

Chapter One

A tall lanky wrangler in trail-dusted clothing ambled Tyra's way, grinning like a silly hound. "Buy you a drink, little lady?"

She palmed the butt of her Colt, holstered below the waistband of her britches, and smiled back. "Not today, cowboy."

He eased close enough she got a whiff of him. A month's sweat mixed with cow dung on his boots. Too unpleasant.

His face puckered in disappointment. "Aw, just a little one. Who knows, you might like me."

Without saying more, she let the chair drop forward on its front legs, and by the time it did, the Colt lay on the table in front of her. "Said no. Don't think you want to irritate me."

From beyond the swinging doors of the Watering Hole Saloon came a gunshot, quickly followed by a second. Not a soul but the rejected cowboy took any notice. He jerked like she might've shot him. After patting his dirty shirt and discovering no holes, he held both palms up in surrender and eased away.

Backed up in the corner of the saloon, Tyra tilted her chair back against the wall and took a sip of the locally brewed beer. Yuk. Would she ever get used to what these Americans called beer? She shook her head like a wet dog. It was said once you drank enough of the stuff, you didn't mind at all that it tasted like bilge water. Obviously she hadn't reached that point yet.

Around the dim room men slouched at tables or leaned against the rough planks strung between wooden barrels to form a bar. They just kept on doing what they were doing. Probably had enough of the rot gut to make them deaf and blind.

Blamed yahoos out in the street, no doubt shooting out windows down at Ames' mercantile again. If Hays City didn't get itself a permanent lawman soon, there wouldn't be anything left but broken glass, burned buildings, and dead bodies. There'd been at least a dozen killings and uncountable gunfights that ended with bloody consequences since she'd arrived in Kansas with Wilda and Rowena two years earlier. It was like there was a feud going on between the cowhands, the soldiers from Fort Hays, and the railroad workers, leaving everyone else caught in the middle. Pecker measuring, most of it. Every Saturday night the jail was stuffed to overflowing with drunks put there by whatever city council member they had annoyed.

These were the same folks who refused to hire her to keep the peace 'cause they didn't have the guts to put a badge on a woman. Said no woman, even one who wore pants and men's shirts and carried a six-shooter, had any business herding drunken cowboys or breaking up fistfights. Idiots.

She'd've cleaned up this wild town by now. Something Wild Bill Hickok hadn't been able to do before being run off by soldiers of Custer's Seventh stationed at Fort Hays. Hickok was shot and killed in Deadwood last summer, and she missed the idea of him still out there riding the plains like a wild man, taking shots at outlaws. She sipped more of the nasty brew. Still not any better. If James didn't arrive soon, she'd be forced to slug down another of the foul drinks.

She'd no more than set down her glass when Vera Jean, one of the more popular doves working at the saloon, ambled over.

The woman escaped being pretty by a long shot, but she was accommodating, and the men liked her. She had large breasts, tousled copper-colored hair, and a hearty sense of humor. That explained a lot when it came to her popularity.

She grinned at Tyra. "Where's that young man of yours tonight?"

"Ah, he went out to Wichita to see if he could buy some cattle. Ought to be back by now, though."

Vera Jean nodded and touched the back of the chair, waiting to be asked to sit.

Tyra pointed her chin in invitation. It would be good to have company. Kept the rowdies from bothering her, with Vera Jean available. They headed toward her like a hound on the trail of a fox. For some reason men preferred women with ample breasts. Made one wonder just what they did with them. Hers were merely a handful. Perhaps that explained why James and her hadn't gotten around to that in earnest yet. His lack of interest bothered her just a bit. Didn't he find her attractive? She'd made it clear that she, like her idol Calamity Jane, was open-minded about such things.

The bartender, a tall, muscular man who went by the single name of Barney, ambled over with another glass, foam dripping down the side. Everyone knew Tyra would buy anyone at her table a drink or two. In fact, she ran a credit at the Watering Hole. Paid of course by Lord Blair Prescott, her guardian. Guardian's foot. She always had to laugh at that. He'd long ago given up guarding anything where she was concerned. He said go left, she went right, and always had.

