



SUBSTITUTE BRIDE

Miss Martin

Margaret Tanner

**SUBSTITUTE BRIDE MISS
MARTIN**

**(SUBSTITUTE BRIDE
SERIES)**

BOOK 1

By

MARGARET TANNER

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Chapter One

San Francisco 1870's

The moment Anna Martin walked into Miss Simkin's office, at the Simkin's Academy for Young Ladies, she knew something was drastically wrong. Her employer's face was pale, her eyes red and puffy from crying. Even now she was dabbing at her cheeks with a white, lace-trimmed handkerchief.

"Oh, Miss Simkin, what's wrong? Can I help?"

"No, Miss Martin, you cannot. I only wish you could." The kindly woman sniffed again. "I have to close the academy."

"What! Oh, no," Anna wailed, wringing her hands. "Why?"

"Because I've run out of funds. I had quite a lot of money invested in the Imperial Merchant Bank, and when it became insolvent, it really affected me financially. I just can't afford to run the school anymore."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Simkin. What will happen to me?" Anna hated sounding so selfish as to be worrying about herself, when this poor woman's life's work lay shattered into a thousand pieces. The kindly, refined English lady had poured her heart and soul into the girls here at the academy.

Miss Simkin sighed deeply. "I have creditors demanding payment for money I borrowed. I've been offered a good price for the buildings and grounds by a religious organization. I've had to accept it, albeit reluctantly. The money should be enough to pay my debts and my fare home to England, where I can live with my brother on the family estate."

"I'm glad you've got enough money to get home safely. I'll be sorry to leave here," Anna said with sincerity. "I've enjoyed my time teaching here and I've learned so much from you."

“It was a pleasure having you here, Miss Martin. Unfortunately, you’ve lost your job also.”

“I know.” Anna blinked back tears. “I don’t know what I’ll do now, not that you’re to worry about me. I’m young enough to find other employment.” She spoke with more confidence than she felt, but Miss Simkin had enough to deal with and didn’t need to be burdened with the woes of someone who wasn’t even kin.

“I’m afraid we’ve both only got a week to organize ourselves, as the buyers need to move in immediately. They probably wouldn’t have bought the property in its entirety, except the sale fell through at the last minute on another property they had purchased. In desperation, they decided this place was probably as close as they could get in regard to suitability. Sadly, they need to move in almost right away, as their previous premises have been destroyed by an arsonist, meaning the order would be homeless, too.”

“If I leave tomorrow, would that be all right? I’ve got some savings, so I can stay in a cheap hotel for a few days until I sort out what to do,” Anna said, wondering how long her paltry savings would last. It wasn’t fair to burden this lady with her problems. Five years teaching here and loving every minute of it was gone in the blink of an eye.

She wouldn’t be the only person broken-hearted about the school’s demise, the forty girls who attended here and their parents would be equally distraught, as they had all been one big happy family. Would any of the parents have a position available for her, she wondered. They were quite wealthy as the fees here had been expensive. It would have been worth every cent for the frantic parents, when their unruly daughters had left here as well educated, confident and refined young ladies.

“Did you hear what I said, Miss Martin?” Miss Simkin was always very formal and never called her Anna. She had once said she didn’t like over-familiarity between people who were not kin.

“I’m sorry, what was it?” Anna tried to pull herself together.

“I was saying, I have a friend, Lady Deauville, who runs a very select and respectable marriage agency.”

“A marriage agency?” Anna tried to contain her shock. “I have no plans on getting married.”

“It might be a good option for you, if all else fails. I need to warn you about employment prospects, for respectable young women like you, being hard to come by in San Francisco now. Marriage to the right man could be a sensible option for you.”

“I don’t need to be married. Look how well you’ve done, Miss Simkin, and you were never married.”

“Yes, and look at me. I’m returning to England with my tail between my legs and throwing myself on the charity of my brother, who fortunately is a good man. If I’d had a husband and family, I wouldn’t be in such a humiliating position. Life for a woman on her own can be lonely, especially if they have no relatives. As I recall, you once told me your parents were dead and you have no other known relatives.”

“It’s true, but marriage to some strange man. What if he turned out to be a drunkard or a criminal?”

“That wouldn’t happen as Lady Deauville is meticulous in checking the references of both the men and women who approach her. I used to know her in England, even though she did move in more exalted circles than I.”

“I don’t know.” Anna gnawed her bottom lip. She supposed it was an option, but one she was loath to take yet needed to consider, things being the way they were. What kind of man would need to send away for a wife?

“I took the liberty of mentioning your predicament to Lady Deauville, and she has agreed to see you at ten o’clock tomorrow morning. I think you would be wise to consider marriage. I do worry about what will become of you, my dear. I’ve grown fond of you over the years. If it were possible, I would take you to England with me.” Miss Simkin shook her head sadly, “but it’s not.”

“I understand and I never for a moment expected you to take me with you. All right, I will go and see Lady Deauville. Maybe she might be able to come up with some other idea.”

“Well, maybe she could. She’s very well connected, mainly through her late husband, that is. An acquaintance of hers needed a cook and handyman, so I recommended Mrs. Armitage, so she’s been taken care of, her husband also, which is a load off my mind.”

“What about Cecily?” Anna asked about her young assistant.

