripped Polaris, who hadn't wanted to go with him but after Robert, he checked him over carefully to ensure he'd acquired no injuries. Content the horse was

sound, he fed him and left him for some well-deserved rest.

The other riders other than Robert eventually woke and another dispatch heading the other way came in. About three hours later, he had just finished shoeing one of his horses when Thomas, another rider who was going to be heading toward Sacramento on the next run let out a yell.

“Cy! We’ve got a problem.”

Stripping off the leather apron, he hurried out into the bright sun. The urgency in the tone prompted him to not dally. The problem could be anything. Thieves, Indians, they had it all out here. Rifle in hand he headed to Thomas’ side.

“What?” he asked scanning the horizon.

Thomas gestured with his chin. Cy squinted in that direction and frowned when he saw a horse approaching at a trot. His scowl deepened when he recognized it as Bill’s horse...without Bill.

“What the...?”

They hurried toward the skittish gelding. When they captured him, Cy noticed the blood on the saddle and along one shoulder was a deep gash. Damn it! Thankfully, the mochila sat secured to the saddle.

“Do you think the Injuns got him?” Thomas asked as they hurried back to the stable.

“I have no idea.” He had a hunch though. And not a good one. “Take him and give him some water. I’ll be over shortly to patch him up.” He headed toward the bunkhouse, dispatches in hand.

Pushing through the darker and thankfully cooler interior, he paused to take it all in. Two of the guys were drinking which they weren't supposed to do in excess. To the right he spied Robert lying on a bottom bunk, back to the wall.

"Bill's horse came back," he announced. "There was blood on the saddle. I need a rider to head out."

Silence reined and he felt his disappointment rise. Then a graveled voice came to him.

"I'll do it."

Robert. He focused on him and not the two who were too busy pretending they'd not heard him. A few inches shorter than most of the riders, Robert often made him wonder if it wasn't hard to be so small. Straightforward brown eyes met him from beneath the brim of his hat.

"Good. As soon as you can."

Robert stood up and buckled on his weapons over his pants. He shoved into his boots before grabbing his saddlebags. Cy wanted to object but their top priority was keeping the delivery going. With a disgusted glare at the two who refused to step up, he led the way out.

"I have another horse—"

"Polaris will do." The interruption came immediately. Firm and definitely expecting that statement to be followed.

He slowed so Robert's shorter stride put them even. In the stable, he took a deep breath and saddled Polaris. He attached the delivery while Robert slid his rifle into

the scabbard.

“Good luck.” Cy’s gaze travelled down to where the black handle of his revolver sat against one leg. Wait a minute. I thought Robert had silver ones. Before he could think on it anymore, the dun gelding had taken off.

Right now, Cy had more important things to attend but then he’d turn his attention to what it was about Robert that bothered him so much. Gathering the medical supplies needed, he went to tend the gelding.

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Rebecca ate in the saddle, constantly scanning around for trouble. Fear clenched at her, as did the desire for sleep. Sure, she knew it was dangerous being a rider, but she'd not expected so much exposure to that harsh reality so much her first day.

Thankfully, Polaris seemed perfectly fine. So she ate, rode, and thought about the station manager. Cyrus Spencer. She remembered Robert telling her they had a new one, she'd just neglected to recall it what with being so concerned about hiding her identity. Nothing her brother had said however had prepared her for actually seeing him for the first time.

Her jaw almost hit the ground when she saw him. Rugged. Handsome. And for some reason apparently capable of making her forget all reason.

He had dark hazel eyes with masculine and chiseled features. He was a large man, all over his barrel-chest impressive, towering over her by at least a foot. She didn't see a lick of fat on him. Everything she saw was muscular. Brown hair with streaks of sun lightening blond hung to his shoulders. Not a full beard but scruff covered his face.

His golden tan muscular physique was one view, which drew her eyes more than once. Broad shoulders and powerful arms strained at the seam of his long sleeve shirt, which sat tucked into denim trousers. She'd not seen many of them, heard of them but they were rare to see, a lot more expensive than her family could afford. Lean hips and long legs of corded muscle. His nose appeared to have been broken a time or two and a sensual mouth. The lower lip plumper than the top but it didn't matter.

Never in all her nineteen years had she experienced such a strong desire to touch a man. She wondered what it would be like in his embrace. Her body had felt weird and

hypersensitive just from his voice. Then when he looked at her...everything escalated.

Despite being deeply lost in her musings, she caught the flick of Polaris' ears. Slowing him, she stared in the indicated direction. She searched the sky and frowned at the familiar outlines of scavenger birds. Worrying her lower lip, she hesitated. The delivery was already late. But she couldn't in good conscious ignore the fact a man could be lying near possibly close to death.

"Come on, boy." She withdrew the rifle from the scabbard and laid it across her lap as Polaris deviated off their predetermined trail.

They moved cautiously and then she saw him. A badly mangled body with blood streaming from his wounds. One final look around to ensure she was truly alone then she dismounted to land near him. She'd never been squeamish but this image turned her stomach. The sight of his chest moving—no matter how shallow—spurred her into action.

"Bill," she said crouching by him and touching shoulder. "Let's get you out of here."

The sole remaining eye opened. "Wh...wh..."

"Quiet," she ordered with calm authority. She whistled bringing Polaris and she took some water before sinking back beside him. "Can you move?"

"Yes." Slowly he sat. She gave him the water and checked his injuries before patching him the best she could with what she had.

"Let's go."

"Why you?"

Carefully they stood. Bill weak from blood loss and being unprotected from the blazing sun. The man used Polaris to assist in steadying him while she tore a cloth to wrap around his head and empty eye socket.

“When your horse returned, I took the delivery.”

“But you don’t like me.”

She stored her stuff and answered honestly. “You have more of a problem with me than I do you. Did you want me to leave you here?”

“No. No.”

In silence, she helped him up onto her horse. She walked around to give herself a bit of extra time. With him sitting so close would he notice she wasn’t who she claimed to be? Didn’t matter, she still couldn’t—and wouldn’t—leave him.

Please. She sent up the one word plea to the good Lord as she mounted. Behind her, Bill sat stiffly.

“Hold on and let me know if you need me to stop.” The moment she felt him grab back for the cantle, she got Polaris back on his way. Once he settled into his gait, she breathed a bit easier. Thankfully, even with the two of them, they didn’t weigh a whole heck of a lot. They didn’t talk and when they stopped, she made sure there was some coverage to hide behind while she relieved herself.

Darkness loomed when she rode into the station.

“I need a doctor!” she cried.

Lights came on and the door opened. The man standing there with a lantern in his

hand was a behemoth. Sandy hair stuck out in spikes around his head. His other hand gripped a shotgun.

“What goes on?”

“I’ve got a wounded man and the dispatch.”

He hurried down to stare at her. Then his gaze drifted from her to the trembling man behind her.

“Bill?” He closed the rest of the distance, as did the others with him. “Get him down and inside.”

She stiffened when men surrounded her. Polaris crow-hopped a bit and she soothed him with a touch. Once Bill was clear, she reached down, removed the delivery, and handed it to the station master.

“Gotta name?” the large man asked after he hollered for the next rider.

“Robert.”

“Come on in, Robert. Bet you could use some hot food.”

“Yes sir. I just need to see to my horse. We only had a short break before setting out again.” Shut up! He doesn’t need to think I’m complaining. She shrugged to hide her embarrassment. “I’ll see to my horse.”

At his nod, she turned a weary Polaris to the stable passing the next rider on his way to start the next leg. She took her time unsaddling Polaris. God, she ached. Every inch of her was sore and stinky. The odor reaching her nose wasn’t pleasant in any form. Her arms shook as she brushed him down and checked him over. She left him with

grain and a bucket of water before trudging out with her rifle in one hand and saddlebags over her right shoulder.

There was so much dirt and grit on her eyes she was amazed they were open. She had newfound respect for these riders. With a sigh, she pushed into the station.

“Set yer stuff down n’ help yerself to some food there.” This man was the opposite of Cyrus, small where he was large. Skinny in a wiry sense.

She released her items and picked up a plate. Soon she was seated and eagerly eating some warm and hearty food.

“Name’s Joseph. We thought we’d lost a delivery. You amazed a lot of us when you rode in with Bill. What happened?” He took a seat at the table, gnarled fingers curved around the chipped mug.

Shaking her head she swallowed her current bite. “Not sure. His horse came back without him, injured and blood on the saddle.” She shoveled in more food. “No one else volunteered so I took it.” A drink of water washed down the cornbread. Not as good as mama’s but considering the growling in her belly it would suffice just fine. “Followed some buzzards and found him.”

“We’ve got room for you so grab a bunk and get some shut eye. I know you need to go back.” He stood. “I’m sending another request for better protection. All over the territories, Indian attacks have increased. Leave your plate and don’t worry, I’ll turn out your horse.”

She did as instructed and found herself soon entering where the riders slept. Four men were in there and they all looked at her with a mix of uncertainty and amazement.

“Nice ride.”

“Thanks.” Good thing she was so tired, her voice was deeper anyway, and she could barely pick up her feet so they dragged.

Even so, it was still hard not to stare. Two men were shirtless and two in their underwear. It wasn’t that they were so handsome she had a hard time not looking, no, men had horrible habits when in groups, and they were no different. These men had nothing to hold her attention. She wanted to feel safe in a man’s embrace. Not wonder if she were stronger than him.

She took a far cot and sat wearily on it. A bath would be so nice yet sleep even better. With her last bit of energy, she undid her bedroll and closed her eyes after climbing in, willingly embracing the sleep, which descended upon her.

The room sat empty when she woke. Sitting up, she groaned at the stiffness, which owned her body. She retied the bandanna on her head and replaced her hat. She’d fallen asleep with her boots on so she only gathered her things and walked out.

In the privacy of the outhouse, she rewrapped her breasts then washed up at the pump. Wasn’t perfect, but better than nothing. She grunted and nodded in response to the few greetings she received on her way to the stable.

Without wasting time, she saddled Polaris and led him out to the pump. Reins on the ground, she worked the handle and filled her canteens. She carried three figuring with her lighter weight it wouldn’t hurt her horse.

“You heading back?”

“Yes sir.” She capped the final one and secured them on Polaris. “Did you need me to take a message?”

“I do have one for Cy. Stop in before you go.”

“Yes sir.”

Alone, she blew out a breath and watched Joseph walk away. One hand on her mount she sighed. “Working so far, Polaris. Just have to make it back and get some rides in.” She was on her way back within the hour. To Cyrus.

No, I mean to the station. Not to Cyrus. He’s nothing to me.

Cy went to the door when the sound of approaching hoof beats reached him. He was pleased to see that large dun returning. While he wasn’t what one would call “close” to the riders, he had a great deal of respect for them given the perils they faced. It was hard on a rider especially without sufficient rest.

For a long time he’d wanted to be one but with his size, it wasn’t meant to be. His ride would tire far too quickly with him on its back. These riders were small and thin.

Stepping out onto the porch, he winced at the shaft of spiking pain that shot up his leg. A hiss of discomfort slid from his lips, and he gripped the railing for balance. I don’t need to fall on my face when Robert comes riding in.

By the time the dun entered the yard, he had made his way down to the hard-packed ground. He worked hard to mask his frown as he watched Robert draw to a halt and make a sliding dismount. Something was different but still, for the life of him, he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Hat lowered over his eyes obscuring his features, Robert made his way to him, the gelding following behind.

“Have a message for you from the station master.” A quick hand in a saddlebag and he offered it.

“Thank you. Did you...see Bill?”

A single nod. “Found him. He’s resting under Doc’s care now.”

That was it and they were walking away. No bragging that he’d been the one to rescue the man. Nothing that would indicate he wanted any recognition for doing so.

Who did something like that?

I’ve thought it before, Robert is acting different but I don’t know him that well.

He scowled and looked down at the message he’d been given.

Sent word to the Army. Hope they will help. Will let owners know about Robert as well. Joseph

He wasn’t sure the Army would help, but he also hoped they would. Before he knew it, he was on his way to the barn. The whickers which met him, made him smile. They’d gotten in more horses yesterday to replace those lost. He loved working with horses. Their smell, warmth, brutal honesty made him smile. It was a comfort no matter where in the country he happened to be.

Soft murmurs reached him and spark ran along his veins. That was no man’s voice it belonged to a woman. Low and husky, it stroked along his skin and sent lust to his cock. Instant heat thrummed through him, reminding him so much how long it had been since he’d had the pleasure of a woman beneath him. Above him.

Aww fuck. He gripped the hard length in his denim and adjusted himself. Time to get under control.

What the hell?

Was there a woman hiding in here? He moved through to check. Nothing. The only person he saw was Robert who stood brushing down his horse.

“Did you see anyone in here?”

Robert whirled only to flick his eyes over him before returning to his task of rubbing down Polaris. “Not other than you.”

“I thought I heard a woman.” And again, thinking about the soft, husky voice, his cock decided to pulse again.

He noticed the stiffening of the man by the horse. Was he hiding her here? A spear of jealousy hit him and he didn’t understand why.

Cy ground his jaw. “You know you’re not allowed to have women here.”

“You think I have a woman in here?” Honest incredulity tinged the tone. “When would I have told her to meet me?” Robert didn’t face him again but dark fingers tightened so hard some of the color leached out from where they gripped the brush.

Okay, so it wasn’t his smartest comment. “You’re right. Sorry, I’m...” he trailed off. What was there to say? It was obvious Robert had just arrived and yet he couldn’t help feel possessive over...he sighed. Over what? A feminine voice I obviously heard in my head? Yes that’ll boost confidence the men have in me. I’m hearing voices.

He cleared his throat and out of habit rubbed the thigh of his injured leg. “Bunkhouse is full, you’ll have to share a bunk.”

Now the following action was a definite tensing. He guessed he understood. Overall the riders didn’t have color issues but there were a few who did.

“Fine.” Robert ducked under the rail, hefted the saddle with ease, and slid it onto an empty spot amongst the other tack. Weapon in one hand and saddlebags with bedroll in the other, he strode from the barn.

Cy double-checked on the large dun then brought the next horse up so he didn’t have to chase him down when the time came. Once that was finished, he got to his daily duties of being a station manager at one of the more than one hundred stations along the two thousand mile trail.

Things didn’t differentiate much as the days went on. The Army didn’t arrive however, neither did they have more attacks. Everyone worked hard right along with everyone else.

Three weeks later, a severe storm overran them. The station was empty except for him and Robert since he’d just sent off the last rider two hours ago. Another few should be coming in within a few more hours, but he figured the storm would slow them a bit. He had a big pot of soup heating and some biscuits cooking in the oven. Cy got to his feet and went to the door. May as well call Robert to eat with him.

The young man had changed, not that he and Robert had ever been extremely close but since the incident with Bill, he’d become even more distant. Respectful and hardworking as always but he kept to himself. Never participated in card games with the guys. Slept and worked.

He pushed out the door and took a deep breath. The rainy onslaught filled the air with a fresh clean scent. It washed away the dry, hot air and replaced it with rebirth. He couldn’t hear the horses over the pounding rain. Nor could he see the bunkhouse.

Immediately soaked stepping onto the ground, he hurried to his destination. He saw one flickering light the closer he got and he pushed through the door shaking the excess water off his head. Running a hand down his face, he peered around.

Movement in the back corner caught his eye so he headed there. Turning the corner of the final bunk he froze as if he'd run smack into a wall. His jaw dropped open and lust hit him again, a hundred times the intensity of his reaction to the feminine voice in the barn.

Robert was a girl. No, correction, not a girl. A woman. No man had a figure like that. Even with the bindings around her torso—which explained how she passed as Robert—he now wondered how he'd missed it. Although it explained some of the differences he'd noticed.

“Where's Robert and who the hell are you?”

Anger began to leech into him as he realized how endangered she'd been by riding the route. She jumped and spun around, eyes wide. He watched her gaze flick between him and the gun hanging near. Tension exploded throughout the room. They lunged for the weapon at the same time.

He had no doubt, she got to it first, he was going to have a bullet lodged in him somewhere.

Her fingers grasped the handle as his heavier weight bore her to the thin mattress. Preservation instincts honed dagger sharp in the Army took over and he rolled them from the narrow bed to the floor. The gun scattered across the wooden planks.

She didn't cease her struggles, in fact, they increased. Her hands whirled like demons, landing several painful blows on him. Stars exploded behind his eyes when her knee landed a direct hit between his legs.

“Christ, would you just hold still!”

Capturing her wrists in his hands, he placed them above her head. He stared down at

her. It was a punch to the gut. He had no clue how he'd mistaken her for a man. She had Robert's features but here, now, this close there was no doubt she was all woman.

She bucked against him to no avail. All it did was reaffirm it was a woman beneath him. Because he'd walked in on her binding her breasts, the wrap was loose and he felt them. Full, rounded, pert and things he wanted in his hands. In his mouth.

Fuck! Now he was getting hard. Well, harder.

"Hold still." He barked the order while trying to convince his body he wasn't attracted to her. It wasn't easy. She had large brown eyes framed by thick lashes, full lips he wanted to kiss, and a haughty expression, which made him, want to morph into one of pure pleasure. All it would take would be to lower his head and...