"You ladies doing okay this evening?" Barney kept an eye on his favorite customers, especially the women. Never allowed any hassling. Tyra took care of her own hasslers so he didn't have to.

He started back toward the bar, weaving through several tables of poker players. Just as he passed by a well-dressed player, a drunk kicked his way out of a chair and knocked Barney into the man, whose cards flew out, face up, across the considerable pot of money, revealing three aces and two tens. Before the bartender could blink, the man sprang to his feet and shoved him backward so that he stumbled and fell, feet tangled in chair legs. The player was on Barney in a minute, beating him across the face with a doubled fist. Unable to kick free of the pile of chairs, the big man was helpless. The attacker bunched Barney's shirt up under his chin and flailed away at his face till blood splattered onto the floor.

Everything happened so fast most people just backed off and gave them room. Tyra watched for maybe half a minute, saw no one was going to put a stop to the brutal beating, and leaped to her feet, the Colt in one hand. Everyone in town knew she could use it and often did, though she'd almost never shot anyone since a well-aimed miss usually did the trick.

Gripping the barrel she tapped the stranger hard on the back of his noggin. "That'd be enough of that, mister." The demand didn't sound threatening, and the man scarcely spared her a look.

"I said leave it be." Another conk, harder this time, got the guy's attention.

Continuing to clutch Barney's shirt, he turned and stared at Tyra, taking her in from flaming red hair to britches to cowboy boots. For a beat, he held Barney down and gave her the eye.

"Aren't you a purty little thing? But I think you might leave well enough alone. I haven't never shot me a woman, but that don't mean I'm not ready to start."

His eyes were blue, the gaze hard as glass marbles, voice calm and melodious, not threatening at all. As if he weren't smashing Barney's face in or threatening an armed woman.

He might be downright handsome, but he wasn't real smart. Tyra lowered her aim and put a bullet into his calf. The echo of the blast brought everyone to attention, the stench of gunpowder mingling with that of cheap whiskey and filthy spittoons. Her target hollered and turned loose his prey. Some of the drunker patrons laughed, others hid behind tables or ran out the door into the street.

The injured poker player sat on the floor rocking and clutching his bleeding leg. "Damn, that hurts. What the hell you do that for? First time I ever been shot by a woman."

"I asked you nice. Now, you try to get up, the next one will blow your guts out." She stared into the eyes filled with pain. Dang, he was a fine-looking man. Too bad she had to shoot him to get his attention.

After a brief struggle to rise, his face drained to a pasty gray, and he managed four weak words. "Shot by a lady."

A couple of cowboys ignored him to drag Barney to his feet and support him to an upright chair. Blood poured from his nose, one eye had already begun to swell, and he was spitting blood.

"I ain't no lady." Tyra took another look at the guy she'd just shot. A fancy Dan, he didn't look like much of a brawler in his well-made butt-hugging black britches, white shirt, and striped vest, but it took a heck of a fighter to bring Barney down. She'd seen the bartender take men a lot bigger and rowdier in appearance than this one. This fellow must be quite a scrapper, plus a man who definitely had a burr under his saddle about something.

He had sun-streaked hair the color of fine sand. Lashes the same shade fringed those bright blue eyes. And easy to see he flat couldn't put his mind around her shooting him. Something in that puzzled gaze went right straight to her gut and tied it in knots. For a moment she was unable to speak. When she finally did, her voice sounded like she'd just swallowed a pint of the local moonshine. First time any man had affected her in such a way.

"Dammit, settle down. Sure sorry I had to shoot you." She peered around at the crowd of men who had started to chuckle in a way that told her they were pleased not to be a target of her ire. "Who's got the keys to the jail this week?"

A dirty hand crawled into the air as if its owner really didn't want to be noticed. Murphy Collins, a railroader for the Kansas Pacific Railway over in Ellis. What the heck was he doing with the jail key? It wasn't any of her business but still seemed mighty odd. She'd just see this man was locked up till the Ellis County marshal, whoever might have survived this month, showed up to take charge of him.