“She’s decided to bring her wedding day forward and head to the goldfields with her husband.”

“Prospecting for gold isn’t...”

“Not prospecting. Her betrothed is a blacksmith. Chances are he will make more money out of that than he would prospecting in the ground.”

“I’m pleased about that, Miss Simkin, as she was a nice girl.”

Miss Simkin gave one of her sweet smiles. “I only ever employed nice people. I’ve always been a good judge of character, if I do say so myself. That’s why the academy was so successful. I only accepted girls who I felt sure were redeemable with the right guidance, and I’m proud to say, I’ve never been disappointed.”

“Yes, each one of them have done well for themselves. It’s a pity some of the parents couldn’t have stepped in and helped you financially.”

“Many of them lost money like I did. The repercussions of the bank becoming insolvent will be felt in a lot of places, not just San Francisco. You, my dear, will be the hardest of all to place.”

Anna started with shock.

“Sorry, my dear, I phrased that all wrong. You will be the hardest only because I want the very best for you and nothing less will do.”

Anna felt like bawling on the spot. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. Miss Simkin was not an overly demonstrable woman, much too reserved, probably because of her upbringing in an upper-class English family. She wasn't titled like Lady Deauville, but her family did own quite a large estate, which of course, was always passed on to the oldest son.

The brother who owned the place now had been wanting her to return home for the last few years, and as there were at least two cottages on the estate, plus the large manor house, her boss could have a good and independent life there and Anna was pleased about this.

If only her own future looked so bright. It didn't, unless Lady Deauville could find her a respectable husband. Marriage as such had never worried her one way or the other. She had never really thought about it, quite content with teaching at the academy here. How quickly one's life could change.

She had been on her own since her parents died when she was sixteen. They had married late in life and had been lucky to have her, so her mother always said. Her birth had been an unexpected and pleasant surprise for both parents. They were schoolteachers who also ran a small ranch on the edge of town. She had wanted for nothing while they lived. After they died, within a few weeks of each other, life had become much harder.

Through the preacher at their local church, she had obtained a position as a maid for a bank manager and his wife. She liked the job well enough and was treated respectfully, only she had wanted more and it came in the form of Miss Simkin and her academy for girls.

Every day Anna worked here had been a real joy. Each member of the staff had their own apartment on the top floor of this lovely old brick mansion, which had ivy-covered walls and beautiful stained-glass windows. It always appeared serene and mellow with the smell of lavender and bees-wax

polish permeating the air. The students, who attended daily, lived within easy commuting distance.

I'll never be lucky enough to find another position like this, Anna thought. It would be a wrench to leave everyone here and start a new life doing she knew not what, with she knew not who.

Chapter Two

Lady Deauville waited in the small private drawing room from where she ran the Genteel Women's Matrimonial Agency. Parsons, the butler, would bring Miss Martin in. Hopefully, the young woman would not be late. If there was one thing she detested, it was unpunctuality.

Thank goodness for Parsons, who had come out from England with her family nearly twenty years ago. Without his help, she would be in dire straits. The other servants were conscientious enough, she supposed, but he was her stalwart right-hand man now she was alone - a crippled widow who was often confined to a wheelchair.

She glanced at the pink porcelain clock on her desk and pursed her lips. Another fifteen minutes and Miss Anna Martin would be late. Valmae Simkin had spoken about this young woman in such glowing terms, she was indeed anxious to meet her as she had a client who was desperate for a substitute bride.

Dayne Pengelly was a rancher with a nine-year-old daughter. A rude and wayward child, according to Elizabeth St. George, who had refused to marry Mr. Pengelly after meeting him and his daughter. Miss St. George had denied it, but the fact the man had lost most of his money and was not the wealthy rancher she had supposed him to be, was the main reason she had returned to San Francisco ranting and raving.

How dare she. I'll soon put a stop to this nonsense, she inwardly fumed. I will not have the name of my agency brought into ill-repute by someone like Miss St. George, who was now permanently off her books. The young woman had possessed impeccable references, which Parsons had thoroughly checked. They knew she was a spoilt socialite who had fallen into hard times when her father lost all his money with the collapse of the Imperial Merchant Bank. She had been

so adamant about wanting to marry a rancher that against her better judgement, Lady Deauville had paired Miss St. George with Mr. Pengelly.

She pursed her lips. Ten minutes to go. From what Valmae Simkin had said, the young schoolteacher would be an asset to a man with a spoiled child who needed a woman's touch. As she was unemployed and financially insecure, marriage to a man like Mr. Pengelly could well be the solution for her and the rancher.

She glanced at his letter again.

Dear Lady Deauville,

By now you would have heard back from Miss St. George about our disastrous first meeting. I am so sorry it didn't work out for us as she was a fine-looking woman.

My financial position has worsened since then, and I need to take the job I was offered even though it necessitates my being away from home for a few weeks. Therefore, my need is desperate now. I need the money this job will bring in, yet I cannot leave my daughter alone.

Please, can you find me a respectable woman as a substitute to Miss St. George? I don't particularly care what she looks like. All I want now is a reliable, respectable woman with good references, who is used to children and will treat my daughter with kindness. It could be a marriage in name only if the lady would prefer this.