"Get off me."

"I don't think so. You need to answer some questions." He kind of liked being on her.

Her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths and for a second he witnessed a glimpse of fear. She masked it quickly and he saw it from her point of view. A woman, a black woman, trapped beneath the body of a white man in a cabin where no one would help her if she screamed. He felt bad but he wasn't about to let her move until he had answers. She would just have to come to realize he wouldn't hurt her.

"So ask so I can finish getting dressed." Her words were matter-of-fact.

Cy tried desperately to forget how good she felt beneath him. "Who are you?" The question came out harsher than he intended. Still she never flinched. She's got grit. I'll give her that.

"Rebecca. Robert's twin."

He scrambled off her. “Get dressed.” He wasn’t strong enough to resist the temptation. Still, he was no fool and went to retrieve her gun.

She moved gingerly, her gaze remained locked on him. As she gained her feet, he dragged his gaze up and down her near nakedness. She never asked him for privacy, merely turned her back to retighten her bindings. Once her shirt was back on, she faced him again; her eyes flickered to her gun that he retained. He watched her strap on some knives and realized she wouldn’t be easy to overpower.

“Why are you here?” Her expression told him of her reluctance to talk. “Tell me,” he ordered.

“Robert got injured. He’s laid up in bed.”

That was it. She didn’t elaborate on his injury. Nothing of the sort. Just stated an answer as he’d wanted.

“So you just decided to take his place?”

“We counted on that pay to help the family. Besides, I can do this. I am doing this.”

He shook his head. “Not anymore.”

She’d sat to tie a blue bandana on her head, but shot to her feet at his comment. “What?”

He crossed his arms, fingers still curved around the gun. “I can’t let a girl ride this.”

“You didn’t even know I was one until you came bursting in here. I can do this. I have to do this.”

Her big brown eyes shone with tears he knew—deep in his gut—she wouldn't shed.

"It's too dangerous. If they were to find out they were sharing a bunk with a woman..." he trailed off and shook his head. "I can't consciously put you in that situation."

"You're not. This is my decision. They'll never know." She took several deep breaths. "Please. You have to let me ride."

He arched a brow. "I do?"

She took a step closer. "What do you want? I'll do anything to keep you from pulling me."

"Anything?" His mind whirled.

A cold glint entered her eyes. "Anything. If it takes me whoring myself out to you, I will. I just have to keep riding."

He'd be one massive liar if he said he didn't find her attractive. All that smooth skin the color of rich coffee with a splash of milk in it. Lord, it made his fingers itch to touch. Explore. However, having her feel like a whore? Never.

He stroked his chin as he thought about it. She had a point; he'd not known she was a woman until now. The others didn't know. Moreover, he admired a woman who would help the family. Times were tough. For some more than others. And he didn't want Robert to lose his position in the company either. He sighed.

"No need to do that. Can you cook?"

She nodded her gaze still unsure of his actions. He recognized the look; he'd seen it

many times.

“Help out with the cooking and I won’t say a word. You’re on your own if they find out. You might want to not do anything like this again in the building.”

Even as the words slipped by his mouth, he knew he was full of shit. He would protect this woman until no breath left his body.

Determination filled her straightforward gaze. “They won’t. No one will catch me unawares again.”

Ignoring the demands of his body, he flipped her gun to hand it over grip first. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“I won’t.”

Problem was. He already did. This just couldn’t end well.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:28 pm

Rebecca slowed Polaris as she approached the edge of Demon Canyon. Definitely not much in the way to look at visually. Deep in the bottom of the canyon, she glanced around before tucking her chin and rolling up the collar of her coat hoping to combat the wind whipping through the area.

There wasn't much of anything to Demon Canyon. The complete town lined the road. Heck, she thought Copper Junction, where she lived, was small but compared to this place, it thrived.

Even though there wasn't much many horses moved along the narrow street, carrying men and pulling wagons. She spied the sign for the General store. Given the coffins out front, she assumed he doubled as the undertaker. Up ahead on her left, swinging in the increasing wind hung a sign she had been on the lookout for.

Right Hand Saloon.

Nerves exploded in her belly and she nearly rode on by only to circle around and head back to the station. Instead, she turned Polaris toward the hitching post out front of the saloon and swung down. Fingering the reins she curved her hand around the leathers before looping them around the post.

"Here I go, Polaris."

Her gelding twitched his ears but otherwise didn't seem to be the slightest bit interested in her issues.

"Thanks a lot." His tail flicked and snapped her on the back. With a glare in his

direction, she stomped up the steps and pushed inside. Two things hit her at once. The heat and the smell. Perfume, stale beer and unwashed bodies. Nausea smacked her in the face and she didn't understand how men could come in here.

Three women looked up from where they walked around the room, delivering drinks and flirting with the men there. Two of the women were white, one with red hair and the other a deep chestnut. The third was of Asian descent. Their dresses were corseted at the top showing off a lot of skin and when one walked around the table, she realized, there wasn't a skirt to it only a bit of material around her regions.

Averting her gaze, she exhaled sharply and struggled to regain her composure. It wouldn't do for them to see her blushing and stammering like she was embarrassed.

"Robert."

Lifting her head she found an older woman walking across the room toward her, her black hair streaked with some gray. Her full figure was impressive as was the way the men all treated her with respect. Unlike the other women, her dress was an actual dress and covered her, even if the top was far more risqué that she would ever wear.

"Sharla is with a customer right now," she said with a smile.

"Just came for a bath."

Her eyes narrowed and ran over her head to toe before she nodded. "Sure. I'll have one brought up to you in the last room on the right."

"Thank you."

"Megan. Come see Robert up to the bathing room. Candella and Rita, get the tub filled as quick as possible."

The Asian woman, Megan, she supposed sashayed up to him and smiled, settling a hand on his arm.

“Come on Robert. Maybe I can convince you to give me a spin even though I’m not Sharla.”

Rebecca cleared her throat and allowed the woman to tug her to the wide staircase and lead her up. From below the brim of her hat, she looked over the men there. No one paid her any attention as their focus was on the women, drink, and cards.

At the top, she turned to the right, Megan still on her arm brushing her breasts against her as she got closer and closer. Rebecca longed to push her away but had no clue as to how her brother acted here.

If she’d not wanted a bath before, she sure did now.

“Sharla is in with Big Jake,” Megan announced as they made their way down the hall.

All she could do was nod. I am so far out of my depth.

Grunting and squeaking bed springs filled the air along with the sounds of skin slapping against skin. Mortification rushed up her face and she dipped her head a bit more, praying it didn’t show.

“That’s it girlie. Take Big Jake’s dick. God you know how to ride it. I’m going to fucking cum all over you. All over these brown tits I’m going to streak my white cum. For starters, gonna make you think twice about ever refusing me.”

The mumbled reply was followed by a smack of what she could only assume was hand to skin. Then more moans.

Her steps slowed, if that woman wasn't there willingly?

Really, what could she do? She wasn't strong, totally outnumbered. Disgusted with herself, she glanced at the woman who insisted on walking beside her, ensuring their arms remained linked.

If it bothered Megan, she didn't show it. Then again, the woman was around this kind of thing all this time, probably didn't even give her pause. Rebecca didn't hold anything against her, a woman had to find a way to survive.

"When is that station manager of yours coming back out here, Robert?"

That got her thinking about something other than her embarrassment of hearing two people fuck. And...whatever else that was about.

"Come again?"

"Cyrus? Cy Spencer? That man used to come here but hasn't in a while. When you see him next," she paused to open the door to the last room, "tell him we miss him here." Megan smiled and bit her lower lip as she dragged her finger down between her breasts, the tops of them nearly spilling free of her corset.

"I'll do that." She looked Megan in the eyes, not focusing on where her finger was going or the blatant offer.

She didn't, however, like the jealousy that slammed into her at the thought of Cy being with these women. No, she wasn't an idiot and knew how things worked. Men came to brothels to get a woman. Or in the case of Demon Canyon they went to the saloon that served double purpose.

She hadn't had a man and until meeting Cyrus Spencer hadn't given it much thought.

Not even with Anson.

A low snort escaped her. Definitely not Anson.

The large tub was there and moments later, Rita and Candella walked in, carrying buckets of hot water and two smaller, well younger men, carried in some more.

Megan continued to wait with Rebecca until the tub was filled. The others walked out but Megan stayed and she turned to trail her hand down his chest. Rebecca nearly flinched. Instead she stopped the downward trek of the other woman before she could feel the bindings.

“Just here for a bath this time.”

She flattened her lips and rolled her eyes. “You can fuck a woman who isn’t black you know.”

A frame slammed into the wall as grunts and groans filled the air once more.

“Bath then I have to get back. My ride is up soon.”

“I’m happy to bathe you.”

Rebecca shook her head. Yeah, that wouldn’t go over well.

Megan sighed and shrugged. “I’ll get my turn with you yet Robert.” Megan rolled her lower lip between her teeth. “I’ve seen your cock and I want it. Mouth. Ass. Pussy. All of those places.” Gaze dropping to her groin, Megan licked her lips. “Soon. Come night time with the lights off, you won’t know the difference between me and Sharla. I promise I can do everything she can and more.”

She guided her to the door and out. “Thank you Megan.” Closing the door, Rebecca sighed as she leaned back on the wood. Things she never wanted to think about in terms of her twin. Taking time to lock the door, draw the shades over the window she began to undress only to pause and put the chair under the doorknob.

Groaning with relief as she unbound her breasts, she shot a nervous glance to the door as she stepped into the hot water. What she wouldn’t give for some nice smelling soap.

The wallbanging didn’t stop. In fact, it got louder as the couple continued with their acrobatics. Tuning them out best she could, Rebecca reached for the cloth and bar of soap.

Heated water soothed her aching muscles and she moaned a little on her own as she settled deeper into the tub. Helped being smaller, she fit where a man like Cy would be not able stretch out as she was.

Her breath stuttered as she lathered up the cloth and scrubbed her skin. Wincing at the abrasive feel of the material, she scrunched up her nose and put it back in the water, softening it up a bit more.

Cleaning quick, honestly she was scared to be caught unawares here and have them discover she wasn’t a man. Unfortunately, even as she rushed through the longest, warmest bath she’d had since she left home, her thoughts drifted back to the station manager.

Cyrus Spencer.

Rebecca swallowed. Hard. She shook her head, not fully understanding the emotions and feelings overtaking her body. Her nipples were tight points, nearly aching with pain and a craving for something.

She skimmed the cloth over them and whimpered at the sensation. The hair on her arms stood on end as her skin crackled with an energy she'd never experienced before. Shifting restlessly on the bottom of the tub, she searched for a way to alleviate this raw, hungry need coursing through her.

Nothing worked. She swallowed constantly as there came increased saliva, breathing came faster, and heat pushed up over her skin and centering in her face. Twice more she passed the cloth over her taut nipples and twice more, low moans were pulled from her.

Her music backdrop no longer the plinking of the piano keys from below, now she focused more on the sounds coming from the room beside her.

She dropped the cloth in the warm water, pulse pounding as she settled her head back against the rim, allowing herself to submerge up to her neck.

Was the woman next door moaning because she was being touched in such a way? Rebecca slowly slid her hands along her tender breasts, tugging lightly at her nipples, moaning again as pleasure streaked through her.

If Cy touched me like this, would I make those same noises?

Was it wrong she wanted to find out?

Between her legs, a demanding throb had set up, this unexperienced need directing her touch down. Eyes closing, panting with a craving she didn't fully understand, she listened to the need of her body.

Her hands weren't smooth and the roughness had her breath hitching as she smoothed them over her torso and down across her belly. Muscles tightening in a mixture of anticipation and uncertainty she pressed on, a greater desire pushing her, directing

her.

The moans next door changed, no longer fast and high but lower and longer. She bit her lower lip as she shifted again in the cooling water.

Rebecca hesitated with her fingers on the wet curls above the juncture of her thighs. Was this wrong?

She knew the mechanics of sex, she had watched animals do it and understood. But until actually meeting Cy Spencer, there'd never been a need within her to feel, well, anything more than she did.

Two fingers slid between her lower lips and she gasped as the headboard from next door slammed into the wall. Wet from the water yes, but there was another slickness there and the tiny nub was swollen and she jolted again as her fingers trailed over it.

“Oh,” she gasped.

Right hand on the edge of the tub, she widened her thighs and made circles on the sensitive bud. Pleasure streaked through her as she didn't relent. Fast and slow, she tried out different speeds and angles to see what she liked best.

Her body hummed with energy, like the air did when a big storm appeared and threatened to explode. With her middle finger, she dipped it inside her core and back out, short, shallow pumps even while she continued to use the heel of her palm on her clit.

Hips shifting, breasts tingling, Rebecca pulled her fingers from inside her and circled faster, needing to get to that cliff. She craved that feeling she'd not had before but her body knew where it needed to go.

Eyes closed, she listened to the shared moans from the room beside her, conjured up a visual of Cy and worked her fingers faster and faster. Just there, a tiny bit more and her body shattered, back arching, hips lifting her from the bottom of the tub, she cried out as her orgasm rocked her.

For a few moments she didn't move, couldn't move. Merely sat there, water again up to her neck and panted. The sounds next door slowed and stopped. Shifting in the water, Rebecca realized where she was and hurried to finish.

Dressing as soon as she was dry, she winced as the wrappings abraded her sensitive breasts. When she'd put on her bandanna and slipped on her coat she removed the chair from blocking entrance. Seconds later, the door opened and Megan stood there, corset unlaced and her breasts exposed.

Wedging her hat on her head, she shook her head and walked up to Megan, eyes on her face, not the exposed breasts. "No time, Megan."

"I heard you in here," she pouted. "You didn't have to jack off alone, I would have helped you."

She maneuvered by the woman in the doorway. "I have to get back, I told you, I have a run."

Another door opened down the hall and out stepped a young black woman, holding a robe closed, eyes widening as their gazes met.

"Robert. Just give me a moment to clean up."

God, this was disgusting. She shook her head and pulled Megan back out of the room. "No need. I was well taken care of." She placed a kiss to Megan's cheek, patted her on the ass and walked away, cheeks burning.

Without stopping again, she hustled outside and was back in the saddle, riding back toward Buffalo Creek station as soon as she turned Polaris in that direction.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for her mind to drift back to the pleasure she'd brought herself in the tub and combined with the rocking she was doing in the saddle, she was aroused shortly.

It was going to be a long ride back.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:28 pm

She stepped up to the door, took a breath and ran her hands down the front of her pants before reaching out to knock on the door. What am I doing? I wouldn't ever knock on this before, why do I feel like I should now?

The ground had lost the water from the most recent storm and the colder weather was on its way. Rebecca was far more nervous than she should be. Pretty much more nervous than she'd been this entire time. Get it together, Rebecca.

Pushing open the door, she stepped into the darkened interior, grateful to be out of the sun and wind. She scanned the interior and found Cy in the kitchen. Her breath caught at the sight.

Even inside, not out working with the horses, building something, the man was beyond impressive. Broad shoulders, narrow hips and an ass she enjoyed watching.

He bent at the waist and pushed more wood in the stove. She gulped and hoped like hell her face was blank when he angled his head to look in her direction.

"You came."

"Didn't give me much choice."

He stood up, gaze raking over her in a manner that made her wonder if she wore clothing or if she were as undressed as she was the day he had inadvertently discovered her secret. Arms crossed he lifted an eyebrow.

"You always had a choice."

She flattened her lips and shook her head. “No I didn’t. If I didn’t come here and help you, per your own threat, you would out my secret and I would lose the money this brings my family.”

“Never said it was a good choice,” he muttered. “Just that it was a choice.”

She shrugged out of her coat grateful the oversized shirt hid the bindings. Not that she had to hide it from him as he knew, but still. Again, she paused and took another look over her person given how he was watching her. I am dressed right?

Yes, yes she was. Although to be fair, at the moment, her skin tingled and felt about two sizes too tight. Her breathing was getting rapid and she had to swallow a few times to gather some moisture in her mouth. This man and his effect on her was overpowering.

“Right. What are you needing help cooking?”

“Do you make biscuits? You’ve had the ones I make and they are no better than hardtack.”

“Well that’s true.” She brushed by him and stepped into the smaller space, doing her best to ignore how his scent filled her nose and made her insides flip a few times.

He gave a sharp bark of laughter and she smiled shyly at him, pleased he hadn’t been offended by her comment that slipped free without thought.

“I never claimed to be a good cook. I had one of those in the army.”

She reached for a bowl and froze when he pressed up against her and snatched it down from the high shelf. Why did he make her want to rub all over him?

“I’ve never had a cook. I mean, I guess when I was little, Mama was. But I learned at a young age.”

Cy set the stoneware bowl down in front of her and held himself behind her for a moment. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. It took everything inside her not to lean back into his chest and simply feel . Experience what it would be like to have a man hold her.

I don’t think I’m wrong about him liking me in that manner.

Then again, it could simply be because he is a man and she was a woman. Perhaps, as with the whores in the saloon there didn’t have to be an emotional attachment. She wasn’t sure.