"Well, git over here and help me haul this yahoo onto his feet. Doc Winters can see him after we get him locked up. He ain't bleeding too bad. Don't reckon he's about to die or anything. I want you all to remember how he was beating the tar out of poor old Barney when I put the bullet in his leg. James would be mighty unhappy to come back and find me in jail."

Another round of laughter. Someone hollered, "Seems you're ole James's favoritest client." Feet shuffled and everyone went back to drinking and playing cards

before she could pinpoint who'd said that.

"Lord, Tyra," Vera Jean said. "Ain't you afeard of nothing?"

"Can't think of anything but stupidity." She slipped the Colt into its holster and took one arm of the wounded man. Under her grip the corded muscles felt like steel cables, and when he leaned into her she gritted her teeth against the warm feel and clean soap smell of him. He'd likely been a customer at Halston's Bath and Shave parlor just prior to showing up to play poker.

Collins shoved through the crowd and took his other arm. Together they dragged the moaning man out of the saloon and down the street to the jail. His shot leg dragged along, the boot stirring up a tiny trail of dust.

"Aw, shut up that caterwauling. You ain't dying." Tyra pulled open one of the unlocked cells and helped Collins drag the man to a cot and drop him there.

When she leaned over, her breasts brushed against his chest. Lightning might as well have struck her. She did her best not to, but couldn't help glancing down at him. Those incredible eyes were splashed with silver and glittered with amusement despite the pain.

"Put his feet up, and I'll go get Doc." She hurried away before she turned plumb silly.

Eyes truly revealed a person's spirit, and these were talking loud to her. Deep down inside him lurked the kind of man she admired. One who took nothing off nobody, even someone way bigger. Despite the brutality of what she'd just witnessed, something behind that unwavering stare called out to her. A man so touchy a mere bump in the saloon had set him off. One corner of his mouth curled into a smart-alecky grin before he snuggled down as if on a fancy mattress. Made her want to slap him fourteen ways from Sunday.

Outside, she cut across the dusty street to Doc Winters' office. The small surgery, tucked onto the end of his wife Josephine's millinery shop, was dark, but Doc and Mrs. Doc lived upstairs. She took the outside wooden steps two at a time, boots thudding loudly over the muffled sounds coming from the row of saloons strung along the dirt road through town. She'd no more than rapped on the door when it swung open to reveal the portly Doc Winters.

The aroma of cornbread and ham wafted past her. Made her wish she'd been invited to take supper there. The stew at Carl's Café had carried a yesterday taste to it.

In the light from inside, Doc studied her face. "Well, gal. Who'd you shoot this time?" Shaggy eyebrows crawled up his forehead toward the shiny bald spot in his narrow fringe of white hair.

"Now, Doc, dammit, I usually miss on purpose. You know that. This was some dandy of a poker player beating the thunder out of Barney. I had to do something."

Doc shrugged. "I suppose there wasn't anyone else who could've stopped him save a bit of a girl with a big gun? And he probably jumped right in front of the bullet."

"If there was, they didn't come forward. You gonna get your bag and come take a look, or what?"

"You mean he ain't dead?"

"Funny. You know I never have killed anyone." Before he could say anything, she went on. "Well, except that one time. And it don't count. You have to admit he deserved to die, after dragging that poor woman out into the street and kicking her to death."

Mrs. Doc peered at them from across the room, where she stitched quail feathers to one of her latest creations. "Evening, Miss Duncan." Her voice was soft in comparison to Doc's and Tyra's.

"Evening, ma'am. You okay?"

"Tolerable, thank you. Yourself?"

"The same."

Doc reached to one side of the door and came up with a black satchel. "Enough of this female palavering. Where is this fortunate man whose life you spared?"

"Over at the jailhouse. He's not locked up, just sleeping in one of the cells. A real fancy man. Could you go on over and take care of him? He ain't hurt bad. I'm gonna head out and see if I can meet up with James. He ought to've been back by now, and I'm getting worried he might've run into some trouble. Boy's sometimes not real bright about cows and guns."

Doc led her down the steps, making a fanning gesture with one hand. "Oh, by all means, girl, go see if there's more trouble you can wade right in to. Bring me the survivors, if there are any."