Hopefully you can speedily find such a woman for me.

Yours in anticipation,

Dayne Pengelly

Lady Deauville placed the letter back in Mr. Pengelly's file. He was desperate and Miss Martin was in the same predicament. If she was even half as good as Valmae insisted she was, it could turn out to be a perfect placement. Not only

was the young lady a schoolteacher but she had also been brought up on a ranch.

The fact Mr. Pengelly had backed down on wanting a pretty wife now was, if only he knew it, a good thing. She let out a long sigh. One of the reasons she had opened this agency was to try and help young men who had such unrealistic expectations when it came to finding a wife. Where this agency differed from others was that she genuinely tried to ensure the couples were compatible. A man living on a ranch out in the wilderness, who selected a beautiful socialite bride, was setting himself up for failure and heartache.

Yes, she knew all about what could happen to young men whose hearts were broken because they chose the wrong woman. The loss of her only son was still an open wound that would never heal. It had driven his father into an early grave. If only she could have spoken to their son, Oliver, before he married the woman who would ruin him with her selfishness and greed, he might still be alive today.

Five minutes to go. Lady Deauville glared at the clock. Things were not looking good for Miss Anna Martin now.

The chiming of the doorbell intruded on her thoughts. Hopefully, this would be her, if not, she would close for an hour or so and partake of tea in the back garden amongst her roses.

“Miss Martin is here, Lady Deauville,” Parsons said, as he ushered a young woman into the drawing room.

Her first glimpse of Miss Martin was of a petite young woman with auburn hair pinned up into a neat bun at the back of her head. Her dove grey dress, with lace trim around the collar and cuffs, was neatly pressed and added to her demure appearance.

“I’m so sorry, I’m late, Lady Deauville, I took a wrong turn and became lost.”

The young woman’s voice was well modulated, quite melodic in fact. She might not be high born, yet Anna Martin was a lady.

“In four minutes, you would have been late. Parsons would you bring us some tea. You do drink it?”

“Of course, Miss Simkin wouldn’t have coffee in her house, only English tea.”

“A woman after my own heart. Do take a seat Miss Martin. Thank you, Parsons.”

Very good, Madame.” With a nod he left them together.

“Um, I suppose Miss Simkin told you what has happened and that the school must close, Lady Deauville.”

“Yes, she did. Such a shame, she did good work there. I understand you have no relatives who can help you out if you don’t quickly obtain employment.”

“Yes, that is correct. I do have some savings which won’t last long if I have to pay for board and lodging for any length of time.”

“So, if I could pair you with the right man, you would be prepared to leave within the next day or so?”

“Yes, I would. I never thought about marrying some man I’ve never met, and I’m only interested in someone respectable with good references, who could keep me in a reasonably comfortable manner.”

“I understand completely, my dear. In fact, I do have a man, a rancher with a small daughter, who would be perfect for you. We did send him a young lady, who I am afraid to say, found him unsuitable.”

“Oh.” Lady Deauville watched Miss Martin wring her hands. “I don’t want a man who is too old or is a no-hoper. He doesn’t have to be rich but...”

“Unfortunately, the man chose the wrong woman from our catalogue. I’m afraid he went for looks and not substance, and she mistakenly believed him to be a wealthy rancher. The fact that he was a widower with a young daughter did not go down well with her, either, and she jumped on the first coach returning to San Francisco.”

“I’m sorry. How awful for her.”

“Not for her. Her behavior was totally unacceptable, so she is no longer on my books. It is the man I feel sorry for. He always acted appropriately and in good faith. His references are impeccable. Quite frankly, I think he had a lucky escape, even though he might not think so now, whereas you would be a perfect substitute bride.”

“Substitute! You want me to go to this man who was rejected by another woman you sent to him? I’m sorry, Lady Deauville, it sounds most unsatisfactory. I admit I’m desperate, but not desperate enough to take another woman’s cast off. I’m sorry if I wasted your time.”

Chapter Three

Anna jumped up from the chair, filled with indignation. She couldn't believe she had heard right. Lady Deauville wanted her to travel to meet a man who was rejected by a woman this very agency had provided for him. *I might be poor and jobless, but I'm not prepared to take on a man who was discarded by another woman.*

“Please sit down, Miss Martin. You misunderstand me. This other woman was not suitable for the man's needs. Unfortunately, she was the socialite daughter of a wealthy man who lost his money, and she thought this rancher was rich enough to provide her with the lifestyle she had been accustomed to. Once he told her his financial position was even more precarious than when he first applied for a bride, and that he refused to send his nine-year-old daughter away to boarding school, she declined marriage to him and immediately returned to San Francisco, leaving him, well in limbo, I suppose you could say.”

Anna sat back down and clasped her hands in her lap. “That is terrible.”

“It pains me to say this, but it was one of the few mismatches I have ever made. I immediately removed this young woman from my books, as I found her behavior reprehensible, considering the rancher was honest about the risk of losing his ranch if he didn't find outside work.”

“Oh, was there a drought?” Anna started to feel sorry for the man now. What a horrible person this socialite woman sounded. Although, she had met this type before, arrogant, self-entitled and thinking they were better than everyone else.