“Thank you.” She gripped the bowl and gazed around to locate the flour. Her mother had pottery ones.

“Sacks.” He pointed in front of her face directing her to the left. “Measuring cups are over in the drawer.”

“Not necessary, I’ve been doing this since I started cooking.” She slid away from his welcoming warmth.

With deft fingers she opened the sack and scooped out the amount of flour she figured she would need. She knew how much her brother could eat and when her father had been home, how many her mom made so with the five guys and her, she figured she would double it.

Bowl on the counter, she tied the bag off once more then swiped up the bowl and moved to a larger section. Grabbing a towel, she tucked it in her waistband and went to the larder to get the rest of what she needed.

When she returned he stood there chopping potatoes. A lot of the meals were stews or meat pies. Looked like today was going to be stew.

His hair hung forward over his forehead, hiding one eye from her for a few moments. Then he tossed his head as he blew some air toward the curl she fought her need to move for him.

“Do you have any other siblings?”

She stopped mixing and regripped her hold on the smooth wooden spoon. “No, only Robert and me.” She added a bit more liquid and stirred once more. “What about you?”

“No. I don’t have any siblings.”

Rebecca cut her gaze to him. He didn’t watch her but continued cutting up potatoes.

“Always figured if I found the right woman, we could have a lot of kids. So they wouldn’t be alone growing up and would have someone to play with.”

“A big family is expensive. Food, clothing and all of that.”

He scraped the cubes into the dutch oven at his left then reached for some carrots and began working on them.

“I know.” Cy held her gaze. “It’d be worth it with the right woman.”

She swallowed hard and tipped the bowl to dump her mixture on the surface to roll it out and cut the biscuits out. “I see. So does that mean you’re looking for a wife now?”

Rebecca lifted her gaze when he didn't respond right away and found him watching her, expression seeking.

"Applying for the position?" His lips quirked as her eyes widened.

"We've discussed this. I'm not your type."

"That's the second time you've felt the need to tell me my type, Rebecca Freeman. Care to tell me how and why you feel it's something you know more than I do?"

Her heart seized and she stepped close to him. "You can't call me that. What if someone overhears?"

"I'm not spending time in a room with you calling you by your brother's name." A deep breath. "We're alone. They won't be in until I call them to eat."

"It's not smart to get in the habit of calling me that. What if you slip up?"

His gaze seared her and her belly clenched with longing.

"What if, what if, what if." He put a carrot piece in his mouth and chewed. "What if I kissed you?"

She dug her fingers into the dough and tried to slow her breathing. It wasn't working. Especially not with the way he watched her.

"That's not what this arrangement is about."

He nodded as he went back to chopping. "True, this is about me proving you don't know as much about my wants and desires as you think you do." His gaze returned to her as he dumped the carrots into the black cast iron pot.

“No,” she argued. “It’s not.”

His firm lips twitched and she realized he was goading her. “What’s it about then?”

“Me upholding my end of the bargain so you uphold yours.” She bit her lower lip, noticing the flare of heat in his gaze as he tracked her motion.

Cy chuckled. “Is that what you think?”

Honestly, she wasn’t so sure anymore. Regardless, she nodded. “Yes. Because you’re a man of your word.”

He reached for a thing of liquid beside him and she shook her head and moved toward him. Snatching it from him, she pushed him out of the way.

If she could help it, she didn’t want to eat lumpy stew. Without a word, she pointed to a smaller bowl and wriggled her fingers. Silent, he retrieved it for her.

Nothing was said between them as she mixed up the gravy to put in the soup. Taking another saucepan she began browning some butter and adding flour to make a roux.

“You’re pushy in the kitchen.”

He stood behind her, again, surrounding her with his heat.

“I like things done a certain way.”

“Me too.” Cyrus had dipped his head so his words blew along the shell of her ear.

There was suggestion in his tone and she was far out of her depths. She didn’t know how to flirt. Whatever was between her and Anson...well, it wasn’t this. That man

made her be on alert, this one, made her want to surrender and let him take the lead, showing her all the things she didn't know but desperately wanted to learn. With Cy.

"I believe we are talking about different things."

Cy slid an arm along her side and her breathing hitched. Long fingers nudged the bowl she had with a spice mixture in for the stew.

"If we are, it's only because you're ignoring the heat between us, Rebecca . And trying to keep this like we're both men."

Her body trembled as he didn't give her space. And she didn't want any.

"There's not heat between us. You need to think of me as a man."

Outrage. Shouldn't she be outraged he was putting her in danger by acting in such a manner? Yet, all she wanted to do was for him to think of her as a woman.

"Never going to happen."

She swallowed back her whimper when he moved away and put a good distance between them. Moments later her roux was as she wanted it and she slowly added it to the stew and the rest of the gravy but now it would thicken and be a bit heartier. She stepped back to the biscuit dough and said, "Cover that please."

He did before inching back into her space.

"I can be agreeable."

"Everyone can if they are getting what they want." Wiping her hands off on the towel at her waist, she reached for the biscuit dough.

“Trust me, baby. This isn’t what I want from you. Not even close.”

She attacked the dough with the rolling pin, wondering how she was going to survive this.

“Get your men to that hill, First Lieutenant! That’s an order!”

Cyrus glanced up at the colonel who sat on his big roan stallion, glaring down over him and his nearby men with disdain. The man hadn’t done much other than venture out of his tent and snap orders. Like he’d actually been in the thick of battle.

Different leading skills.

Personally he wouldn’t send his men anywhere he wouldn’t go whereas this colonel had no problems losing men that were sent out ahead to scout or be the first to engage the enemy.

“Sir, yes sir!” He snapped out a salute before turning to head back to where his men were trying to get some rest, the sun had almost retired below the horizon. They’d just been out on the field of battle for five days and this new company were supposed to help give some reprieve.

A reprieve that lasted maybe six hours. If that.

His men had been given one larger tent to crash in. Another way for them to feel expendable.

He pushed into the gloomy interior and stood there for a moment. Snoring filled the air, his men were exhausted and had crashed after getting more than a field ration.

Damn it. I don’t want to do this.

Orders were orders and orders were to be followed.

“Everything okay, sir?”

First Sergeant Wilson stood beside him, his beard sat there scraggly and rough. Uniform hanging off his frame, a testament how this was affecting everyone.

“No, we have to get going.”

“Really sir? We’d been told we were getting twenty-four hours.”

“Colonel Sanderson has decided differently.” He cleared his throat, took another five seconds and called out to the men. “Wake up! We have new orders.”

His men jumped to with swiftness, even bleary eyed they stood straight as if expecting an inspection.

“Get dressed, take a shit all the things. We’re moving out.” He cracked his neck. “Colonel Sanderson wants that hill. And we’re gonna give it to him.”

The hill wasn’t really a hill but more of a cliff. At least on one side. It wasn’t easy to get up or down. The Indians weren’t playing nice but to be fair, they were trying to push them out of their own homes so he got it.

“Yes sir!”

He rubbed the nape of his neck and sighed. A terrible feeling lingered and he did his best to shake it off. He owed it to his men to make sure he was operating at the best possible. Hurrying out, he waved for his horse to be readied.

Not a lot of cover for him or his men to be found. The night was a clear one and the

moon, nearly full.

This is not going to go well.

His gut hadn't let him down yet. Not during the years of avoiding his old man's fists. When he first enlisted in the army it had saved his life numerous times. And right now, it blatantly informed him whatever he was heading into now, wasn't going to be easy or end in a good way.

"Your horse sir."

He didn't speak, just nodded his thanks before swinging up on the back of his mount. A coal black gelding, the one nice thing from his father. Big, strong, and easy to ride, the horse didn't have an issue with his size, the horse didn't tire and also didn't let but about three people touch him.

His men lined up and in the waning light, their exhaustion obvious, he picked up on their determination and commitment to him. He was proud of them.

"Let's go, men."

It went as expected. The hostiles waited for them and the seemingly quiet night soon filled with screams of pain, shots, and shouting through the ranks. Charging up the side on his ride, he slowed at an extremely steep part, his horse blowing hard but ready to carry on if that's what was asked of him.

It was.

Clucking his tongue, he regripped the reins in his left hand and held the pistol in his right. Tossing his head, the horse surged forward up the most dangerous part of their climb. He didn't try to guide him, allowing the animal to pick the best way up.

Nearly to the top he fired a shot when someone jumped out at them, spooking his horse. With a yell, the man thrust a spear at the horse's exposed chest. He pulled the trigger as his mount fell back.

Cyrus had no clue if he even hit the man who'd shoved a spear in his horse's chest.

He hit first, the heavy weight of his horse slamming onto his leg before they began sliding down. The first bump brought tears, the second, removed him from the pain reverberating through his body as he fell into unconsciousness.

He bolted up in bed, sweat dripping down his body. Even now, his hip and leg still ached. Cy ran a hand over his face and swung his legs around to the floor, needing to get up and move.

Years. It had been years since he had the dream.

He poured himself a drink of water and gulped it down before topping it off and having another. His limbs shook and his heart continued to pound out of control.

Thirst quenched, at least for the moment, he took a deep breath and reached down to the scar on his leg. He'd not only lost his army career that day but the one decent thing from his father, that stallion. He'd had to be put down to end his suffering.

The doctor had been a drunk and a fool, not setting his leg right. Even his hip hurt at times now but mostly his leg when he had to ride a long distance or on the occasion he made a wrong step.

Either way, refusing to head home with his tail tucked to face his bastard of a father, he had tried for the Pony Express once more and jumped at the chance to head this station when the chance came.

He'd lost most of his men that day and the colonel who had sent them never came to talk to him to see how he or the survivors were doing. However, Cy had heard him after he'd been allowed to get up and move around, talking about how the losses that day were worth it because it was another accomplishment in his hat for his superiors to know about.

One of his men had held him back or he would have physically attacked the man. Cy hadn't seen him since and didn't want to.

He stepped outside after pulling on some pants, the suspenders hanging low, and boots were untied on his feet but he walked out from beneath the low awning of the station he now called home. Staring out over the grounds he closed his eyes as cool air blew around him, chilling his heated skin.

Nothing sounded out of the ordinary and he scanned around, something having set up as off in his mind. Again, it was his gut and he wasn't about to ignore that.

Bunkhouse was dark so he cut his gaze to the stable. All dark as well. Wait, was that a flicker of light? Silently, he stepped back inside and swiped up the rifle he had by the door. He knew how many steps it took to get to the stable, he'd run it so many times by now.

He went up to the door and paused before entering. Slinking around to the paddock he climbed through the split rails and edged up to the space there that was open to allow him to bring horses in and out. The doors stayed open unless the weather was bad, then they would close them.

Winter hadn't hit yet.

Rifle ready to fire, he crept inside, ears and eyes attuned to anything that was out of place. After a full check of the entire building, he exited out the front, frustrated that

he hadn't been able to find anything.

"I need some damn sleep."

It was more than that. He needed the one thing he wasn't allowed to even entertain having as his own.

Rebecca Freeman.

Knowing he wasn't about to get anymore sleep, he started on breakfast. Staging it so it wouldn't take as long to prepare for the men.

Later that morning, he was in the barn taking another look, while dealing with daily chores when a tingle ghosted over his skin and he glanced up to see that Rebecca was standing there watching him. The blue bandana wrapped around her head and the hat set low, obscuring what he knew now to be a woman's face.

"Need something?" He hooked the rope keeping in the chestnut mare and moved on to the next stall.

"No. Heading in to town."

His anger fell away and he found he wanted nothing more than to needle her and see if he couldn't fluster her. Propping his hands on the top of the rake handle, he jutted his chin at her. "Spending a lot of time there, Robert. Got a woman that holds your fancy? Megan? Sharla? I've heard they like you."

As expected, Rebecca shook her head and scuffed the toe of her boots in the dirt floor.

"Not really my scene there."

“But you are going to the Right Hand, aren’t you?”

Polaris stuck his head out of his stall and whickered a hello. She moved to his side and hugged him before stroking his neck.

I’ve never been jealous of a horse before now.

He wanted that touch on him not the hide of a horse. Hell, she could stroke him all over if she wished. Cy was more than willing to strip naked for her touch. Through his clothing would be acceptable if that was the only way she would do it.

“Yes.”

“Making sure to keep up appearances? How does that work in their rooms?” He crossed the aisle to stand near her, unable to keep away. Needing to see her eyes, he pushed her hat back.

His heart and ego swelled when she ran her gaze over him and he didn’t miss the hunger there. Yeah, his woman wanted him too, she was scared though.

She smirked at him. Smirked.

You’re definitely not scared of me, Rebecca. Your feelings for me yes, but not me. She never would have teased him when she first arrived.

“Well?”

Nothing was said while Polaris was saddled in the stall but when she walked out, hat again tugged low.

“Perhaps you need a trip into town, Cy, if you’re not recalling what happens in those

rooms upstairs.” Rebecca swung into the saddle and touched her heels to the dun side moving him out.

Pivoting he swallowed back his retort as he watched Bill standing there, saddle in hand. His lips twitched.

“Kid’s got a point. You need to head into town and get your dick into some quim. More than one perhaps.”

“Between you and Robert, you’d think I still needed help taking a piss and wiping my ass.”

Bill grinned. “Ask them, they may help with that also.” He went to his horse’s stall. “I’m following the kid and getting some pussy. Been to long.”

He waved at him but didn’t say anything else because what floated on the tip of his tongue wasn’t something he should be sharing. It wasn’t his place to ask another man to keep an eye on a woman pretending to be a man to help her family.

Fuck!

If he were smart, he would ride off after her and do what he’s wanted since the first time he realized Robert was really Rebecca.

Claim her.

Mark her.

Possess her.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:28 pm

C y rubbed the nape of his neck as he swung down from his roan gelding. He continued to ride a stockier horse than the slimmer faster ones used for the pony express. Not that his wasn't fast, it wasn't a draft horse, but the equine was bigger.

His horse snorted and shook his head, the black mane nearly hitting him in the face. On either side of him, two more of the guys who'd come to Demon Canyon with him dismounted as well. The next ride from his station wasn't due for three more days so they were taking a bit of down time.

Did he want to be here? Not really.

Had he his choice in the matter he would have snagged Rebecca and not let her out of the bed until they'd both been completely sated. Hell, probably not even after that. In his mind, there wasn't enough time to adequately explore that woman.

His woman.

My woman.

Once he'd ensured his leg would be just fine with his weight, he sighed and patted the horse on its neck.

Bill and Tyler glanced at him before moving toward the saloon. Tyler waggled his eyebrows at him.

"Coming with us?"

He had no wish to flirt with much less lay with another woman. Hell, even the mere thought of doing such a thing had his dick trying to hide.

Scratching his chest under his coat, he opened his mouth to refuse when a familiar dun caught his eye.

“Robert?”

The ones with him looked over to see Polaris moving toward them at a smooth jog trot, in the middle of the street, small dust swirls kicking up from the hooves as he moved.

Tyler held up a hand and whistled. The cowboy hat riding low over the rider lifted and he found himself snared by brown eyes. His heart turned over, even knowing that this was technically supposed to be Robert.

A small shift of the left hand on the reins, navigated Polaris closer to their side of the street even as the horse slowed.

“Didn’t know you were headed to town, Robert.” Cy secured his gelding then looked back at the rider.

“We’re heading to see the women.” Tyler grinned, showing off his misaligned teeth. “I heard both Sharla and Megan have taken a shine to you.”

Cy lifted an eyebrow as he held her gaze. Had they now?

Perhaps it was embarrassment which had her skin flushing, perhaps it was nothing more than the damn cold wind that never failed to whip through this canyon in winter.

“You joining us?” Why he asked the question he didn’t have a clue, it wasn’t like he wanted to partake in any of the women in there. No thanks. The one he wanted currently sat before him on a pony she’d gotten as a gift from the Indians in the area and was acting as her twin brother.

“No.”

That was it. One word. No further explanation.

Tyler stepped closer to the dun, head tipped back, black bandana around his neck fluttering in the wind. “Why not?”

Cy observed as the rider leaned down a tiny bit and shrugged. “Already been. Have to stop at the general store and pick up some staples.” That head popped up. “I was told I was making dinner because someone had other things to do today.”

Yeah, she was pissed. Cyrus knew this was going to take some doing to dig out of the hole he’d put himself in. Truth was, he had a lot of plans today and this hadn’t been one of them.

“Gonna make some of those biscuits you do, Robert? Your mama’s recipe?”

Tyler shifted closer and Cy swallowed back his possessive growl, not wanting any man close to his woman.

“That had been the plan, if I can get more flour from the store.” He sat up straight. “Reckon I’d best be getting along.” A tip of the cowboy hat and Polaris had moved on.

“No offense Cyrus,” Tyler said. “But that boy’s mama’s biscuits are damn good. Not hard like yours.”

He grunted, not wanting to talk about Rebecca posing as Robert cooking with him so he could keep her close to him. In his periphery he noticed how Bill watched him, calculating, wondering.

Without waiting for the others, he turned and stepped up onto the sidewalk and entered the saloon. Bill and Tyler right behind him. The riders immediately sought out women and headed up the stairs while he scanned the room for a game.