Doc hurried down the street, high-buttoned black shoes kicking up puffs of dust. He scurried out of the way of four mounted soldiers riding side by side.

Dang. If she'd hurt that gambler too bad, she'd be unhappy. Hard to get her mind off him. Who was he, and why hadn't she seen him before? Plenty of poker players drifted into town to find a spot at one of the many card games underway in this crazy damned town. But this one she wouldn't have forgotten, so he must be new to Hays City. And while she was wondering about stuff, what in thunder was a railroad worker doing with keys to the jail? Crazy damned town. Too bad they wouldn't let her run the place; this sort of nonsense would come to a halt.

Being a lawyer, James hated that she hung around Hays City, one of the wildest towns west of the Mississippi, but she craved the excitement and getting involved without worrying about ending up arrested herself, seeing as how there was no one with the authority to do so. Even though the Ellis County marshal wandered through once in a while, no one in Hays City was going to jail the cousin of Lady Rowena, who lived with her husband Lord Blair Prescott in nearby Victoria, the dullest town in Kansas.

The sun slithered through purple slashes of clouds and blinked out of sight below the horizon, as if it had had enough of all this nonsense. In its wake, brilliant orange light darted across the flat landscape, leaving behind smudges of gray. Shadows of the town's buildings slinked across the dusty street in her path. Lamps flickered on in windows, especially the dozen or more saloons that would soon fill up with railroad workers, wranglers, travelers, and local bums who could manage to talk someone out of buying them at least one drink.

Where was James, anyway? He should've been back from Wichita several hours ago. Time she went looking. At the livery, she saddled her long-legged black gelding and rode toward the edge of town, chased by the growing darkness.

Since coming to America she had developed a fondness for riding fast and hard through the windy night, so hot the gates of Hell must be open, and her daring the devil himself to stop her. Weather in Kansas was so different from England and its soggy summers. It was like she could breathe better than ever before. There were two kinds: blistering hot and frigid cold, both accompanied by a constant wind that made all the

trees grow slaunchwise.

She kicked her mount into a trot and was almost past the jail when Doc came running out the door waving his arms. Reining up, she hung on to the dancing horse that made a full circle before stopping.

"Better git on in here, gal. I need some help digging that bullet out. It hit bone, and that poor feller has sobered up fast with the pain."

"Oh, crap, Doc. I'm not a doctor or even a nurse. Cain't you get Collins to help you?"

"He's useless as tits on a boar hog. Turned white as a sheet when his hands got bloody. Come on in here. You shot this man, least you can do is help me patch him up."

With a deep sigh, she slid from the gelding, looped his reins over the hitching post, climbed the steps to the boardwalk and followed Doc inside. The smell of blood, mixed with the stench of vomit and liquor, flooded her nose, so she stiffened her resolve.

A flickering lamp sat on a stool next to the cot where the victim of her gunshot sprawled on his back. His face was gray, and dark circles shadowed his closed eyes. Doc's sleeves were rolled up, his hands dark with blood.

"Good heavens, Doc."

"Wash your hands in that pan, then rip me up some of the sheet from that other bed. Git over here and hold this lamp closer so I can see what I'm doing."

She did as he asked, carried strips of sheeting to the bed where her victim lay, and reached for the lamp.

"Before you fetch that light, tie one of those strips just above his knee and twist your gun barrel into it so it tightens up good. Shut off the blood flow so I can poke around in this unfortunate fellow. Come on, girl. Get a move on. Hold the lamp so the light falls on this bullet hole."

Following his directions, she swallowed hard to keep from losing the brews she'd drank earlier. The ragged black hole in the man's leg leaked more blood, but then the flow slowed.

"Dang, Doc, I'm sorry. Just meant to wing him before he killed Barney."

"Don't tell me, tell him." Doc forced a shiny tool deep into the wound and pulled out a sliver of lead. "Bullet shredded when it hit the bone. It's gonna hurt like the very devil for quite a spell. Glad he's passed out." Back he went to wrestle with another hunk.