“It wasn't a drought that ruined him, but cattle rustlers who apparently stole a whole herd of valuable breeding cattle from him. He can't find work locally, and needs to bring in extra

income, so his only option is to leave home. Under the circumstances, he can't take his daughter with him and he has no-one he can leave her with, hence his urgent need of a suitable wife."

Anna gnawed her lower lip. "I'm sorry he's having such a hard time of it, but..."

"There was nothing wrong with the man himself, my ex-client even admitted this. Her only problem with him was he wasn't rich enough and he had a little girl she wasn't prepared to mother. I can't put it plainer than that."

"She does sound like a selfish young woman, Lady Deauville, although you can't blame me for being wary. No-one likes to think they are only good enough to be a substitute."

"I understand, Miss Martin." Lady Deauville picked up one of her hands and gave it a gentle squeeze. "To be honest, I would feel the same way myself; it would be humiliating, only there are extenuating circumstances in this case."

"Where does this man live?"

"His ranch is a few miles out of Virginia City. Your fares and expenses will be paid for by my agency as I cannot, under the circumstances, expect the man to pay twice for our services, even though he has offered to do so."

Lady Deauville went up in her estimation for not trying to take advantage of the man's obvious desperation. It proved she wasn't a greedy money-grabber with no conscience, like some marital agency owners she had read about. Because of the expensive surrounds of this room, and the mansion in which this aristocratic-looking lady lived, this was not a money-making venture for her. Miss Simkin had mentioned about her friend being a widow and having lost her only son in tragic circumstances, so it made sense to think this agency was more a pastime for a lonely woman rather than a means of earning money.

"I have the man's correspondence here if you would care to read it. Maybe it will give you a better idea of his needs and

suitability.”

Parsons interrupted them when he entered the room carrying an ornate silver tray containing a white porcelain teapot and two cups and saucers all with matching gold trim. On an oval crystal dish were several heart-shaped cookies.

“Thank you, Parsons, just place the tray on the desk and I’ll pour the tea.”

Once the butler left the room, Lady Deauville picked up the teapot. “Do you take milk in your tea?”

“Yes, please, no sugar.”

For a woman who was obviously used to being waited on, Lady Deauville seemed quite adept at pouring out the tea, adding milk into both their cups and handing Anna hers without spilling so much as a drop.

“Thank you.” Anna took the cup of tea but shook her head when Lady Deauville offered her a cookie. She was so nervous she would barely be able to swallow the tea, let alone eat anything. Her mind was in turmoil. This rancher was desperate and so was she.

“You might as well read Mr. Pengelly’s letters while we are having our tea. I always find it such a refreshing drink. I can’t understand the American fascination with coffee. Horrid stuff, in my opinion.”

“I do prefer tea.” With a trembling hand Anna accepted the folder of papers and picked up the first letter from Dayne Pengelly. Every piece of correspondence was neatly filed in date order.

Dear Lady Deauville,

I obtained your name and that of your agency through Mr. Edmund Dwyer, my lawyer, who told me how you successfully matched his son with a lovely young woman who became his wife.

To be honest, I am not really looking for love, although if I found it, that would be a bonus.

I am a widower with a nine-year-old daughter, Francine. Her mother died when she was four years old and I have, quite successfully I believe, brought her up myself.

I own a prosperous ranch; well, it was until recently, when I lost almost a complete herd of prized cattle to rustlers. They took just about every decent animal I owned, including my stud bull. If that wasn't enough, they caused extensive damage to my fencing and some of my outbuildings, all costly but imperative to replace.

For the first time in years, I am in financial difficulties and I need to find outside employment for a while to ensure my ranch's viability. It was handed down to me by my father and is my daughter's legacy, and I cannot lose it without a fight.

I need someone to care for Francine while I am away. I thought re-marriage would be the most sensible course of action. My home is quite comfortable, even if it does lack a woman's touch.

Francine is a sweet child; well, maybe a little spoiled by me. She is of an age now when a permanent woman in her life is becoming a necessity.

I am aged thirty-four and am six feet tall, with grey eyes and dark hair. I consider my appearance presentable rather than handsome, but I can assure you I am an honorable man, and I enclose a reference from the local preacher and my lawyer and bank manager who can attest to everything I have told you.

My need is quite urgent, and I would like to find a presentable, respectable woman to care for both myself and my daughter. In the first instance, it could be a marriage in name only to see if we are compatible.

I do hope you will be able to find me a suitable wife. I understand you do vet your applicants thoroughly and this is important to me, as I cannot subject my daughter to any woman who is not of the most impeccable character.

Thanking you in anticipation. If you would be kind enough to let me know the expenses involved, I will be glad to forward

the money via my bank.

Yours faithfully,

Dayne Pengelly

It was a nice letter, Anna thought and Mr. Pengelly did sound honest and sincere.

She scanned through the next letter he had written, the one where he had viewed the photographs Lady Deauville had sent him and chosen the woman he wanted. He sounded quite enthusiastic about her, commenting on how pretty she was and how Francine liked her, as well.

The last letter was of the utmost importance, Anna thought. She was interested in hearing his version of the disastrous meeting with his prospective bride and why it turned out so badly.

Dear Lady Deauville,

It pains me to write this letter, but you would probably have heard from Miss St. George that our meeting was a disaster, and she couldn't run away from my daughter and I quickly enough.