Adjusting the hat on his head, he walked to a table and took a seat with a nod to the others gathered. Across the room, he saw Sharla, her dark skin agleam in the light, she sat perched on the knee of a man he didn't know.

“Haven't seen you around in a while, Cy.”

“Don't get a lot of free time running the station, Landon.” He took the cards that had been dealt him and took a peek. “Actually was just out to get some supplies.”

Landon James was a rancher in the area. His daddy was rich so he thought he could do whatever he wanted. From his perfectly coifed hair to his new clothing rarely was anything out of place on him. A womanizer and one who had no problem taking a woman even if she said no.

“That's right, you had an Injun attack not to long ago.”

He waved for a card after tossing in some money. “Thanks for your concern.”

“Gentlemen,” the owner and madam strolled up. “I don't allow fighting in my saloon. You want to have words, you take it outside.”

He nodded up at Gwendolyn Royal, she'd been a madam back east and had come this way thinking she was going to marry a man. Rumor had it, he wanted to put her to

work on her back and she didn't see it going that way. Now she was alone and had her own establishment. She may be a woman, but the men in this town didn't push her for she was quick to draw and didn't miss what she aimed at.

"I hear the army's finally sending some soldiers out to help your riders." She perched against his chair, long fingers smoothing along the nape of his neck and tangling in the hair that fell to his collar.

Cy wanted to move away, but he wasn't wanting to explain why he was moving from a woman's touch. Didn't feel like telling the world he'd gone and fallen for Rebecca, not when he'd not told her yet.

"That'll be nice. It will be good to have some extra protection there." He wanted Rebecca protected at all times but also, didn't want any of the soldiers to be near her.

"Perhaps you can come by more. I know the girls love you. All big and brawny." She bent down, her breasts in Cy's face. "And from what I hear, well versed in using that big dick of yours."

"Perhaps." That was the only concession he would give her. Avoiding the bosoms thrust in his face he flicked in another coin and leaned away from her.

"Just because I'm a bit older doesn't mean I wouldn't show you a time you'd never forget."

"I'm sure that's true Ms. Royal, but I don't think I'm the one who is to get that special treatment."

She dragged her knuckles down the back of his cheek. "You would tempt a nun and that's the last thing I am. Although," she plumped up her tits, "if you're in to that kind of thing, I would be willing to find a habit."

The men around the table whooped and hollered. Cy shook his head and folded.

This wasn't what he wanted to be doing. She should be on her way back to the station right now.

Winter was bearing down on them and soon the plains would be covered in snow and the winds would be insufferable. The thought of Rebecca out in such weather cut him deep.

"You in?"

He glanced over the table at Landon. "Yeah." Cy forced himself to stay there and not leave to track down his woman.

The wind brought with it the promise of snow. Blinking against the biting cold she dipped her chin as Polaris finished his trek to the general store. She needed to run home and get herself more winter clothes.

Exhaling slowly, she swung down, trying her best not to feel betrayed that Cy would be heading inside that damn saloon to the waiting women there. He would be a welcome change from a lot of the ones who visited there. A lot of the riders were small skinny men, perhaps wiry was a better word. Some of the larger ones tended to be fat but then there was Cy.

Hard bodied. Muscular. Large broad shoulders. Chiseled features. Shaggy hair and sometimes scruff on his face that she dreamed about skimming along places on her skin that would make her tremble.

It wasn't fair. Muttering to herself, she tied off her ride and stomped onto the sidewalk and inside the general store. Two others were in there, a woman and her daughter. They were up by the front purchasing material. They glanced in her

direction then sniffed and went back to finalizing their purchases.

It didn't take her to long to figure what she needed to take back. "You from Buffalo Creek Station?"

Angling her head to view the older, rotund man approaching her. "Yes sir. Robert Freeman. I was sent to get some purchases. They need some staples."

He nodded. "Names Buchannan. You have a wagon?"

"No sir." She scratched her upper arm through the coat. "My horse is strong and I don't weigh a lot. I can take the flour and sugar back on him."

"That flour is a hundred pounds and the sugar is close to forty."

"We can do it."

"Fine. I'll put it on the stations account. You have to load it yourself, I can't be bothered to help."

"No problem, sir. Am I allowed to take from the floor here or should I go around back?"

"Back. I'll let my boy know you're coming."

Touching the brim of the cowboy hat, Rebecca walked outside and saw Polaris waiting but there were two others tied up beside him. Military men and she immediately went on guard. She knew how they acquired their horses. They liked what they saw and it became an acquisition.

With a low whistle for her mount, she made her way to his side and swiftly unwrapped

the reins and walked toward the alley around back the general store and mercantile. Behind her, she heard them talking and her gut churned as their discussion swung to her mount. She wasn't about to give him up for anything.

Or anyone.

Steps brisk as she moved through the alley to the back door of the store, she positioned him at the hitching post there and hastened to the door, pounding on it three times. A man, young and a lot like his father but with more hair on his head opened the door. Blue eyes ran over her as his lip turned up.

"One bag of flour and one of sugar." He jerked his thumb to the left. "Don't be touching anything else."

"No sir." She swallowed back the anger, but again, nothing she'd not faced before.

Just like lifting a hundred pound bag of flour wasn't something new. Didn't mean she enjoyed it and it definitely meant she would feel it later but she did it, under the watchful glare of the owner's son.

Thankfully, Polaris stood for it as she flopped the hundred pound sack over the saddle followed by the sugar that set more up by his withers. A quick assessment of how best to secure it and where she would ride and she was on her way, tucked behind the cantle. His reins were long enough she had somewhat of a hold.

Tipping her hat, she pushed through town desperate to get away from the soldiers and back before dark. It wasn't the best situation if she had to ride fast.

"Hey boy."

She kept going, hoping they weren't talking to her.

“Boy. I’m speaking to you.”

Two horses went in her path and she halted Polaris and looked up at a sourfaced sergeant.

“Yes sir?”

“That’s a nice horse.”

“Thank you sir.” She nudged him and he moved, not caring there were things in front of him. He would go through or around them.

“He’s strong and would make a good horse for the army.”

“He has a job, sir. One I need to be getting back to.”

The man smoothed his hand down over his black moustache and grunted. Two riders swung down and moved toward her.

“We like him.”

Ears back, Polaris crowhopped and backed away from the first man grabbing at him. She balanced the items on his back best she could.

“He’s not for sale, Sergeant.”

“Don’t right recall asking you boy if he was or not.”

Another man reached and her horse snapped at him. Good boy. He jumped back with a curse.

“Don’t much appreciate you trying to take horses from my riders.”

Cy’s deep voice wove around her bringing a sense of calm she hadn’t expected.

“And you are?” The sergeant demanded.

“Cyrus Spencer, station master at Buffalo Creek Station. This horse ain’t for sale and you need to leave the rider alone.” He rode up beside her barely cutting her a glance but the brief one singed her. “Unless you want me to take it up with Major Olson.”

The men swallowed. “You know the Major?” A hard cough. “You’re that Cyrus Spencer? Former First Lieutenant Cyrus Spencer?”

He’d been a First Lieutenant? An officer? What am I doing?

With a grin she would consider bared teeth more than anything, he nodded. “I am. Move along and don’t fucking bother my rider again.”

One of them shook his head. “Why you defending a darkie? Who cares if we take his horse?”

“Boy,” Cy growled voice down an octave. “You ain’t even earned the right to wear a stripe yet, keep your opinions to yourself. All the riders at that station are mine and I suggest you don’t forget it. They’re off limits for harassment and their rides are off limits. Don’t reckon I want to have this conversation again.” He shifted in the saddle. “Ride on, Robert.”

She listened knowing he moved in behind her and rode there silent until they got out of town, then he maneuvered his gelding up beside her.

“Why are you carrying all this on his back? You can’t outrun anything weighing him

down like that.”

“It’s still less than some carry with one person,” she snapped. “I had it handled. Why don’t you go back to your whores.”

He reached over and drew Polaris to a halt. Before she could say anything he deadlifted the nearly forty pound bag of sugar off him and settled it across his saddle.

“Jealous? You want to renegotiate the terms of my silence and I’m all up for it.”

Heat sluiced through her as she thought about the time in the tub. Squirring on the back of her horse, she shook her head. “I’ll keep what we have thank you. Besides, based on how the madam draped over you, I’m not your type.”

She encouraged Polaris on to a faster trot, wind slamming into them from the left.

“Baby, you shouldn’t challenge me like that to show you just how much my type you are.”

His words reached her with no problems but she didn’t answer, just held onto the heat they gave birth to in her gut and kept riding. Horses hooves pounding into the hard ground. Cy at her side as they returned to the station to get the food ready for the men.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:28 pm

Rebecca drew Polaris to a halt and scanned the horizon. The vibe in the air crackled with danger. It had been weeks since Cy had discovered she was a woman. She, honestly, was amazed he'd kept his word on letting her continue to ride. Winter had arrived.

He confused her. There were times when it was just the two of them—his gaze burned hotter when he looked at her. And for her part, well she was having a harder and harder time not staring at him. There was no denying her attraction.

Before her last ride, she had come upon him working on a horse. Shoeing him. Mama never said anything about men who looked like him. Unlike so many of the riders picked for their slighter build, Cyrus Spencer was anything but. He'd been attractive before but seeing him without his shirt...she'd not been expecting her own reaction.

Sweat gathered only to roll down his well-defined muscles. He'd worn a pair of old Army pants, which had molded to large powerful thighs, emphasizing his trim waist. He carried no extra flesh on him. The sun had converted his skin to a rich golden tan. Mesmerized she'd stood there staring and watching the easy ripple of his muscles as he worked. Right up until he'd lifted his head and pinned her with those hazel eyes.

Her insides had felt all funny and damned if she'd not wanted to touch and explore his hard body. Follow that trail of hair that disappeared beneath the top of his pants. So focused on the need coursing through her, she lost track of time until he called her by her assumed name, Robert. However, as usual it was his eyes, which made her question everything her mama warned her about men.

Her mount snorted before sidestepping and snared her attention back to her current

situation versus her enjoyable trip down memory lane. Today, she'd ridden to Demon Canyon and headed to the saloon for a private bath. It had been so luxurious. A chair shoved under the door handle and no windows afforded her the pleasure. Despite no sweet-smelling soap, she felt so much better. It had taken a lot for her not to turn her head from the scantily clad women she met on her way in and out. It had become a bit of a thing for her.

Polaris snorted again and pawed the hard packed ground. She glanced around before nudging her mount forward. All senses were alert as she rode. In the distance, black clouds rolled giving off an ominous vibe. A big storm was coming and from the swirling of the clouds a twister could possibly make an appearance.

Bottom line, she needed to keep moving back to the station. But that wasn't it. There was something else. And it set her on edge. When the first cry pierced the air her breath hitched, when others echoed the sound, panic rushed upon her. Indians.

They were coming from the left and riding hard. Their whoops and hollers had her leaning forward over Polaris' dun colored neck, wrapping gloved fingers in his mane.

"Let's go boy. They can't catch you." As the words slipped free, she prayed it was true.

The Indians were coming fast as well as at an angle in attempt and cut her off. The distance closed as they ran on. Polaris cleared the brush, logs, and small ravines with the ease and confidence she'd come to expect from him.

He could go faster but she wasn't sure if more lay in wait ahead. A sting tore across her arm and she said some words that would have gotten her mama to take a switch to her. To hell with this. She shot under her arm at them before making herself as small a target as possible.

“Go Polaris, run!”

Bless his heart her sweat-covered horse did just that. He flew, stretched out, and finally the cries, known to strike fear in those who heard them, fell beneath the endless pounding of hooves.

Eventually she slowed him to a walk. Sides heaving and head hanging, he plodded along. Nervous, she continued to watch the clouds that had replaced the Indians in gaining on her.

“May have to run again,” she muttered, casting a glance down to the bags on her saddle. They held her things but she wanted him to carry the least amount possible. She had close to another hour before reaching the station.

The first fat drop of icy rain fell and she knew there was no way to outrun the fury coming for her. She saw the wall of rain approaching and had but one thought—get out of it as fast as she could.

“I know you’re tired, boy, but you need to run again.” Polaris responded and they took off. The rain, however, bore down on them along with fierce wind. It tore around them, sending dirt into her skin with painful accuracy.

She nearly swore in relief when she came upon an abandoned barn. The homestead sat burnt to rubble but this remained. She swung off Polaris and struggled with the door. After guiding her reluctant horse in, she again fought to get it shut. She didn’t want to turn him loose and prayed it was only rain coming. The interior was almost pitch black; the few missing boards didn’t offer much light given how dark it was outside. Nevertheless, they were out of the worst of it.

A sudden flash of lightning had her swallowing a scream and reaching for her guns. Jumpy. She was just jumpy. Blowing out a breath, she touched Polaris’ side trying to

calm down. Her arm throbbed from the slice of the arrow yet she ignored it. Too dark to do anything now, plus the rain had washed it out.

Polaris whickered and she tensed again, cursing when an answering horse sounded. There was someone in here with her!

A hand snaked around her midsection while a second one covered her mouth, silencing her scream. Give up? Without a fight? No way, that wasn't how she had been raised. She struggled and went for her closest weapon. Just as her fingers curled about the handle, a familiar deep voice murmured in her ear.

"Calm down you crazy woman. It's me, Cy. I'm not going to hurt you."

Cy. Now she trembled for entirely different reasons. His large hard body pressed against hers. His heat offered her warmth.

"I don't know who's out there, so stay quiet, okay?"

If she didn't respond would he continue to hold her so close and tight?

"Answer me, Rebecca."

He called her by her name, oh dear Lord. It didn't matter it wasn't the first time, her body reacted as if it was. And he'd done a great job of doing it when they were alone cooking together.

She removed a sodden glove, wanting to touch his skin and tapped the hand covering her mouth. He didn't immediately release her. His fingers flexed against her flat stomach and he pressed tighter to her back.

Goodness, she felt hot. Her skin flushed and her heart pounded like a heard of

stampeding cattle. One odor she could only identify as man had replaced the musty scent she'd first smelled upon entering . Cy smelled of horses, leather, the outdoors, and even rain. As well as a masculine scent. She wanted to roll in it. Soak in it. He smelled divine. A man's man.

She tapped again and he removed his hand. Still didn't stop the tensing she did when callused fingertips dragged teasingly along her lips. Her breaths came sharp and shallow.

"Keep your voice down."

She couldn't speak immediately. Her mouth was as dry as the ground around her had been before the rain. The through process of her brain was addled and slower than normal. Obviously, he meant he wanted an answer now.

His large hands were remarkably gentle as he spun her to face him. Although it was hard to make out his features, she still tilted her head back as if she could clearly see him.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I came looking for you." He huffed. "This is why you shouldn't be here. You're a distraction."

She drew back a bit at the venom in his voice. His fingers tightened on the flesh of her upper arms, returning her to the close proximity he'd had her at before. She bit back a moan of pain when he squeezed her injury. "No one knows I'm a woman except you. So how is it my fault you're distracted? I never asked you to come looking for me. Nor did I expect it."

"Because," he growled, his warm breath spreading over her skin. "I know what

you're hiding behind those damn clothes.”

She'd imagined him wanting her for a while now but this was almost too much, to be face to face with that reality. “Still not my fault.”

He knocked her hat off before tearing the bandana off as well. When his lips covered hers, all sense went out the window. He had firm lips, which moved tantalizingly over hers. He swallowed her gasp of shock as she gripped his large arms for stability, her legs didn't want to support her anymore.

His tongue trailed along the seam of her lips before sliding into her mouth. He tasted so good. A moan bubbled up as he began to explore.

She'd not enjoyed her previous kisses. They had been rough, sloppy, and not at all anything she cared to repeat. However, this one, this one, astounded her. He didn't force and Cy didn't seem to be in any huge rush. He took his time. He delved, stroked, and dipped through her mouth.

The longer the kiss went on, the closer and tighter he held her. His hands left her upper arms to settle upon her lower back and the curve of her butt. Her hands relocated to his chest, fingers flexing upon the hard plane.

He was nothing but muscle. She could feel the strong staccato of his heart beating beneath her right palm.

“Rebecca,” he mumbled against her mouth.

Hunger surged up through her, scaring her with its intensity. Reckless and out of control, that was how she felt. And she loved it.

She didn't answer. At least not verbally. She reconnected their mouths and slid her

arms up around his neck. To hell with what she should do. Right here and right now it was about want. Moreover, she wanted this. Him. All of it.

“Baby, you’re killing me here.” He blazed a path from her mouth down her throat to the base. “All I’ve thought about is you.”

She warmed at his words and the pulse in her core grew heavier. More insistent. He swept up and carried her to a pile of hay. When she realized there was a blanket on it, she relaxed back, welcoming the heavy, hard and warm weight of Cy on her.

His hand moved deftly under her shirt, the callused palm warm and rough against her skin. She trembled and gasped at the sensations flooding her. Closing her eyes, she arched her body into his investigative touch. Not sure what she asked for but trusting her body with his hands and touch.