The man on the cot moaned, and one hand pawed air, fingers clamping around her upper arm. The lamp jostled, and she shifted it to the other hand, then laid her palm over his forehead. "Hush now, it'll be okay. You're gonna be okay." She glanced toward Doc. "Ain't he?" Fearful of his reply, she dropped her gaze to stare at the fancy silver buckle on the man's belt. Anything to keep from registering the damage she'd done.

Lead slivers tinkled into the small metal tray on the floor by the bed. "There, I believe that's the last of it. He'd better hope so. I've seen men take an infection and die from one shred left to fester. Put down that lamp and fetch me the bottle out of my bag."

She did as he asked, finding only a bottle of whisky hidden among the other remedies in the bag. "This, Doc?" She held it up, and he nodded. Before she gave it over, she pulled the cork out between her teeth and took a healthy slug herself.

After Doc did the same, he said, "Now, make him a bandage out of a piece of that sheeting, big enough to wrap plumb around his leg." Without pausing, he poured

whisky over the wound. The man on the cot roared and came up off that cot ready to kill.

Good thing he was weak. She forced him back down with one forearm, holding the lamp out of his reach. "Ssh, now. Hush. Don't be such a baby. It's finished. Lay back down."

Doc took the lamp so she could rip a strip of cloth and wind it round and round his leg and tie it secure.

As soon as she had, she grabbed up another piece of material, poured water on it from a pitcher and wiped the sweating face. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "but you hadn't ought to've been beating on poor Barney like that."

His reply sounded somewhere between a growl and a groan.

Coming to her feet, feeling somewhat foolish for showing her feelings, she stood over the two. "Is that all? Can I go now? I need to—"

"I know, you need to ride out to find some more mischief. Get on out of here, gal."

She had one foot through the door when Doc said her name. She turned.

"Good job, fine job."

A curt nod and she got the hell out of there. The knot in her throat kept her from replying.

Leaping onto the waiting horse, she dug in her heels and hollered so the animal galloped out of town, dodging this way and that around slower-moving wagons. Low in the saddle, she rode to meet James Lee, hell-bent for leather toward the sliver of light lingering along the western horizon. Away from the man suffering at her hand. When she thought of him, it was to remember the way those unusual eyes of his gazed at her. She didn't figure to ever see him again. Didn't even know his name, but wouldn't forget him soon. She and James Lee were leaving for Victoria, Texas in a few days, but in the meantime they would stay with Rowena and Blair at Fairhaven.

Rowena's Diary, March 1877

Tyra is leaving today, leaving for good this time. The ragged little brat who came here with Wilda and me what seems like years ago has grown into a beautiful, tough, fiery-haired westerner. Now we have to say goodbye to her. My love and I will be left on our own in this castle he built on the Kansas plains. Lord Blair Prescott's women are finally settled. Wilda out in Colorado with her tamed outlaw Calder and their baby boy, myself in Blair's arms forever, and now the one who's given us the most trouble, little Tyra, setting out today with that lawyering fella who believes he's a cowboy. We've all got our doubts.

This morning we will breakfast together, James Lee and Tyra, Blair and myself, and no doubt reminisce about all those adventures since my handsome hellion Blair first saw us at St. Anne's Workhouse and bade us come to America. We will miss Tyra and her entertaining antics, but we have our life stretching out ahead of us, beckoning like a road leading from one exciting exploit to another.

I must go downstairs now or Simmons will have one of his controlled English fits. He believes he is thoroughly in charge of Lord Blair, his home, and his family.

Tyra stuffed her few belongings into a tattered carryall and glanced once more around the room where she'd occasionally lived since arriving in Victoria from England

two years earlier. Nothing of her left here, if ever she had been here in the first place. From the beginning her heart had been out there riding the wild Kansas plains, the wind in her face, the land in her spirit.

The aroma of bacon cooking greeted her when she opened the door and stepped into the hallway. Down in the kitchen, voices blended into laughter. Her cousin Rowena, Blair, James Lee and Simmons, Annie and Maggie, the two women who took care of all manner of things in the castle, all engaged in lively banter. Fairhaven had become a fun place to be since Rowena and Blair married. For an instant she regretted having to leave, but then James Lee's raucous voice floated up to her. Soon they would marry and, with her by his side, fulfill his dream of having a ranch near his family's holdings, strangely enough close to Victoria, Texas.