She was indeed a beautiful woman, but when she insisted that once we were married, she expected Francine to be sent away to boarding school because she was such a brat of a child, I knew any relationship between us was doomed.

I found it quite hurtful, not to mention humiliating, when she berated me in front of others for lying about my financial status when I had tried to be as honest as I could in my correspondence.

I really do need to find a suitable wife to mind Francine while I am away. In fact, to be brutally honest, I am desperate. It would have to be marriage for the sake of propriety, as there is no other woman living on my ranch.

Please, can you find me a respectable woman as a substitute to Miss St. George? I don't particularly care what she looks like. All I want now is a reliable, respectable woman with good references, who is used to children and will treat my daughter with kindness.

Yours faithfully,

Dayne Pengelly

'I don't particularly care what she looks like.' Those words jumped off the page and almost plucked Anna's eyes out. On reflection, the bitterness in the lines was understandable, she supposed, given the way the beautiful Miss St. George had treated him. Why a rancher would choose a woman like her was a mystery. Surely, he must realize she wouldn't be suitable for a rancher's wife, or mother to a little girl. Men can't resist a pretty face, she had heard someone say once. Obviously, it was true, they couldn't.

If she did choose to become his mail-order bride, what would he think of her appearance? She certainly wasn't beautiful, a little better than average looking was probably the best way to describe herself. What if the man didn't like redheads?

"What do you think, Miss Martin?" The question interrupted her musing.

"I'm not sure. I found it rather disquieting, him saying he didn't care what his prospective wife looked like."

"Those are the words of a man who was disappointed and hurt. I would pay scant attention to them. It is what else he has written that is important. Would you be able to cope with living on a ranch? Are you prepared to take on the care of a child who is not your own? These are the important things. I suggest you go home and think about it, then we should meet again. Say the same time tomorrow, and you can let me know your decision. Does that sound fair?"

"Yes, thank you. I would like to think things over before taking such an important step. Not only for my own sake, but

that of Mr. Pengelly and his daughter. I would hate for them to be disappointed again.”

“Good, tomorrow then.” Lady Deauville pulled a bell cord to summon Parsons.

“My considered opinion, Miss Martin, is that you and Mr. Pengelly would be a good match. Believe me, I don’t say this lightly. There are a couple of other women on my books who would be suitable, only I think you are by far the best candidate.”

Parsons arrived to escort her to the front door, and with a nod to Lady Deauville, Anna followed him out of the drawing room with her head spinning at the enormity of what she was contemplating.

Chapter Four

Dusty Bend way station, Nevada

“Pa, will this lady be as beautiful as Miss St. George? Why didn’t she like us?”

Dayne Pengelly glanced down at his daughter, Frankie. Maybe she should have worn a dress, not that she had many because she preferred wearing pants and a shirt like him. He was proud of how pretty and smart she was. All things considered, he had done a good job raising her on his own since Mary had died. If it wasn’t for the fact he needed to take the cattle-drive job to bring in money, he would have been quite content to live out his days on the ranch with Frankie.

“I’m not sure, Princess, maybe she was tired and cranky. Who knows with pretty city ladies.”

“I picked her out of the catalogue because she was so pretty and I wanted her to look after me. Why didn’t she like me?”

“It was probably me she didn’t like, because I wasn’t rich enough.” It was a bitter pill to swallow, being humiliated in front of several acquaintances by Miss St. George. It wasn’t as if he had gotten her here under false pretenses. Women, he would never understand them. He’d been married to Mary for nearly five years and hadn’t really understood her, either.

On reflection, he supposed his marriage had been happy enough. It had never been a love match. During the war, he had been introduced to Mary by his army friend, who happened to be her brother. They had gone out a couple of times, and with the specter of heading off to the battlefields hanging over his head, things had gotten out of hand one night and Mary had ended up pregnant. She was six months along before he was able to marry her.

A dust cloud in the distance and a man bringing out a fresh team, alerted him to the stagecoach's imminent arrival. The stage normally only stopped to change horses, and to let down the odd passenger or two. Dusty Bend was small, although it did have a school and a church and the general store, plus a couple of other stores. He much preferred Virginia City, although this place suited him as it was only about three miles from the ranch. With things the way they were, he couldn't afford to be away from the ranch for a minute longer than necessary. There was so much to do and so little time in which to do it.

The cattle drive had already left Idaho and been on the move for weeks, which meant he would have to leave home within ten days if he wanted to catch up with them on the other side of Virginia City. Would that be enough time to marry Miss Martin and get her settled in at the ranch? He had to make sure Frankie would like her. What if the woman turned out to be unsuitable, where would that leave him?

Dayne fretted and worried about the future. He couldn't lose the ranch. His father and grandfather had carved it out of the wilderness and he'd worked hard on it for years. The only time he ever left the place for more than a few days was to go to the war, because he felt duty bound to do so. Now, he was verging on bankruptcy because a gang of rustlers stole the prized herd he had been carefully building up for years.