“I wish it were lighter out so I could see you better.” His voice poured over her like the aged whiskey her father had shared with her once. Warm with a hint of bite. Made her feel amazing and slightly light-headed.

“Please.”

“Patience,” he muttered, despite the way his hands tugged at her clothes in frantic motions.

She discarded her shirt and helped where she could in removing her binding. His large hands ripped the last bit away and she moaned as he palmed a breast. Pleasure and pain—from the rush of returning blood—exploded throughout her as he rolled the nipple in his fingers and tugged lightly on it.

“Oh...I...”

Words wouldn't come, but they didn't need to, he understood, tossed their clothing to the side, and laid her back again. This time when his large body covered hers, they were skin to skin. She ran her hands up powerful arms, encouraging him closer until they were chest to chest.

His thickness pressed against her and she instinctively widened her legs more. Cy peppered light kisses all around her mouth as the fingers from one hand drifted through the curls between her legs before dipping inside her.

Her hips bucked and she cried out in pleasure. One finger played with her clit as his touch continued to inflame her until she writhed beneath him, incoherently asking for something she'd never received from another. Something she'd never wanted...until Cy. But this man, she wanted it all.

His rumble of pleasure could be felt as his light kisses changed into something more. Much deeper. Incredibly intense. His tongue dueled with her own embedding his taste further into her as he removed his fingers and replaced them with the broad head of his shaft. She dug her short nails into his back, expectant. Desperate for what was to come.

He nipped her lower lip then lapped the sting away as he surged forward with his hips, sinking into her fully. A bolt of pain pierced her and she stiffened with a gasp.

Cy froze; she could feel him tremble above her. "You were...shit, why didn't you say anything?"

She tightened her grip on him. "Don't stop."

His breath blew across her face and he began to move. She moaned as the pain morphed into pleasure. Oh Lord, no one said it was like this.

Back and forth, he moved and she followed. Sensations new and powerful exploded through her. She felt so full. Breaking the kiss, she buried her face into his shoulder. He smelled of man and sweat.

In and out he stroked, catapulting her closer and closer to the pinnacle she sought. The air filled with a canopy of sounds. The rain, wind, thunder, horses shifting, and the sound of their bodies moving together as one.

“So tight,” he rumbled in her ear. His thrusts came faster and deeper.

She couldn’t hold back anymore. Muscles clenched, she bowed her back, crying out as she shattered. Cy powered twice more before he erupted, coating her womb with his seed.

Out of breath, she lay there; small tremors shook her as she floated down from the cloud of ecstasy he’d taken her to. He lowered more of his weight down and she smiled tiredly at the quickness of his own heartbeat. It was a wondrous feeling being pressed beneath him. He moved off and she felt chilled; however, only momentarily though, for he immediately gathered her and tucked her close.

She didn’t know what to do. He ran a hand up and down her arm. The wind rattled the building and she tensed. Her cut arm throbbed from the hay, which poked her through the blanket, much more noticeable now that she wasn’t in the throes of passion.

“Are you okay? I didn’t hurt you, did I?” His deep voice was low and soothing.

“No.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Would it have made a difference?” She rested her hand upon his chest.

Cy took a deep breath. He could still smell the lingering culmination of their scents. He hadn’t planned on this happening. Hell, he’d avoided her for this very reason.

She was a virgin. He closed his eyes and continued to stroke up and down her arm.

Ever since he’d discovered she was a woman he’d been having dreams of her. Beneath him, crying his name in pleasure. So today when he saw the storm approaching he’d ridden out to find her. He knew she’d gone to town but honestly, he’d expected her back before then.

She worked hard. Cooked some meals, as promised, in exchange for his silence. Still didn’t stop his concern for her every ride she took and every night she bunked down with other men. He hated it.

Liked the idea even less now. The woman in his arms deserved to be protected and safe. You slept with a rider, his brain reminded him.

Rebecca shifted against him and he remembered she had asked a question.

“Yes.”

“How so?” There was honest curiosity in her voice.

“I would have taken more time to prepare you. Been gentler.”

“So you’ve done it before?”

“Yes.” She stiffened. “Wait, done what before?”

“Slept with a virgin.”

She felt so right against him. He brushed his lips along her forehead. “Never.”

“So it’s over and not an issue.” A shiver wracked her and he curled her closer.

He caught his frown before it formed. Why was her distance bothering him? He sought out relief on occasion and never once did he stay after and do what he was now. Cuddling.

“Can’t go anywhere in the storm anyway,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

“Just thinking out loud.”

“How long is enough time before we can dress?”

Her straightforward question made him smile. “Trying to get away from me already?”

“No. I am however, a bit cold.”

His shaft stiffened at the image of a different—much more enjoyable—way of warming her up. Closing his eyes, he inhaled the clean scent of her. He didn’t want to dress, he wanted to start over and take his time in pleasuring her.

It had been a while for him and he’d been like an animal. To top it off she’d been a virgin. He wanted, needed, to show her it was—could be—like with an attentive lover.

She didn't complain.

No, she hadn't but she also didn't have any one for a comparison.

Next time will be better.

That thought gave him pause. Next time? She rolled away and he struggled not to bring her back close. He shoved back into his wet clothes and lifted the blanket, shaking it off.

"Rebecca?"

"Yes?"

He moved in the direction of her voice. It had grown even darker as the intensity outside increased. He wanted her close.

"You dressed?"

"Yes."

He smiled at the softness to her voice. So unlike when she spoke at the station where it was deeper. More graveled.

"Come here."

She listened and he took her back to the blanket he'd laid down again. He gathered her close and wrapped his arms around her. Her hair was covered and he wanted to remove it.

"Tell me about you."

“Me?” Her voice rose a bit, becoming almost a squeak.

He smiled in the dark. “It’s just the two of us here, so yes, you. ”

“I have my twin, Robert, who rides—”

He covered her mouth with his hand, silencing her. “I know that much. Tell me about you, Rebecca.”

Her nod removed his hand. He understood and respected privacy but damn it, he wanted to know more about her other than what he did. Hell, even as Robert, he knew very little about her.

“We live in Copper Junction.”

He knew where that was located. There was an Army post a day’s ride from there. Many Blacks lived in Copper Junction. That stopped him for a moment before he shook it off. He didn’t care about the color of her skin. Only how it felt beneath his fingertips.

“Your mother let you do this?”

“Mama knew without Robert’s income life would be even harder. We couldn’t take in enough wash to make up the difference.” Her words were straightforward and blunt, unashamed. Her fortitude amazed him like how she just accepted what was her lot in life.

“And your father?”

She moved with her shrug. “Not sure.” Cy knew it was difficult especially without a father. He went to offer his apologies when she continued. “Last we heard he was on

his way toward Boston.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“He works for a major in the Army.”

A jolt struck him in the heart. Something he could never be again. A soldier. Gulping back his own pain, he held her tighter. “Good for him. Do you see him often?”

A heavy sigh. “We haven’t seen him in over a year.” She shifted nearer and laid her head on his chest while her fingers moved idly over the damp fabric of his shirt. “What about you?”

“I was in the Army.” She tensed slightly but said nothing. “I got injured and while I can walk and ride shorter distances, I can’t withstand the rigors of Army life. Not anymore.”

“You miss it.”

Not many knew that. “How can you tell?”

She laughed gently. “You still act like you’re in the Army. Strict regimen.”

He supposed it was true enough. “It’s how I grew up. My old man was in the Army as well.”

“Was?”

“He died three years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. He was a mean bastard. When he died, my ma said she was leaving this godless frontier and returning home.”

“And where was home?”

“Charleston, South Carolina.” She grew so still he tightened his hold on her. “You okay?”

“Sure.” She lied and he knew it for her voice was anything but fine.

The horses whickered and she bolted up. They strained to hear anything beyond the storm. She moved away and he struggled to see her. It was no use. Therefore, he went by sound. His leg ached a bit but it had been so worth it.

He caught her by her horse and slid an arm around her waist. “Come lay with me.” The feeling of her in his arms was one he had gotten addicted to very quickly.

He lowered his head and placed light kisses along her neck. She quivered and he continued his tender assault. When she sank into him with a slight whimper, he lifted her and carried her back to the blanket. She was like fire in his arms, burning him. He wanted so much more.

Their mouths melded as he lowered her down, her arms twined around his neck as mewls poured from her throat. Once more , he told himself.

The rain had stopped when he woke. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up. With the storm passed, he could see more and he scowled. He was alone. Rebecca and Polaris were gone.

He got up and finished dressing a second time before he gathered his things. Leading his horse to the door, he opened it and peered out. He could see the storm moving off

to the west. It would be nightfall soon. He swung up on his gelding and headed back to the station.

When he rode in, he immediately saw the dun out in the corral and breathed a bit easier. It didn't last long for when he went around toward the front of the barn, he saw her with another rider, Hank, leaning close to her, his face near her breasts.

“Good to see you back, boss. Have fun in town?” Pete asked with raucous laughter.

“What's going on?” He swung down.

Pete scratched himself and puffed his smoke. “Hank's sewing up Robert's arm. Injuns chased him. And you have a message that came in with the last rider.”

Shit. He'd missed a transfer being out there with her. The more important issue is why didn't she say anything about her injury?

He looked at her; she met his gaze as she always did. Emotionless. “Come talk to me when you're done here, Robert.”

Pete walked near and sat down as she gave him a nod. Cy bit back his curse then went to unsaddle his horse and carry his supplies inside. As it grew darker, he began supper, his dispatch in his pocket. While it simmered, he sat in a chair and read it by lantern.

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Rebecca made her way to the station, moving slow as she tried not to wince. Even the ride back here had been one of discomfort. Not that she regretted what had transpired between them, for she didn't. For the first time in her life she'd felt something deeper.

She opened the door and walked in, Cy sat in a chair to her left. Dark hazel eyes speared her and her breath left her in a rush.

"You wished to see me?"

He dropped the paper from his hand to the small table beside him and pushed to his feet.

"Oh yeah," he growled.

Lord, he was big. She wanted the opportunity to explore his hard physique in the light of day. The recollection of his hands upon her skin caused a hitch in her breathing. Strong callused hands skimming over her waist, breasts and every ache she'd experienced previously vanished. She wanted more and could feel herself ready for him.

"What?" she asked. Hopefully he couldn't hear the pounding of her heart. It was so loud to her.

"You left me there. Not only that, you didn't tell me you'd been injured."

"We're men who work together. I didn't think I needed to wait for you. Moreover,

the cut is just a cut. Hank did a good job.”

He narrowed his eyes. “We’re not men. I am. You...are a woman.” She blew an exasperated breath. “He put a needle in you.”

“Like he would do any other man who got hurt. Should I have gone to see the doc? Pray he didn’t ask me to remove my shirt?”

“Damn it!”

Anger began to rear. “Am I suddenly not able to do the job?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good because I refuse to lose this job.”

He clenched his fists and swore. She crossed her arms and looked at him, unwilling to budge.

“I could force you.”

“You could.” A shrug. “You won’t.”

“So confident?”

Not really no. “Yes.”

“And why is that?”

Please don’t let me be wrong here. “Because you gave your word.”

“And you trust me?”

“Yes. I never would have slept with you had I not.”

The door opened behind her, shattering the moment. Hank stood there.

“Sorry Boss, am I interrupting?”

Cy moved an impersonal gaze over her. “Not at all. We’re done here.”

At her dismissal, she pivoted and walked out. It wasn’t supposed to work like that. Was it? Conflicition warred within her as she tried to sort out her feelings. In the bunkhouse, she sat on her bed and lay back.

What were you expecting?

She had no answer for her brain’s question. She hadn’t thought of anything but the moment. Being intimate with him had been the right thing to do. Both times. For such a large man he could be exceedingly gentle.

It no longer mattered. She had to stay focused on work and not slip up. She drifted into an uneasy sleep and woke with a jerk. The place was quiet, broken by the occasional grunt or snore.

Awake, she made her way to the door and outside. The moon was almost full and bathed the area in silver light. She walked to the corral and released a low whistle.

Polaris trotted up, greeting her with a whicker. “Hey boy.” She rubbed his head beneath his forelock. “Thank you for keeping me alive, today.” He whickered again and nudged her.

When his ear twitched to the left, she tensed and dropped her right hand to the butt of her gun. The shadows parted and Cy approached.

“Where’d you get him?” he asked settling by her on the fence and patting Polaris as well. “Your brother said from some Indians when he was young.”

“Yes.” She didn’t embellish further.

“How’d you get your hands on one? I mean, why did they give him to you?”

“A gift.”

“Are things going to be difficult between us?”

She tipped her head to the side momentarily thrown by the change in conversation.

“Are you going to treat me differently?” He sighed and shifted. She wanted to lean against him. Inhale his masculine scent.

“You know this is hard for me.”

“Why? It’s no different than before.”

“Bullshit!” His response fell harshly.

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I knew you were a woman, but everything has changed now.”

A bit of fear penetrated. “How?”

“Because,” he said his voice all deep and graveled. “We’ve slept together. I took your

virginity, for God's sake."

Ignoring the flutter of passion within her, she narrowed her eyes. "Doesn't change my capabilities, I'm riding the trail."

"Damn it, Rebecca! I want to protect you."

"I don't need your protection. And you already told me if I was caught I was on my own."

"I will kill them if they hurt you." His tone was dagger sharp.

"Kill who?" Bigger question was why did the thought of his protection make her smile so?

"Whoever."

So much for being on her own if they found out. "Don't ruin this for me. Please."

He whirled and left abruptly. She noticed his limp and realized that was probably had him up at this time. She blew out a breath, which Polaris echoed with a snort.

"Who understands men," she muttered before patting him a final time then leaving.

Things between her and Cy remained tense. She ensured they weren't alone and went out of her way to avoid him without appearing she'd done so. Three weeks after they'd made love in the old building and she still couldn't forget how it had been.

Today blistered. She'd come in from her ride and was looking after her horse. Content he had sufficiently cooled down, she walked him to the corral where the others stood lazily beneath a lean-to, tails flicking indolently at buzzing flies.

She sent him off with a pat and trudged back into the barn. With a groan, she hefted the saddle and put it on the rack where it would stay until her next ride. She turned the saddle blanket upside down on it to dry out.

Running the back of her hand across her brow, she sighed. She bent to grab her saddlebags and swung them over her shoulder when she turned; she froze at the sight. Cy leaned against a stall, arms crossed and legs hooked at the ankles.

She dragged her tongue over dry lips and tried to slow the beating of her heart. He looked so good. His pants were snug, as was his shirt. Touch. Touch. Touch. Her body cried.

“Something I can do for you, Mr. Spencer?”

“Cy.” He strode toward her.

She held her ground and watched his approach. Raw power. His hair hung over one eye and she clenched a fist to keep from reaching for it. He glanced around before gripping her wrist and tugging her back into the room she’d just vacated. Her saddlebags fell to the floor as he shut the door behind them.

“What are—”

“Shh!”

He kissed her. Dominating her mouth, his tongue swept through with broad strokes. Flames licked at her skin. She arched into him, embracing the wondrous feeling of being in his arms again.

“I can’t keep away from you,” he rasped. “I want you, Rebecca.”

The length digging into her side confirmed his words. She should refuse. She should demand he leave her alone.

“Yes,” she murmured as his hand squeezed her ass.

“Tonight. Come to me at midnight.”

His touch was making her crazy with need. “Yes.”

Another hard kiss and he vanished before she could ever recover. What had she just agreed to? Right. More amazing sex.

The rest of her day passed all too slowly. The anticipation continually built until she almost hummed with need. She skipped eating with the others needing some time to herself. She kept still as the others fell asleep. Belly in tight knots, she stepped to the door. One destination in mind. Passion awaited her. Cy waited.

Cy paced his room. Midnight was too far away. Hell, he wasn't even sure she would show up. She'd missed dinner. He'd almost gone out to find her but stopped himself.

One candle burned in his room. It was on the other side from the bunkhouse. He paused and ran a hand through his shaggy hair. Where was she? He made his way to the tall wingback in the corner by his bed and sat with a sigh.

He rested his head back and closed his eyes. A slight tingle ran up his spine and he opened his eyes to find he was no longer alone in the room. He rose, eyes on her.

Rebecca stood there, resting against the door. Heat shot straight through to his loins. She'd removed her hat and kerchief, holding them in front of her.

“You came.”

She didn't respond. Her brown eyes glinted courtesy of the candlelight. She moved toward him and despite her male attire, he didn't believe he'd ever seen anything so sexy. Rebecca paused before him, her hat falling to the floor. She tipped her head back, dampened her lips with the tip of her tongue, and he felt the jolt in his groin.

"I shouldn't be here."

He had no desire to hear what shouldn't be. There were so many excuses. He didn't care. Her skin color wasn't an issue for him. Her spirit had drawn him. Dissuading any further comment, he reached for her, curving one hand around her arm. She was softness and strength fused into one.

Cy drew her close and kissed her. He swallowed her moan and held her tighter, thinking he wouldn't ever get enough of her. She tasted of lemon and he knew it was from those little lemon candies she liked so much.