Excitement burst in her like spring prairie blossoms, and she hurried down the stairs. Leaving the carryall in the foyer, she went to join her family for one last time together.

Blair sat at the head of the table, Rowena on his right, her hand under his on the shiny surface. A true wonderment, their love. How wonderful it would be if she and James Lee could enjoy such closeness. It had changed Blair so much, as had his accident that left him somewhat lame. It didn't slow either of them down. Their herd of Morgan horses had grown so that ranchers from as far away as Colorado and Texas came to Fairhaven to buy stock or put their mares to stud.

After greetings all around, Tyra smiled at her husband-to-be and sat next to him on Blair's left. As always, she would behave herself while in his company. Annie bustled in with a platter, from which she removed the cover to reveal coddled eggs and neat strips of bacon. Beans for the British in them, and biscuits and gravy, adopted from American cooking, were delivered by Maggie. A pot of coffee and a china pitcher of tea sat in the center of the table.

Food was passed around, coffee and tea poured and stirred with the tinkle of silver against china before conversation picked up again.

Rowena glanced up from her plate, blue eyes gleaming. "Are you excited about your trip, Tyra?"

"Of course. Texas sounds like such a big place."

James Lee chuckled and gestured with his knife. "Big is too small a word for Texas. One can ride all day on one single ranch and not reach its boundaries."

"Oh, my. Is your ranch that large?" Rowena's expression brought a giggle from Tyra.

"Not yet, no. But some day it will be. Had to go to Wichita to buy some of those Aberdeen Angus cows your people brought over from England. Seems no one around here would let go of any this season. Going to breed them to longhorns already on the ranch. I hope to increase the herd and buy more land until one day the J Bar T will be that large."

This was all news to Tyra. He was not one to share much. He was good-hearted, but she wished he was warmer, wished he would gaze at her like Blair gazed at Rowena, share his hopes and dreams with her. Instead, he'd kept them close to his vest to share here with the family.

"Have you hired any men to help you?" Blair picked up a strip of bacon and took a healthy bite.

"Well, I have a friend who lives in Ellis, name of Renner Brown, who has been looking to make a change. Looks as if he's set to accompany us. Tyra and I work pretty well together, and I don't think we'll need anyone else. I only bought cows, you see. They're easier to drive than steers." He glanced at her and smiled. "She's a heck of a cow puncher."

Would have been good if he'd told her about this. She kept that to herself and simply smiled back.

Rowena lay down her fork. "I still wish you two would marry here before you go. I'd so love to attend your wedding."

Tyra felt much the same way, but again James was in charge. She had her way, that wouldn't go on much longer.

"Then you should come down," James Lee said, a bit too curtly. "You can take the train from Victoria, Kansas, and in Texas the Great Northern goes to Austin. There you can catch a stage south to Victoria, Texas. Someone could pick you up for the drive out to the ranch. We want to marry in our home. My parents and grandparents and many other family members will be present."

Rowena turned to Blair. "Oh, could we?"

"We'd have to find someone to help care for this place. At any rate, you should go, sweetheart."

She squeezed his hand. "Not without you I won't. We'll see." She aimed a tight smile at James Lee, as if a bit displeased with his remark. "Perhaps we can arrange to come, but it sounds like a long and tedious trip." Her quick glance at Blair signaled she was thinking of him. He had never completely recovered from his accident. His frown was quickly gone, and she went on. "If not, we wish you both the very best."

"And in case we can't come," Blair added, "our gift to you is out in the corral. A pair of the finest matched Morgans you'll find anywhere."

Tyra scooted her chair back, leaped up, and ran to stand between Blair and Rowena, arms around them both. "Thank you so much! What a wonderful wedding gift." She leaned down and kissed Blair on the cheek, and he blushed. "I love you, Blair. You too, Rowena. You take care of each other."

Her heart ached from regret that she had to leave when she was just getting to like Blair and enjoy Rowena's company. Wilda had always told her that one day she would grow up and realize how important family was. Perhaps that's precisely what she was doing when she understood just how much she would miss these two people. She returned to her chair to finish breakfast.