He didn't hold out much hope of them being caught; even if they were apprehended, his cattle would be gone. Ranchers who wanted to build up the quality of their own herds, but didn't want to pay the market value for them, were just as culpable as the rustlers, to his way of thinking. It was immoral and despicable to ruin a fellow rancher out of greed. He had no doubt his herd had been stolen to order. It had been a mistake to take out that newspaper advertisement about hiring Rascal out for stud duties and extolling the bull's virtues.

Apart from the fact the bull was so well bred, Rascal had been born at the ranch. He was well named because as a young bull he had been a real rascal, but he was almost part of the family

and to lose him was an almost killing body blow. He would recover from the loss eventually, not being the type of man who did anything except look adversity in the face and spit in its eye, as his father used to always say.

“I can see it. I can see it.” Frankie grabbing hold of his arm interrupted his thoughts, and he forced himself to concentrate on the matter at hand – meeting Miss Martin and assessing her suitability.

Dusty Bend was well named. He tried not to choke on the swirling dust kicked up by the horses. His heart suddenly slammed against his rib cage. His mouth dried up and it had nothing to do with the dust.

“I hope she’s beautiful, pa.”

“Looks aren’t everything, darlin’, as long as she’s presentable and capable is the main thing.”

“No.” Frankie stamped her foot. “I want someone beautiful to look after me.”

“Her looks aren’t important. Well, we don’t want a hag.” The moment the last word was out, he regretted it. What a shocking thing to say about this Anna Martin, when he hadn’t even met the woman. “It’s more important that she’s nice and capable. We need someone who can cook us nice meals, bake cakes and teach you things a young lady should know.”

“I’m not a young lady, I’m a kid. I know she’s going to be fat and ugly, and I’m not going to like her.” There was a mutinous expression on Frankie’s face and Dayne’s feeling of dread escalated. He supposed he had spoiled his daughter, who was such a pretty, sweet child and the apple of his eye. So, what was wrong with giving her everything she wanted? She had lost her mother at a young age, for heaven’s sake. He had been particularly outraged when Miss St. George had called her a brat.

What if Miss Martin didn’t turn up? Lady Deauville had sent word about the day and time of her arrival, not to mention extolling her virtues. She had apparently been a schoolteacher

who had taught at a small, exclusive girls academy, which had closed at short notice. Her references were impeccable.

Could he trust Lady Deauville for a second time? The woman had apologized about Miss St. George, who had proved so unsuitable, but had scolded him, ever so gently, about the foolishness of picking a woman mainly on her good looks. In fact, it had been Frankie who had chosen her, but he could hardly admit such a thing to the agency. Being a grown man, he should have had more sense than to fall for a pretty face.

As the stage drew to a stop, his heart slammed against his rib cage. He felt like a gladiator waiting to enter the Colosseum to face a ferocious lion. The idea was laughable, but the nervous state he was in certainly wasn't.

The man riding shotgun jumped down from the stage and started to unhitch the sweating team, while the driver hurried around to the back of the coach to open the luggage compartment. He pulled out a trunk and a carpet bag and placed them on the ground.

Dayne stood rooted to the spot as the driver opened the door of the stage and spoke to someone inside.

The first view of his prospective bride was of a small, gloved hand taking that of the driver. His mouth dropped open when the woman stepped down from the stage. She was small and dainty, was his first thought, then he noticed a few tendrils of auburn hair had escaped from beneath her bonnet. Her emerald-colored eyes stood out starkly against her smooth, milky white skin. She sure was pretty.

“Yuk. She's got red hair,” Frankie exclaimed loudly, causing him to squirm because there was no way Miss Martin could have failed to hear. The flush coming to her cheeks confirmed it.

“Are you Mr. Dayne Pengelly?” she asked in a soft, tremulous voice, making him feel lower than a snake's belly because his daughter had acted so rudely.

“Yes, are you Miss Martin?”

“I am. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Pengelly. And this young *lady* is Francine?”

“Yes, say howdy to Miss Martin, darlin’.”

“I don’t want to. She isn’t beautiful like Miss St. George was.”

Dayne knew he should admonish Frankie for her rudeness but somehow couldn’t. He was strong-minded normally, but with his daughter he was soft as melted butter and let her get away with more than he should.

It wasn’t only because Frankie had lost her mother at such a tender age, but he felt guilty because he and Mary never loved each other as a husband and wife should. Had she not been expecting their baby, they never would have married and he was honest enough to admit it. He had acted rashly and had paid the price for it.

Chapter Five

Anna stood staring at Dayne Pengelly, who was handsome in a rugged kind of way. His grey eyes appeared kindly and he looked embarrassed at his daughter's rude comment, although he didn't admonish her for it. This little Miss obviously ruled the roost.

"Um." He cleared his throat. "Did you have a pleasant trip?"

"Thank you, I did, although it was long and tiring." If this union between them was going to work, they had to be honest with each other from the start. She didn't like saying it, but it had to be said, even though confrontation had never been her way. "There's no point procrastinating, Mr. Pengelly, your daughter has taken an instant dislike to me."

"I'm sure she didn't mean anything by the comment. She's only a child and has been without a woman's influence in her life since she was four. I'm afraid she is inclined to take things at face value."

"I taught children at the academy for several years, so I do have quite a lot of experience with young girls." Anna hesitated, wondering whether she should say exactly what she thought. If they didn't get this sorted out here and now, they were only wasting each other's time.