She fit perfectly against him. Mouths locked on one another, he moved his hands to her shirt and began unbuttoning it. He cursed the binding she wore as he tore his mouth from hers.

"I hate these."

"Try wearing them." Her words were soft yet matter-of-fact.

Soon the bindings were in a heap along with her shirt. He drew back and stared at her. The smooth dark skin teased him as it called to him to touch and caress.

She rolled her lower lip between white teeth before she reached for his chest and undid his buttons. He barely breathed as she opened his shirt and pushed it free of his shoulders. Her touch was light but sure.

“My turn,” he muttered his fingers going to her belt.

Soon she stood naked before him and his cock pulsed at the sight. Small and petite, she brought out some protective instincts as well as some definite sexual thoughts. Vivid thoughts. All consuming.

“Beautiful.”

He stepped close and kissed her as he lifted her and carried her to his bed. Laying her back, he allowed one hand to trail over her figure. Head braced on one hand, he watched facial expressions when his fingertips moved over different parts of her body.

Her eyes remained locked on his, wide, innocent, and trusting. Over her ribs, past her small waist and hips, he dragged his touch. Her breathing quickened and she shifted only to still.

“Why are you still dressed?”

“I want to make this good for you, Rebecca. Like your first time should have been.”

She watched him before reaching up to touch him. “My first time was perfect. I want to explore you as well.”

“I don’t have that much control,” he rasped.

Her hand drifted lower to the waistband of his pants. He inhaled sharply when she grazed against his length. Christ, if she did that again he would embarrass himself.

“My turn to explore right now.” He captured her hand and put it by her side. “My turn to do this,” he murmured, lowering his head. He captured one nipple in his

mouth and sucked hard as she arched with a cry.

“Shh.” He moved to this other and did the same thing. Back and forth until she writhed beneath his administrations. Her nipples were taut and from her reactions, very sensitive.

Lower and lower, he moved until he settled between her legs, widening them. Inhaling deeply he closed his eyes in ecstasy at the scent of her arousal. Heady. Spicy. Addictive.

She moved a bit away so he rested an arm across her midsection, immobilizing her. “Cy, no,” she began.

He cut her off by placing his mouth over her core. He swept up between the lips with his tongue and her essence coated it. Lord, she was wet and ready. Her taste drove him crazy and with a rumble, he went for more.

He feasted. She undulated against him, riding his tongue as she had his cock. Her fingers dug into his scalp as he continued to lap away. With his free hand, he slipped in two fingers, groaning at her tightness. In and out, he drove them as his tongue flicked over her clit. Her thighs clamped along his head as her hands pulled him closer still.

Her back bowed and internal muscles clenched around his fingers as she came. He replaced the digits with his tongue and lapped all her cream.

“Cy,” she moaned. Her body still trembled.

Backing away, he divested himself of all remaining attire. Her eyes were slightly unfocused but unwavering as she stared at his length. He fisted himself and stroked twice as he repositioned himself between her legs. Eyes on one another he pushed

into her. Instantly her tight wet sheath gripped him.

“Damn, you’re so tight.”

She watched him. “Move.”

Thank God, she said that because he didn’t believe he could have withheld any longer. Starting slow, he withdrew and flexed forward until he had a nice rhythm. Rebecca met him thrust for thrust and with each stroke he delivered he witnessed her hunger grow.

“Legs around my waist,” he ordered.

She complied and he lifted her up a bit, allowing deeper penetration. Her eyes darkened as she gasped.

“Uh...uh...uh,” she mewled, head tossing on his pillow.

He watched her in the candlelight. Her small breasts bounced with each forward motion, lips swollen from his kisses and wet from her licking them. Her hands were on his forearms, nails digging into his flesh then moved up to his shoulders.

Damn, she was beautiful.

“More,” she begged. “More please.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” He wasn’t a small man.

“Cy...please...I....need...Cy...”

To hear her calling him Cy with that breathless quality of voice pushed away the

remnants of his control. A growl, almost savage in nature, rolled from his lips. Harder he drove. The bed frame slammed into the wall and he moved faster. Needing more. Wanting it all. She rode his pace as if she'd been doing it forever, not asking for quarter. No, she encouraged him on with her cries and pants.

She came in a rush with a wordless scream, hips rising to meet his furious thrusts. The velvet walls rippled around him and he erupted with a low roar.

Shit! His body trembled as he lowered it onto her. His heart pounded out of control. He'd never felt like this before.

Not true, his brain reminded. You felt this with her before.

Shoving that thought away, he brushed a gentle kiss on her lips. "Are you okay?"

Her affirmative was more of a purr and he grinned. Soon they were under his blankets and he held her close. The silence between them not at all strained. He'd begun to doze when her fingers moved from his waist down his leg. He flinched as if shot when she met his scar.

"Don't," he snapped, grabbing her wrist and removing it from the puckered skin.

"What happened?"

"None of your business."

The moment the words were out, he knew they were a mistake. She stiffened, then moved. Like a wraith, she escaped the bed and was at her clothing.

"Rebecca," he said sitting up. "Come back to bed."

She didn't say a word. She drew on her undergarments and pants. Blanket around his hips, he moved to her side. She wouldn't even look at him. Each movement precise and effective, she had soon dressed fully.

"Rebecca." He caught her hand as she shoved into her boots. Finally, she met his gaze. He was shocked and more than a bit disturbed by the lack of emotion in her eyes.

"I need to go."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged. "You were right, it's none of my business." She pulled free and slipped from his room, leaving him alone and wearing naught but a blanket.

"Great job, Cyrus," he admonished himself. He couldn't go after her. Therefore, he snuffed out the candle and crawled back in his bed. Rebecca's faint smell escorted him to the land of slumber.

The next morning she didn't show for breakfast. When the rider headed in, he hastened outside and frowned at the sight of the powerful dun waiting.

"Rider up!"

She ran from the bunkhouse and swung onto her horse with ease. Polaris knew what was expected and tossed his head, showing his readiness.

The approaching horse came to a halt in a large cloud of dust. Cy worked quickly transferring the mochila between horses. As he attached it to her mount's saddle, he tried to talk to her.

“I didn’t mean to be so gruff.”

He stepped back to look at her. She glanced down double-checking it was secure then wheeled Polaris around and rode off without a single word. He hated it. He was scared for her. Wanted her with him. Wanted to be out there too.

“Sorry you can’t ride?” Jesse the newly arrived rider, asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“The longing on your face.”

Shit. He had to be careful with that. “Yes. There’re times I really wish I could.” He tore his attention from the shrinking visual of Rebecca and put it on Jesse. “Grab some chow, I’ll see to your horse.”

The young man nodded and trudged off. Cy headed to the stable allowing himself one more look to where she’d gone. Had he just ruined something, which could very well have been the best thing in his life?

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Rebecca blew out a breath and rocked on her knees before leaning over to splash her face with water. Lord she felt like hell. Staring at her reflection in the stream, she saw heavy circles beneath her eyes and the gauntness of her face.

This wouldn't do at all. Mama would ask all kinds of questions. Polaris whickered behind her and she pushed unsteadily to her feet. Back in the saddle, she nudged her gelding toward home. The night was approaching and she should be home in time for dinner.

As she rode, she sucked on her last lemon drop. Her heart lightened when her family home came into view. A welcoming light shone through the encroaching darkness.

She unsaddled Polaris and turned him loose before heading to the house. The door opened when she set her foot on the first step. Her mother stood there.

"Rebecca?"

"Hi, Mama."

"You home for good?"

"Two days."

"Come on in and wash up, we were about to eat."

"Yes, ma'am."

She walked in and saw her twin at the table. His smile made her feel so much better; at least he was mending. She changed, unbound her breasts, and washed up. In their kitchen, she stared briefly at the empty space for her father, the place he occupied when home. Licking her lips, she met her mama's gaze. Worry brimmed in those eyes.

"You eatin' enough?"

"Yes, ma'am, but home cooking is scarce there."

She opened her arms. "Come here, baby." That was what she'd been waiting for and flew into her mother's comforting embrace. "You look sick, child."

"I'm okay, Mama."

Mama released her after one more squeeze. "Sit. Eat."

She ate hearty and helped with dishes after. While they sat in the living room after, her mom sewed. "Tell us about it."

So Rebecca did.

That night she slept soundly, again safe in her own house and bed. When she woke, the sun was high in the sky. Slipping on a clean dress, she left the room. Her brother was in the kitchen, stoking the oven's fire.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?"

"Mama said you needed it."

"Where is she?"

“Delivering laundry.”

Rebecca felt a stab of guilt for not being around. Her brother must have sensed her turmoil.

“We’ve managed, Becca. I’ve helped Mama when I can. She found the money you brought and nearly wept. She’s proud of you, you know.”

“I feel as though she’s disappointed in me.”

“You know Mama.” He squeezed her shoulder. “How’s it been?”

Cy and his magical touch flashed before her eyes. She fought the blush. Her brother wouldn’t understand. “Good. You didn’t say you went into town. I had to go a few times. Met Megan and Sharla. They seem taken with you.” Robert dropped his gaze to study his toes. She smiled. “I got a bath then went back.”

“How are they treating you?”

She pulled out a mixing bowl for biscuits and as she started on the meal, she told her brother in more detail than she’d shared last night. Almost everything from Bill’s injury to why she was riding Polaris. She even mentioned the arrow slice from the Indians.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” The worry thick in his tone.

“Hank did a good job,” she replied. Kneading the dough in her mama’s spotless kitchen, she worried her lower lip. “When will you be ready?”

“Can you handle another month?”

Ignoring the brief pain in her heart at the idea of not seeing Cy again, she nodded.
“Of course. I’ll come home next payday and we can switch back.”

“Thank you, Becca.” He paused. “You know Anson has been by looking for you.”

She groaned. “What did you tell him?”

“You took Polaris to visit your Indian friend. And would be back later.”

“And he believed you?”

“He’s come by a few times since. At least until Mama answered the door.”

Rebecca smiled. “She’s never liked him very much. Calls him shifty.”

“Anyway it’s fall and he knows when you go see her.”

“ She has a name you know.”

He grumbled but didn’t dispute her. She covered the bowl and got to work on the rest of the meal. While it cooked in the oven, she went out to their barn to feed the animals, her brother beside her on crutches.

“Have we heard from Papa?”

“Nothing. Not even by post.”

She was worried but didn’t speak on it. Robert fed the chickens while she fed and milked the cows. Once finished with the chores, she carried the pails back to the house.

“What do you think of Cyrus?”

Good Lord, she almost dropped the buckets. Blowing out a deep breath, she shrugged. “He’s fair. Seems kind of young to be running a station.”

“He was a soldier. Got injured so he couldn’t serve anymore.”

“What happened to him?”

Robert glanced at her and she gave him an innocent look. They walked in and as soon as she set the pails down, he grabbed her wrist.

“What?”

“Are you kidding me?”

She had a sinking feeling he’d just figured it out. Still she had to try. “Kidding about what?”

“He’s a Southern white man.”

“What does that have to do with how he got injured?” Damn her twin for knowing her so well.

“Don’t try to fool me. You like him?”

“I don’t dislike him.” Would her answer work?

“You can’t be staring at him like a lovesick child.” His voice was low and angry.

She whirled on him. “Do you think I would be so stupid as to give myself away? I

made the decision to fill in for you to help this family! I wouldn't mess that up because one man doesn't scratch himself, pass gas, or belch in front of me. And shame on you for thinking I would."

Biting back her rising frustration, she thrust a bowl of potatoes at him along with a knife. He got the hint and left her alone. She squeezed her eyes shut and struggled to forget about Cy Spencer. It hadn't worked so far and didn't this time either.

Her relationship with Cy was more than a few passing interludes of passionate sex. On the nights she cooked, they'd talked. Gotten to know one another. She liked him. She respected him.

It's more than that, her subconscious volunteered. You've fallen in love with him.

Could that be? She shook her head. Surely not. Just a bit more attachment because he'd taken her virginity.

Do you really believe that? Her brain asked, seconded by her heart.

Didn't matter. She had a month left with him. That was all.

She worked in silence despite her brother's attempts to talk more. That night Cy filled her dreams. They went on picnics, made love along sparkling streams, and spent their nights in each other's arms.

The rooster woke her and she dressed quickly, drawing on her buckskins, which would keep her warmer than her other pants. She also dug out her fur-lined moccasins. Once bound and dressed, she slipped from her room and made her way to the door.

Stepping outside, she inhaled the cold crisp air and paused at the whicker near the

house.

“I thought you would be up early to leave.” Her mama spoke from the left.

“Thank you, Mama.”

“There are some biscuits and jerky in there for you. As well as a surprise. You take care now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her mama enveloped her in a hug, before Rebecca moved to her ride and swung up. Although it was dark, she tugged on the brim of her hat prior to riding off. She ate the ham biscuits on her way and allowed Polaris to pick his own pace.

She arrived at the station the following afternoon. The men were outside the bunkhouse, cutting hair when she rode in. Cy was off by the stable, repairing some fence. He looked up when she rode by. She barely glanced at him and dismounted.

“Robert,” Hank called. “Where’d you go?”

“Had to see a woman,” she returned, walking toward them with bags in hand.

The men whooped and hollered. “Did she mark you like Cy’s woman did?”

Cy had a woman? She felt sick all over again. “Mark me?”

“Hey, Cy!” Pete cried out.

Bags over her shoulder, she watched her sometimes lover wipe the sweat from his brow and walk toward them. Despite the coolness of the day, he wore no shirt and his

suspenders hung down. His inherent swagger set her pulse racing.

“What, Pete?” he asked when he got there.

“Show Robert where your woman marked you.”

God, she didn’t want to see this. However, she was Robert again, not Rebecca—a woman who’d lain with him.

Cy spun around and her gaze immediately went to his firm ass.

“Look at his shoulders.”

She couldn’t even begin to say who said that phrase, so focused on the hard body before her, nothing else mattered.

Tearing her gaze from his ass, she moved it over his trim waist and up. Sure enough on his broad shoulders, there were scratch marks. Nausea churned.

“Nice.” What was the proper response for seeing the marks of another woman on a man?

“Got them on his forearms too,” Pete chortled. “He won’t give us her name though. Not fair ‘cause I want a go at her. I’ve had all the whores at Right Hand and none of them left marks on me like that.”

Cy turned around and her gaze latched onto his muscled arms. Pete was right. More scratches. Wait a moment. That’s where she’d held him. Did she do that? And his back? Meeting his dark hazel eyes she couldn’t help the sharp intake of breath.

“Guess she was something else.”

His eyes burned. “You have no idea.”

Cy kept his gaze directly on Rebecca. It hadn’t been his imagination when he’d seen the jealousy in her eyes. He wanted to go to her, gather her close, and kiss her. Run his hands over her and strip her bare. Just for starters.

He’d missed her. She’d only been gone a couple of days and yet he still missed being around her. Her expression was one of disinterest before she readjusted her bags and walked off. Shoving down his urge to follow her, he went back to the fence and gathered his tools before putting them away. He went inside and made their evening meal.

Christ, she was wearing buckskins now. The temperatures had dropped swiftly the past few days, a sure sign of approaching winter. He swore and slammed the pan on the stovetop. The men were loud and raucous at the meal and he noted they included Robert. He swirled his coffee around in his mug and watched as she inched her way to the door.

“A word, Robert.”

“Yes, sir.”

He swallowed the last of his coffee and rose from the table. They stood by the door, out of hearing for those eating but within view. As much as he wanted to have her in private there was no reason.

“How’s your brother?”

“Fine.” Her tone was cool and composed.

“Is he coming back soon?”

Every inch of her stiffened. “Don’t worry. I’ll be out of your life soon enough.”

Crap. He just couldn’t get the words right around her. “That’s not what—” she brushed by and out the door. “—I meant,” he finished.

The cold pump handle pushed through her gloves and she shivered as the wind whipped around her. She wouldn’t be out in this weather if not for the need for more water. Two more pumps and she should be good.

“Robert!”

Blinking away the stinging dirt carried by the wind she saw Tyler standing in the bunkhouse doorway.

“What’s up, Tyler?”

“We’re playing poker. Come on. We’re dealing you in.”

“Have to drop this off first.” She thumbed back to the main house where they ate their meals. Cy had asked her to bring some more water in.

“Fine, but be back in time for the next hand.” He stepped back inside and slammed the door.

“Sure thing,” she muttered to the emptiness of the prairie.

Finished filling the second bucket, she adjusted her gloves once more and picked up each handle. Body aching and sore, she moved carefully not to spill any of the water he would need for cooking and cleaning.

In all honestly, it wasn’t a lot different than hauling water for the laundry she used to

do. Seems like such a long time ago.

At the door she set the buckets down and opened it before hefting them once more and carrying them inside. “Cy?”

No answer.

The inside was warm however, the fire burning nicely. She cut her gaze toward his bedroom, wondering if he was in there and if she went, would they end up there together?

Not that she would mind. Hell, her thoughts were on it all the time now. She wanted him. Wanted to have him fucking her, lifting her up on her toes with his hard thrusts. Wanted his mouth on her all over, driving her to distraction and turning her into a quivering, begging mess.