Even though she and Blair were getting along quite well since he and Rowena married, the generous gift bowled her over. She hadn't expected such a gesture. During the past year he had changed from brooding and unhappy to a cheerful and thoughtful man. There were still times when he disappeared into the night, riding with the wind, and she never knew why, but Rowena was happy with him, and that's what counted, after all.

She glanced at James Lee. Would they be that happy? She shook off a niggling doubt, and put her mind on the upcoming trip.

Out on the portico, hugs were exchanged all around. Unexpected tears filled Tyra's eyes while goodbyes were said.

Rowena and Blair stood side by side, his arm around her waist. "You write when

you get settled, and let us know when the wedding is.” Rowena leaned into Blair’s shoulder and wiped tears from her cheeks. Tyra covered her mouth to muffle sobs.

James Lee took her arm. “We have to go now. Thanks again, Blair. The Morgans are beautiful. Hope you can come down to the wedding.” He guided Tyra away.

Their saddled horses waited, the two Morgans bridled and tied to a lead rope. They would enjoy the trip to Texas, stretching their long legs and exercising their exquisite bodies. Tyra ran a gloved hand over the gleaming flank of first one and then the other before mounting up. For a long while she watched the castle disappear behind them. Hands held high in a goodbye wave, Rowena and Blair grew smaller and smaller. With a closing throat Tyra turned from that final view of her home.

“I wish you’d shared your plans for breeding the cattle, building up a ranch. I thought—” She didn’t get a chance to finish.

“Why? Don’t you want to?” He didn’t bother to look at her.

A brisk wind caught at her shirt and ran its fingers through her long hair clipped at the nape of her neck. “That’s not my point, James Lee. Of course I want to. It’s just that you never share anything with me. We are to marry, yet you treat me like a hired hand who will do what she is told without asking any questions. A good little wife who will sit quietly at your side.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware of that. As my wife I expect you to be helpful, to stand behind any decision I make.”

“Honey, I will. Of course I will. But I would like you to discuss things with me. Let me help you make decisions.”

“Well, all right. I suppose I can do that.” He still hadn’t spared her a glance.

She touched her heels to her mount’s flanks and moved closer to him. “You are not marrying a housewife. You’ve known that from the beginning. You are marrying a partner who will work beside you, not wash dishes while you ride herd, or mend fences or drag a cow out of a mud hole. I want to be right at your side helping you build this ranch.”

His silence drove a pain through her. This man had saved Blair’s life, had been right there when Rowena needed him. He was a kind man, a considerate man, and that’s why she loved him. But this side of him was not exactly to her liking. It seemed that once they married she would take a back seat to his dreams.

He reached out to her, took her hand in his. “I apologize. I’m so accustomed to making my own decisions. I watched my mother step quietly into her dutiful role as a wife. I know better with you. Your rough and rowdy ways are what attracted me to you. I need a strong, opinionated woman who will wade in and help out. Guess I just wasn’t thinking. I’ll try to do better. I love you very much, and I sure don’t want to hurt you. This is a tough life I’m offering, starting with next to nothing but our muscles and our brains. My dad expects me to begin with very little, just like he did.”

“Oh, James Lee. Don’t you know that’s exactly what I’m looking for? But I want a partner, not a boss.”

He didn’t reply, and they rode on in silence, once in a while commenting on something along the trail. In Ellis they stopped at The Crooked Mile for a cold beer, where James Lee expected to find Renner. Sure enough, the lanky, shaggy-haired man leaned on the bar, nursing a beer. She had met him a couple of times but knew only that he and James Lee had worked together once or twice. An accomplished horseman

and wrangler, he was a quiet man, who, when he did say something, was worth listening to. He would be a good choice to help herd the cattle to Texas.

How exciting that was going to be. She had so looked forward to the ride down, rather than taking the train, but now to find they were actually going to push a cattle herd... Despite the lingering doubts about her relationship with James Lee, she set out to enjoy herself. It promised to be a grand new adventure.

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