"Your daughter is obviously a very visual person, and has no concept about looking beneath the surface to see what lies underneath. My understanding is that one of the reasons Miss St. George returned to San Francisco, is that she wanted Francine to be sent away to boarding school, which you quite rightly refused to do. What I am trying to say is, it is about time your daughter understood this; because she is not a baby, the beautiful Miss St. George didn't want her because she thought she was a brat. She didn't want you, either, because you had lost all your money."

Anna watched the man's mouth drop open and his eyes darken to the color of storm-tossed seas, while the child glared at her. She would be pretty with her blonde hair and big blue eyes if there wasn't such a sulky, pouty expression on her face.

"I don't care how much money you have or don't have. All I expect from you is a reasonably comfortable home, and to be treated in an honorable manner. As for your daughter, I am not her mother and would never presume to take her place, but I do expect respectful behavior. In exchange, I will run your house to a high standard, and even do some ranch chores, as well. I used to live on a small ranch, so I am familiar with the work involved. I will care for your daughter to the best of my ability, but unless she is prepared to be respectful, there is little point in us continuing with this arrangement."

"I would never treat any woman dishonorably," he said with such sincerity she believed him.

"And your daughter? What about her? Will she be prepared to behave in an appropriate manner toward me?"

"I'm sure she would. Wouldn't you, darlin'?"

The little girl glared at Anna but positioned her head in such a way her father wouldn't see.

"As for you, little Miss Francine, you would be very pretty if you took that sulky pout off your face," Anna said.

"I'm not sulky."

"It appears that way to me," Anna said, trying to be patient and getting her point across without raising her voice.

The stagecoach had left, the way station people had gone about their business, leaving the three of them standing in the front yard. She idly noticed a buckboard parked under a large tree.

You could cut the silence with a knife it was so thick, Anna thought. It was imperative for them to sort things out and come to some agreement before they committed themselves to anything permanent. She was prepared to tolerate some

misbehavior and resistance from Francie, after all they were strangers, but would not put up with blatant rudeness.

“Everyone calls me Frankie.”

“All right, Frankie it is. You don’t know me so it’s not unreasonable for you to not like me right away. I understand this and I’m fine with it. If I marry your father, I hope we might become friends one day. At the very least, I expect you to be respectful toward me, and any other adult for that matter. It’s your decision. If your father doesn’t leave the ranch and obtain work somewhere else, he’ll lose his ranch. I know he won’t go on the cattle drive without being sure we can get along while he’s gone, so it’s your decision, Frankie.”

“I’ll stay with you then,” the child said with obvious reluctance.

“Thank you, darlin’, I’m sure you and Miss Martin will grow to like each other.”

“I think you should both call me Anna, now we’ve got our differences resolved.” They weren’t resolved, she would be a fool to think they were, but the understanding did give them a chance to move on.

“Call me Dayne. I um, maybe we should see the preacher and get married now, then you can come to the ranch right away. I’m starting to feel confident things are going to work out for us.”

She didn’t share his confidence but wouldn’t say so. The battle between her and Frankie would heat up once Dayne left, as sure God made little green apples. The child would not relinquish her stranglehold grip on her father without a fight.

Over the years at the academy, there had been a few girls with the same attitude, and she had managed to sort them out over a short period with a great deal of patience. She had the patience but didn’t really have the time, because Dayne had to leave within a few days.

Dayne hoisted her trunk on to his shoulder as if it was full of feathers, indicating he was a strong, fit man in his prime. What

would it be like to be a real wife to him? She shook her head to empty it of such foolishness.

“Could you carry your carpet bag?”

“Yes.” She picked it up and they made their way toward the buckboard, with Frankie skipping on ahead as if she didn’t have a care in the world. It was probably only the calm before the storm; still, she would enjoy it while she could. Children generally liked her and she them, therefore it had come as a shock to receive such a hostile reception from this little girl.

Frankie climbed on board without assistance and took up a position to be next to her father. Dayne pursed his lips slightly, although he said nothing as he helped Anna up with an impersonal hand under one elbow.

“Comfortable, ladies?” He climbed on board and without further ado they drove off, heading toward the small main street of Dusty Bend. “I’ll need to buy you a wedding ring.”

“And you can’t wear my mother’s ring, it’s mine. Pa said it was.”

“Of course, your mother’s ring belongs to you. I wouldn’t dream of depriving you of it. I wear my mother’s wedding ring on a gold chain around my neck, so she’ll always feel close to me. Maybe you could do the same until you need it when you get married yourself.”

“I want to do that. Pa, I want a gold chain for ma’s ring.”

“Well, I...” She guessed he was worried about the money it would cost.

“There again, if we made a special little velvet bag for it, you could wear it pinned to the inside of your dress right next to your heart.”

“I can’t sew.”

“I’m good at sewing, it was one of the subjects I taught at my school. I could easily teach you. Imagine how extra special it would be if you could make it yourself.”

“Okay.”

At least, this was a small gain, Anna thought, maybe all was not lost after all. It wouldn't be easy. She didn't delude herself on this point for even one moment.

Chapter Six

They arrived outside the small red brick church and Anna glanced around with interest. It was plain but did have a fancy bell tower. Following her gaze, Dayne explained. “They ring the bell whenever there’s a wildfire or some other type of danger threatening the town. The preacher lives out in the back, as he’s a bachelor.”