Longed for the sweat to pour down both their bodies as they lay limbs entwined, hearts pounding. Moaning she walked to the kitchen area and put down the buckets. She didn’t have the luxury of waiting around for him.

Such a pity.

For the first time, she wanted to leave a note. Let him know she’d been there, thinking of him.

Shaking off the foolish notion, she turned on her boot heels and found him there in the doorway, eyes locked on her.

“Need something?”

She swallowed twice and licked her lips before responding. “Dropping off the

buckets of water like you asked.”

“Staying to help me make dinner?”

Her insides tossed and turned. The way he watched her made her wonder what exactly was on the menu.

“Seems to me you’d like me out of your way rather than in it, so I’ll be on my way.”

His jaw firmed as he stared at her. “You’re not letting me explain myself.”

She lifted her chin. “I don’t have to, that’s the beauty of this, we owe each other nothing. Now, I have a game to get to.”

Over the next several weeks, there was very little opportunity for him to talk to her. One of their other riders had fallen sick and was at the doctor in town. Like the soldier she was, Rebecca had taken extra rides.

When he did see her, he had to bite back his raging desire to butt in and demand she rest. He bit back a curse while tossing hay in the stable. She was going to run herself into the ground. All he wanted to do was protect her.

Not true. I want her in my bed. Waking with me and falling asleep with me.

He loved holding her close to his chest as they dozed off after making love. Sometimes they went slow, sometimes it was hard and fast. He didn’t care, he wanted her anyway he could get her.

The way her dark skin glowed in the sun or moonlight. How her lips parted as she puffed out short breaths, his name falling from them as she begged him.

Harder.

Faster.

Deeper.

The pleas, the scratches, all of it, he would never get enough.

His cock stirred in his pants and he groaned as he released the pitchfork to hit the side of the wall. Tipping his head back, he exhaled with a rush as his skin heated up.

Damn it.

With the heel of his palm, he rubbed against the insistent press of his hardening dick. The last time they'd been together, she had been on her knees before him, full lips parted waiting for him to push the mushroom head between them. Her first time sucking cock and he'd been the lucky participant.

She'd been so willing and while not the most skilled, it had been the best blowjob he'd ever gotten. Seeing his seed on her lips after she swallowed and her saliva coating his dick like water, all he could think about was how he wanted to do it again.

“Fuck.”

Giving he, he dipped his hand down into his pants and freed himself. One hand braced on the wall beside him, he squeezed his length and began to pump. Slowly at first, he twisted and moved up and down the hardness.

Eyes screwed closed, he pulled up the visual of her, on her knees sucking his dick. On her hands and knees, waiting for him to spear into her from behind to take him deep. He grew impossibly harder.

Panting he stroked faster, wishing it was her tight, hot pussy gripping him and sucking him in to hold him as if she never wanted to let him go. Balls tightening, Cy exhaled as he ground his jaw and tried to stave off the release which he desperately needed but would hate himself for the moment it happened because it wasn't with Rebecca.

“Oh.”

He yanked his gaze open and pinned it on the one who owned his dreams. Rebecca stood there, eyes wide and locked on where his hand fisted himself, the swollen head poking out through the closed fist he had only to disappear again when he went the other way.

Cy licked his lips. “Look at me.”

She tore her gaze from his dick and held his stare. He wasn't stopping, she would watch this as she stayed.

There was hunger in her gaze and that only mollified his need slightly to know she needed him as he did her.

Her tongue dipped out to swipe along her lower lip and he groaned. Seeing it was like having it glide along his shaft. Goosebumps burst out on his skin as he shuddered at the memory.

“Cy.” Low and breathy, her calling his name pushed him over the edge.

She didn't move as his cock jerked, sending his seed all over the dirt floor and hay before him. “Rebecca.”

A whimper escaped before she did, leaving him alone with his cock in hand, still

hard, and a mess on the floor in front of him.

As the days turned into weeks, Cy knew something must seriously be wrong for Robert to not have returned yet and Rebecca was worried. She continued to assist with meals occasionally and the men definitely preferred it when she had a hand in them, but otherwise, there was definite distance between them.

Winter had since changed to spring and the days began again to get warmer, although the nights were still cool. And this would be the case until summer arrived and turned everything hot as hades.

Which is why I'm always cutting more wood. For the stove to cook, for the stove to stay warm.

Stacking the wood he'd cut, he looked up and his heart leapt to his throat. Five Indians on horses watched him. He dropped the wood and grabbed his rifle.

He showed no fear. There was no one at the station other than him and he was glad. He didn't want Rebecca in this danger. There were friendly Indians, he just wasn't sure if these were able to be lumped in that category, or if they were in the "hostile" category.

"What do you want?" The man in the middle gestured to the horses. Cy shook his head. "Those are my horses, move along."

More chattering and gesturing. He shook his head again and moved himself between the men and his stock.

"You steal."

"What?" Not only the accusation but also that the language it came in had been

English shocked him.

“You steal horse.”

“I’ve stolen nothing. They’re all mine.”

“No. Polaris not yours.”

He’d forgotten Polaris was here. He’d been too exhausted to carry on so Rebecca had left him behind. Cy looked to the corral where the horse in question watched them.

“That’s not yours either. I’m not giving you her horse.” He wasn’t sure he liked this man knowing Rebecca’s horse. It could all be a lie. Polaris was by far the best piece of horseflesh here. He did call him by name though.

“Rebecca’s. Where Rebecca?”

“You know her?”

“Where!”

He flexed his fingers on the rifle. “Not here right now.”

They spoke amongst themselves. “She hurt?”

“No.”

Hoof beats entered the terse silence. He turned to see who rode up and when he looked back, they were gone. He blew out a breath and hurried to meet the rider. It was Rebecca. She sawed hard on the reins of her lathered horse.

“I have no other rider here. He didn’t show.”

She wiped a gloved hand along her mouth before spitting. “Saddle up Polaris, give me two minutes, and I’ll be ready.”

He couldn’t argue, no matter how much he wished. The mail had to go on. The moment, she dismounted he took the reins and headed for the stable. She showed up as he hefted the saddle on Polaris. He noticed she chewed on a biscuit.

“An Indian asked about you right before you rode in,” he commented, tightening the cinch.

“For me?”

“Claimed I stole Polaris and asked if you were hurt.”

She gave a non-committal grunt. He glanced at her over the back of the horse where she stood securing the mochila.

“Who was he?”

“A friend.”

Anger spurt to life within him. Ducking beneath the muscled neck, he went to her side. She watched him from under her hat and he swore low before kissing her. It demanded. He demanded. Beneath him, she opened, willingly accepting him in. Their tongues danced along one another and he moaned encouragingly as her hands tore hungrily at his clothing. He worked quick and soon had her against the wall with his cock deep in her.

She undulated and moved in tandem with him. Hot, passionate, and fierce, he came in

her as she crested.

“I love you,” she whispered on a faint breath as tiny tremors continued to rack her body.

He froze and so did she. Her eyes grew wide as he withdrew from her heat. He’d never seen anyone dress so fast and he had to hurry in order to keep up. A fistful of her long-sleeved shirt and coat brought her right back before him. Her eyes smoky and lips slightly swollen. It was a punch to his gut, he wanted so much more.

“Wait.”

“No. I...forget I even said that.” She jerked free, swung up easily onto Polaris’ back without the stirrups, and they were gone.

He watched her leave unable to believe what he’d heard. But you did hear it. She’d said she loved him. Followed by the command to forget she had. Forget it? Not a chance.

When you return Rebecca, we are going to have one hell of a discussion. To hell with what is right or not.

Not much later, a group rode in and he found himself staring up at an Army company. A man on a large chestnut gelding—a major based on what he wore—gestured to another to swing down then snapped a salute. Cy almost returned it, hard not to after all the time he served. As it was, he still stood straighter.

“You the station master, Cyrus Spencer?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Major Bolden.” He glanced at the sergeant on the ground, who handed him a letter. Cy opened it and read the message. A knot filled his stomach and he reread it twice more. “Is this for real?”

“Yes. We need to protect the riders from those heathens as well as the stations and animals. So some of the men here will be staying and there will be a soldier accompanying every rider from now on. Or at least until we take care of the pests.”

The major’s opinion on Indians was obvious; Cy didn’t need to ask how he felt. As annoying as that was, it wasn’t his main concern. A soldier would be riding alone on the trail with Rebecca. His woman. There was no way he’d let her ride off with another man. Who knew what could happen to her.

“Very well. There is a bunkhouse over there they can use. It will need to be cleaned first.”

Major Bolden gestured to six men. “Your riders can move and clean.”

He frowned. “No, sir. Your men want to stay, they clean. My duty is to my riders as well as Russell, Waddell, and Majors, not the Army. Not anymore.”

Grudging respect filled his face. “Fine, my men will take the other one.”

“We have a code around here they will have to follow. The riders agreed when they signed on so I will not have problems at my station because of them. No drinking to excess or cussing is top along with respecting others.”

“Still have the Army in you, son. I can see it. So can my men. They’ll listen to you. You. We need to water our horses before we press on.”

Cy showed them where to do that and got back to his duties while the soldiers got to

work cleaning out their quarters. His night was restless as he envisioned Rebecca's body broken and beaten. That morning he set off the first rider with a soldier as escort. He didn't think it was a good idea but orders were orders.

Finally, the day Rebecca should return arrived. Unsure if her Army escort would have been there or not he anxiously kept an eye on the horizon.

"Rider up!" he called out as the familiar dust cloud rolling from beneath horse's hooves appeared.

The breath it seemed he'd been holding all day left him in a disappointed rush. The incoming horse wasn't the dun he'd hoped to see but it was one he recognized. Reaver. The knowledge made his heart sink with the knowledge. Robert—the real one—had returned.

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Rebecca wiped her hand across her mouth to remove the dripping water. She felt terrible. Standing upright, she hefted the bucket to add to the tub to continue the washing.

“You okay, Rebecca?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She nodded along with her response although it was nothing more than pure fabrication. Something was wrong and she didn’t know what. Emotions were all over the place, she was sore in ways she’d not been since she first laid with Cy. It didn’t make sense.

She’d been home for nearly a month now. Summer had arrived and was settling in with a vengeance and Robert had gone back to riding the route. A fact that both pleased and upset her.

Cy. Her hands trembled again at the thought of never seeing him again.

A mental admonishment for that’s what caused the splash the first time. She emptied the bucket in the large iron pot. This would be the last load for the day and she was glad. She stirred another and glanced to her mother.

Ever since word of the start of the war had come through, Mama had been nervous about Papa. Not that she wasn’t, no word from her Papa wasn’t like him. She noticed this slight slump in her mother’s normally erect carriage.

Was she exhausted? Of course, but so was her mother. Rebecca took a deep breath and tucked a short curl beneath the kerchief on her head. “I can finish this, Mama,

why don't you go inside early."

"There's so much—"

She pasted a small smile on her face. "It's okay, Mama. You go. I'll finish folding these to be ready for pickup." She'd already delivered some.

"Maybe I will." Mama removed her apron and went from the small building where they ran the washing business to the house.

Rebecca sighed and chewed on a fingernail as she stirred the boiling sheets, briefly. She made her way to where her mother had been ironing and folding. Determined to ignore the unrelenting images and memory of Cy, she worked like a woman possessed.

When people began showing up it was all ready. Even the final wash hung out to dry.

"Hello, Rebecca," a deep voice said from her left.

Startled, she looked up and put a hand on her belly stilling the unease there. "Good evening, Anson." Not whom she wanted to see. Sure, he was nice enough, if she wanted to have ten kids hanging on her skirts. He couldn't understand she had no desire for that many.

"You're looking lovely tonight."

His look was expectant and she hid her annoyance. "You're very handsome as well."

As she anticipated, he preened and puffed out his chest even more. In her eyes, he still fell short. Moreover, to her knowledge everyone would for they just couldn't begin to compare to Cy.

She hadn't lied that day—that last day—when he'd taken her in the stable. Idiot that she was she'd gone and fallen in love with him the former soldier turned station manager.

Then she told him. Not her best moment.

“What do you think?” Anson touched her arm as he asked.

Great. While she'd been daydreaming about Cy, this one had been talking. “Umm.”

“Just a stroll through town, Rebecca. That's all.”

“Sure.” She could do that. Besides, just because he didn't make her legs weak, heart race, or breathing go out of control didn't mean she couldn't accompany him.

“I'll be by for you at eight.”

“See you then.”

The smile on her face hurt by the time she finished dealing with her last customer for the day. Cleaning up, she regretted agreeing to this thing with Anson. She did her chores then washed up and took her tired body inside. Everything ached and she longed to simply take herself to bed.

It didn't make sense, I did more than this riding and I wasn't this sore.

It was true, with the rides, the cooking, the hard life out there at the station, she would have sworn she'd done more there than here but right now, all she longed for was sleep.

And Cy.

Her sleep had been sporadic at best. Nothing had felt quite so right than falling asleep being held by his strong arms and hearing his heartbeat while the masculine and outdoorsy scent of him wound around her. Now, she had nothing but blankets.

“I see Anson stopped by.”

Mama set the table.

Rebecca licked her lips. “He asked me to go walking with him. I can tell him no if you need me here.” Did her mother hear the hope in her tone for an excuse not to go?

A brief head shake. “Go. Eat first though.”

She’d hoped to get out of it, especially since her mother wasn’t entirely fond of him. “Yes, ma’am.”

Together they ate the simple but filling fare. She wanted to crawl in bed and dream; instead, she changed into a nicer dress and waited for Anson. There were no anticipatory butterflies. No sweaty palms or rapid breaths as she hoped maybe a brush of skin or even a kiss. He arrived on time and she made herself appear happy and not as she truly felt—resigned to her fate. He gave her a small bag of Snaps, which she accepted with a smile then handed to her mother. Why bother telling him again she didn’t eat them?

In fact, licorice made her nauseous. Horribly so.

Anson took her arm and they moved into the main part of town. Strolling along the boardwalk, they passed other couples and exchanged pleasantries.

“How is your friend?”

“My friend?”

“Your ma said you went to visit one of your Injun friends.”

She narrowed her eyes. “She’s not an Injun.”

“It’s just a word, Becca.”

She pulled free and glared at him as she lifted the hem of her dress to avoid a pile of mud. Why it was on the on the boardwalk, she wasn’t able to say. “So are some names we’re called, but that still doesn’t make it right.”

The sun hadn’t fully set and she could see the anger flickering in his eyes. Apparently, he didn’t like corrections. Tough.

“You shouldn’t be friends with her.”

This time she stopped walking and fully placed herself before him. Hands on hips she seethed. “You should finish this walk on your own and stay away from me. No one tells me who my friends can be.”

He appeared shocked by her declaration. Then a patronizing look took over. “Are you having woman issues? It would explain your irrational behavior. Perhaps tonight wasn’t a good night to walk. You should rest then we’ll talk again when you feel better.”

Was he kidding? Woman issues? Her fingers itched to slap him. “You...of all the arrogant...woman issues? Let me tell you something, Anson. I’m not irrational. Yet. What I am is a woman who can think for herself and doesn’t need a man to tell her who to befriend or treat like a simpleton. So yes, this was a mistake, one that will not be repeated. Stay away from me.”

She stepped to her left to walk around him when bruising fingers caught her upper arm.

“Don’t walk away from me.” The voice was not from the Anson she knew. This was from a man angry and sinister.

She met his gaze, refusing to show fear. “Let go.” Why had she left without a weapon?

His fingers flexed and it took an extraordinary amount of control for her not to wince at the pain radiating out from where he gripped.

“There a problem here?”

“Cy,” she breathed on a whisper.

A new voice, menacing in its own right, intruded. The instantaneous reaction her body had told her who it was before she even looked. The advance knowledge didn’t help as her gaze hungrily ate up the vision there.

Cy rode a large paint and watched them from under the brim of his cowboy hat. His face was unreadable yet she could feel the tension pouring from him.

Anson’s grip relaxed. “Nothing. Just having a discussion with my girlfriend.”

She gasped with indignation. “I am not your girlfriend.” She stepped away from him only to refocus on Cy. So powerful, he drew many an eye. People watched them and she thought it more his good looks and the fact he was a stranger as opposed to the color difference.

“Rebecca?” Cy spoke her name with rugged familiarity.

“You know him?” Anson sounded furious. “This...man?”

Not bothering to respond, she lifted her chin. “What are you doing here, Cy?”

Her cowboy lifted his head and speared her with his gaze, one eyebrow lifting. “We need to talk.” He rested his arms on the saddle horn.

Anson babbled but she ignored him. She shook her head.

She rolled her “You shouldn’t be here.”

A slight narrowing of his gaze. “Did you think I would let it go?”

Honestly? Yes, she had. She moved her mouth but nothing came out. She broke left and dashed away, cursing her skirt and how it slowed her. Forcing herself to walk before she entered the house, she closed the door gently behind her.

“How was your walk?”

She kept her face averted. “It was okay, Mama. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, child.”

Rebecca paced behind her closed bedroom door. Cy. Here. Oh God, she felt nauseous again and a bit like riding away on Polaris. Why was he here? What possible reason could he have for showing up?

Bigger question would be why she felt this way just from seeing him again. Her fingers burned with the desire to touch the silky sandy brown hair and let it flow over her skin. Follow the contoured and sculptured muscles.

She was too keyed up to sleep and snuck out to the barn. To her surprise, her Indian friend, Nita waited there by Polaris. The moon offered a small bit of light. They shared a hug and she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Father said he saw your horse but not you. Are you okay?”

She bit her lower lip and shook her head. “I’ve fallen in love and I’ll never see him again.”

Nita held her and whispered soothing words to her. They talked into the night before Nita had to leave. Alone, Rebecca went back to her room.

She fell into a restless sleep only to wake as if she’d not slept at all, frustrated both emotionally and sexually, from dreams filled of Cy. The cold morning air helped to wake her further. On automatic, she did her morning chores and started the fires for washing. She barely ate her breakfast and escaped as soon as possible.

She worked on instinct and was off to the side when the large paint trotted in the yard. Nice horse, sure, but it was the man on his back, which made her knees wobble. Cy. She touched her hair and smoothed her dress before she realized her actions. He dismounted and walked to the table.

“Can I help you, sir?” her mama asked.

“I was told you took in laundry, ma’am.” His gaze moved to her and she found herself nearing.

“I can take this, Mama.”

Her mother glanced between them both before walking back to what she’d been doing.

“Why are you here?” she demanded in a harsh whisper.

His dark hazel eyes never wavered as they bore into hers. “We need to talk.”

“There is nothing for us to talk about!” She slashed her gaze to her mama--grateful she ignored them, or pretended to.

“Really? The guy you were with last night mean anything?”

Was he jealous? Someone else approached and her heart raced. She swayed and before she knew it, she was in his arms again.

“Are you okay?” His deep voice was full of concern and made her want nothing more than to snuggle up to his large chest. Perhaps he would hold her tighter and kiss her.

“Rebecca!” Her mom rushed over. “What happened?”

“Nothing, Mama, I’m fine.” She struggled to get up both grateful and saddened when he released her. Catching his gaze, she silently pleaded with him not to say anything. “Thank you, sir.”

Mama didn’t seem concerned and she spoke to Cy. “Did you get the information you needed?”

Cy never took his gaze from her. “Yes, ma’am and I’ll be back tomorrow. Good day, ma’am.”

He tipped his hat and left. Not without sending her one final look. He meant it, he’d be back. She had to talk to him away from here, out from under her mother’s watchful eye.

Early afternoon, her mama approached her. “I need you to go pick some things up from the general store.”

She blinked in surprise. “Now?”

Lips flattened. “Yes.”

“All right.”

She finished folding the item in her hand and headed for town with the list in her pocket. It didn’t take too long and she had the items paid for and in her basket. Moving between two buildings, someone grabbed her. A hand stifled her scream, the basket fell to the ground, and she spun into the wall of one of the buildings. Amazing dark hazel eyes snared her.

“Cy?”

He kissed her. Hungry. Totally enveloping and dominating. She pressed closer and gripped his upper arms, returning the fevered kiss. Her burgeoning desire exploded and she opened wider, wanting more.

“Don’t leave me like that again, Rebecca,” he growled. He continued to hold her close, as if she meant so much to him.

“Why are you here?”

He drew back and frowned before tilting his head to the side. “I came for you.”

Her heart skipped a few beats at those four determined words.

Cy watched the woman between him and the wall. He shifted his weight to block

those walking by from seeing whom he had with him.

“Me?” It was a squeak.

“I went to Robert a week after he returned and told him I knew.” He shrugged and reached out to trail two knuckles down her cheek, unable or was that unwilling to keep from touching her. It had been so long. “Then I had to wait for them to send a replacement station manager.” He stared in her eyes and opened up about something he’d once snapped at her about. “I got smashed beneath a falling horse going down a steep ravine during a battle with the Indians. Our medic was a drunk and set my crushed leg wrong. By the time I got to a real one it was too late. My bones had healed awkwardly. All the way here, I cursed this injury that kept me from riding as fast as I wanted, otherwise I would have been here sooner.”

Her hands—small and strong—slid over his chest. He swelled with pride and desire at the possessive touch.

“You came to say what?”

“You’re joking, right?” He glanced over his shoulders and focused back on her once he was sure they were still safe.

“No.” She lowered her hands and wrung them together.

“After all the...”

He took a deep breath suddenly realizing he could lose her. He refused to accept that. There was one person for everyone in the world and this woman, here, before him, was his. He didn’t care one bit about others’ stance on skin color or what some deemed proper order. Rebecca Freeman was his. He wanted to spend the rest of his days with her. Fall asleep with her at night. Make love and watch her belly swell with

their child.

He shook his head and tried again. “After all the times we made love over these past months and your statement of love, did you honestly think I would let it go?”

She worried her lower lip and his heart slowed, breathing became difficult.

“The moment...I...” She shrugged.

He shook his head and captured her chin in his hand. “No way, Rebecca. You don’t get to say that then run. Not from me.”

“We can’t...”

He pressed closer. “I forgot to tell you how beautiful you look. I love seeing you in a dress.”

Her eyes widened and he knew he was getting to her. He gentled his touch however, he didn’t release her. Her brown eyes were soft and large, framed by thick lashes. He could stare at them all day.

“This isn’t a good idea.”

He disagreed immensely. “Why? Do you have someone in your life to keep me away?” She frowned and he amended how it sounded. “Someone you are dating?”

“No.”

He breathed easier at her immediate response. “Then there is no problem.”

“How can you say that?”

“Easily.” He brushed his lips across hers. Shifting his leg, he grimaced.

“Is it your leg?”

He kissed her again, harder this time, gentling it when she sank into him. The siren’s call to tempting to ignore and he pulled her flush to him, his erection dug into her belly. She slipped her arms around his neck, giving him more of her weight.

The heat grew and he forgot they stood in an alley. There was no feeling like having her curved against him. Kissing the woman he wanted beyond all else took precedence.

The snort of a horse burst the world they’d created for themselves. He spun, cursing the weakness in his leg, checked both front and back of them. One hand kept Rebecca behind him.

A large bay stood at the end, street side. Seated on his back was an imposing black man in an Army uniform. He had sergeant stripes and a blank look on his face. Disappointment? No. That wasn’t it. Something else. Something that made him suddenly fear for his life.

Despite his attempt, Rebecca moved beside him. “Papa?”

Oh, shit. That was her father? Sargent Freeman. Not quite the first impression he wanted to make.

The man never smiled just looked down his nose and ran his gaze dismissively over him before returning it to his daughter. Cy waited for any sort of emotion from him. Beside him, he could feel Rebecca shaking and he grew angry.

“I’ll speak to you at home, Rebecca Ann.” A touch of his heels and the man vanished

from sight.

He turned to find her with wide eyes and tears shimmering in them. Cy reached out to her only to pause when she flinched away from him. The shaft of pain was hard to bear.

She crouched and quickly gathered things back into her basket. All the while she mumbled, "I let him down. He's so disappointed in me."

Ignoring the throb in his leg, he hauled her up and took the items from her. "Look at me," he ordered. No response. "Look at me, Rebecca."

"I...I have to go."

Never had he seen her this rattled. Not even when he'd discovered she wasn't who she'd pretended to be. Then she'd been calm and matter-of-fact. Now, she looked ready to fly.

"We haven't talked yet."

Her eyes were slightly unfocused. "No...I...home..." She took the basket and bolted. Before he could dwell on that she reappeared, lower lip caught between her teeth.

"Doc Williams may be able to help you with your leg." A shy grin filled with concern and another emotion he needed to keep focused on. Desire.

She was gone again. Cy swore and smacked his hat against his leg before plunking it on his head once more. He limped from the alley and to his mount. Using his upper body strength and a push off from his good leg, he launched into the saddle, asked a pedestrian for directions to the doc, and rode away.

After a visit to the doctor, he stabled his horse at the livery and went to the general store. He picked up two purchases there and left hoping this would play out for the good. Determined it would.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:28 pm

Rebecca swallowed hard before she clenched the basket tighter and walked in the house. She had known her mama was in here as well, waiting. She set the items on the counter and began putting things away.

“Hello, Papa.”

This wasn’t the reunion she’d expected, she had pictured hugs. Her father sat in his rocker watching her with an unreadable expression.

“Want to explain to me why I found you in an alley kissing a white man?”

She clenched her fingers. What could she say?

“Rebecca?” Mama this time. “Was this the guy from yesterday?”

Mortification at her actions kept her mute. She nodded and found her mother beside her.

“I come home after a year and that is the first I see of my baby girl. Wrapped around a man like a street whore.”

Immeasurable pain sliced through her. He thought her no better than a whore. “I’m so sorry, Papa.” Her words were barely above a whisper.

“Go easy on her, Joshua.”

“Easy? You didn’t see her, Sally. She should have been at home where she wouldn’t

get in trouble.”

“Your daughter is no longer a child. She is a grown woman who took over for her brother when he got injured, so we wouldn’t lose the extra money! So before you come back after no word for over nearly two years, perhaps you should see how she’s doing before passing judgment.”

Rebecca watched in shock. In all her years, she’d never seen Mama argue with Papa like this. Much less, raise her voice. She’d never had to.

“What happened to my boy?”

“He’s fine!” Mama snapped. “It was your daughter who cut off all her hair and rode the Pony Express with all those men around her who could have done...who knows what, had they found out about her. Extra rides, hostile Indians, and more. However, look at her she’s fine. And for you to come home and say that...” she slammed the cupboard door, “...is neither right nor fair.”

Rebecca wanted to hide in her bed and cry. Her mama faced her and touched her chin. “I’m so proud of you, baby.” Whirling around she demanded, “You better figure this out, Joshua, because I will never forgive you if I lose my daughter and my first grandchild!”

It took a moment for the words to register. Then she shook her head in shock. She couldn’t be. Could she?

“What?” her father bellowed.

She had no moisture to formulate a single word and her legs wobbled.

“You may as well come in, I figure you’re a big part of this.”

Her mother waved at someone behind her. Rebecca turned and watched with mixed emotions as Cy stepped through, removing his hat as he did. His dark hazel eyes sought hers and the deep emotion in them astonished her. He moved toward her.

“You didn’t know.” A statement from Cy.

She shook her head. “You did?”

Those eyes blazed hot and she shivered for an entirely different reason. “I suspected. Your body has changed,” he murmured in her ear.

He didn’t touch her but she felt his presence like a warm cloak offering protection. She looked back to her mother. There was compassion and sorrow in her eyes.

“You really didn’t think I didn’t notice the sickness and the way you tired so easily, did you?” Her mother posed the question.

“I thought I was sick.” It was the truth.

“I was waiting for you to tell me. Then he showed and I saw how you looked at him.” She frowned. “What is your name?”

“Cyrus Spencer, ma’am.”

“A southerner.” Her father spoke.

“Yes, sir. South Carolina.”

“And you got my daughter pregnant.”

Cy didn’t seem bothered at all. “It would appear so. May I have a moment with your daughter, sir?”

When he nodded, she walked to her bedroom and stepped inside. Cy shut the door and hauled her close before devouring her mouth. All that mattered was his touch, nothing else.

She sank willingly into him, rubbing against him as the kiss continued. Whimpering in frustration when it ended, she licked her lips. She went to step back but he wouldn't let her.

"No, Rebecca. No running."

"My father..."

"Forget him. This is between us. Not your parents. Us."

"He's my father."

"And I know that. This decision has to be yours and yours alone."

Her belly tightened. "What decision?"

"To be with me." He didn't blink.

Her heart thundered in her chest and she trembled. He held her up effortlessly. "Be with you?" One hand stroked her hair.

She flinched when the door swung open. Her father stood there.

"We need to talk, Cyrus Spencer from South Carolina."

"Yes, sir." He dragged a knuckle down one cheek. "Here. I'll be back soon." He pressed a bag in her hand and walked out.

“What did he give you?” her mama asked.

Tears pricked her eyes as she stared down at the bag full of lemon candy. Her favorite.

Cy followed Sergeant Joshua Freeman outside. The man lit a smoke and puffed in silence. Cy waited for him to speak and ask a question. He didn’t offer Cy a smoke and there was some silence for a few moments.

“I’m wondering what I should do. I come home to find a white man has gotten my only daughter pregnant. I see her clinging to you like...a woman I don’t know.” He shifted. “You’re a southern boy.”

Forget waiting for a question. “Yes, sir. I’m twenty-four, served in the Army, and am now the station manager for The Pony Express at Buffalo Creek Station. That’s where I met your daughter.”

“You served?”

“Yes sir, from sixteen to twenty-two.”

“You met my daughter...”

“I only discovered who she truly was after a while. We made a deal that she help with the cooking every now and then and I kept quiet on who she was. Your daughter is an amazing woman and rider.”

“I know that.” Her father scowled. “You do know a war is going on right?”

Yes. Everyone knew about the war. “Yes sir.”

“You’re a white man, a southerner, and my daughter is black.”

“With all due respect, sir. I don’t view her any way other than the incredibly beautiful and brave woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I love her. I can’t say when I fell in love with her but I am. I admire and respect her as well. I woke up one day and realized she was everything I could and would ever want in a woman.”

“So you say now.”

He bristled but remained in control. He supposed it was a father’s right to not want his baby girl with anyone.

“So I will always say.”

“There’s a guy here who is interested in her.”

“Is this the one who got mad and could have hurt her?”

“What?” Cy relayed what he’d seen the previous night. “And if he’d hit her?”

“He would be dead.” Cy spoke the truth; he’d kill anyone who hurt Rebecca without hesitation.

“I have to protect my daughter.”

“I love her. She’s carrying my child within her. I will protect her.” He paused. “With my life if necessary.”

“How would you support her?”

“I have money and I’m working. I will give her a good life.” He blew out a breath. “I’m not asking for your permission, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

He was an imposing man. Cy took a deep breath and plunged ahead. “I love your daughter, she’s the one who matters here. Her and our unborn baby. I will wait for her decision.”

“Papa.”

They both looked to see Rebecca there. Cy stood straight, his heart pounding hard as it always did around her. The dress she wore made her seem soft and gentle, hiding the spine of steel.

“Your mama says you’ve barely ridden Polaris since your return. Go for a ride just don’t be late for supper.” Her father spoke.

She vanished only to return dressed in buckskins. Longing slammed him. Cy watched her father kiss her on the cheek and slip inside. Those beautiful doe eyes met his gaze.

“Can you ride or would you rather take a wagon?”

“I can ride.”

He went and mounted then watched unabashedly as she ran to the corral, put a bridle on Polaris, and swung up on his bare back. She waved at him and he followed her, heading away from town. His large horse ate up the ground after her.

She stopped a while later and dismounted. He did the same and tied his horse. Hers, he noticed just wandered.

“Tell me how you came to have him.”

Her grin shone with her love for Polaris. “I got him from the Choctaw Nation. I have a friend in the tribe. They still have horses with the pure Spanish Mustang stock, her

father gave him to me as a gift of that friendship.”

He was suitably impressed, well aware how hard it was for the Army to get them. At least without stealing them.

“Come here,” he muttered, craving the feel of her against him. He grabbed his bedroll from behind the saddle, spread it out, and lay down with her in his arms. For a while they didn’t speak, just lay there, his hand over her womb, a slight sense of disbelief that his child grew there. The sun had begun to set and he enjoyed the view.

“I love you, Rebecca.”

“What?” She moved her head and stared at him.

“I said I love you. I have for a long time now. It’s something I should have said that afternoon in the barn but I was so shocked you’d said those words, I never did.” She closed her eyes and burrowed closer. “Will you come with me?”

“I can’t leave Mama to do all of this, Cy.”

He hesitated but realized it wasn’t a no. “Okay, I’ll come here.”

“And do what?”

“I have a lot of skills.”

“I know,” she said in a husky voice.

He grinned. “I will find work here so you can be near your family. I’ll provide you with a good home, Rebecca.”

“Are you asking me to marry you?”

He almost held his breath. “Yes.”

“Will they let us?”

He didn’t give a damn. “Say yes right here. God approves of our love, Rebecca. That’s all that matters.”

She rolled and stared at him. “Yes.”

He shifted and withdrew what he’d also purchased with the lemon candy.

“Here.”

“Oh Cy.” She stared at the ring.

“Give me your hand.”

She did and he slipped the thin gold band on her finger.

“My wife.”

She rolled on top of him. “My husband.”

Never had a word sounded better. He nibbled along her lips. “When’s supper?”

She rose up and went to work removing his pants. “When we get there.”

Brazen little filly. Cy agreed and soon he was making love to his wife. Never would he think of her as anything but his.

“I love you, Rebecca,” he whispered as they came together in a flurry of brilliant colors.

“And I you, Cy.”

Watching her bathed in the sun’s glow, he thanked God for that fateful ride which brought her into his life. For it would never be the same. Moreover, he looked forward to each day with Rebecca at his side.

The End

Thank you for reading Cy and Rebecca’s story.