“He’s sparking with my teacher, Miss Tootell. I sneaked up on them once and they were kissing.”

“It isn’t nice to spy on people.” The words were out before Anna could stop them.

“It’s how I find out stuff.”

“You wouldn’t like people sneaking around watching what you do, darlin’, so you shouldn’t do it.”

“But then I won’t be able to tell you what I see and you won’t know what’s going on.”

“Your father probably doesn’t want to know what’s going on in other people’s lives, I know I don’t. I’ve got too many problems of my own to worry about without burdening myself with someone else’s.”

“I like to know everything,” Frankie said with her hands planted firmly on her hips.

Anna wasn’t particularly surprised; getting something on others would give this little girl power and the child certainly wouldn’t hesitate to use it.

The moment Dayne climbed from the buckboard Frankie jumped down also. He came around and helped her out, once again with the impersonal hand at her elbow. Dayne Pengelly was a gentleman, another trait she liked in men. He spoke well and wasn’t uncouth. His one weakness, if you could call it

such a thing, was his willingness to give in to his daughter's every demand.

"I hope the preacher will agree to marry us right away," Dayne said. "I've got so much work to do on the ranch and so little time in which to do it."

"I can help, pa."

"You can and you do, darlin', but there are some things only a man can do. Besides, you need to go to school."

"No, I don't. I hate school. I want to stay home and help you run the ranch."

"Every child needs an education these days to obtain a good job," Anna said, hoping she didn't sound too pompous.

"I'm going to get pa's ranch one day, so I don't need another job."

"And if you can't read and write, who is going to keep all the accounts in order and pay the bills, or any wages, if you one day employ men on the ranch?"

"I can read and write good enough." Obviously, Frankie was used to having the last word on everything.

"Miss Martin, I mean, Anna is right, education is imperative these days."

As they walked up to the arched front door, Anna mused about how strange the setup was. There were houses on either side of the church grounds, yet the church building was about fifty yards away from the back fences of the neighboring properties.

"Won't we need witnesses," Anna asked Dayne, who was starting to look agitated.

"I guess so. The preacher will know what to do."

Organ music drifted out to them, followed almost immediately by several female voices singing the beautiful hymn, *Nearer My God to Thee*, one of Anna's favorites. "It sounds like they're having choir practice," she said.

“It does; at least we’ll have a good pool of witnesses to choose from. I better knock loudly, the preacher does choir master duties as well.”

It took several loud knocks before the door was opened by a tall young man. His hair stood on end, as if he had been running his fingers through it.

“Oh, Dayne and Frankie. What can I do for you?”

“I, um, this lady is Anna Martin, and um, we want to get married.”

“What! Now?”

“Yes, if that’s possible.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Miss Martin, I’m Preacher Gavin.”

She smiled. “Lovely to meet you, too.”

“I’m sorry about the rush, but I want to get Anna installed in the house and settled in before I leave to catch up with the cattle drive.”

“We’re in the middle of choir practice as you can hear, but knowing the position you’re in, I’ll do it. No word on the cattle that were rustled yet?”

“No, and I don’t think there will be. In my opinion they were stolen to order, particularly Rascal.”

“Rascal,” Anna queried.

“He was my prized bull; losing the other cattle was bad enough. Having him stolen is a crippling blow to my breeding program. It has set it back years. I’ll probably never recover from it.”

The pain of his loss was clearly evident in his eyes. Why did good people have to suffer at the hands of greedy evil doers? The loss of a prize bull would be devastating for a rancher.

They followed Preacher Gavin inside the church. The decor was quite plain, although the dozen or so pews were carved at either end. This carving exactly matched what was on the

baptismal font and the slightly raised pulpit. There were three quite large arched windows on either side, which gave the place an unusual brightness for a church interior.

The several ladies, holding hymn books and occupying the front two pews, were middle-aged. They all smiled in a friendly fashion and Anna knew she would like to attend services here. By the way the preacher spoke to Dayne he was obviously a regular worshiper.

“Dayne and Miss Martin are wanting to get married, so I’ll need two witnesses. Raise your hands if you’re interested.”

Every hand shot up causing the preacher to laugh. “Haven’t you ladies heard the saying about not volunteering for anything?”

“We have, Preacher Gavin,” the youngest of the women said. “We wouldn’t have volunteered except we trust you not to lead us astray.”

“Yes, and we like weddings,” another chimed in. “You’re getting yourself a pretty wife, Dayne.”

Dayne nodded without speaking and Frankie pulled a face behind her father’s back and out of the line of vision of the women. She was obviously a cunning little monkey. *It’s becoming more and more obvious, it’s only me she dislikes.* This fact gave Anna hope that eventually she would be able to win the child over. In a way, it was understandable the child didn’t want to share her father, after having him to herself for so long. There again, Miss St. George had obviously met with her approval, although it would probably not have lasted long.

“Sorry if I sound impatient,” Dayne said, “but I do need to get back to the ranch. I’ve got a ton of things to do before I leave.”

“Come up and stand near the font and we can begin,” Preacher Gavin invited.

“You might be needing that font in about twelve months,” one of the women said, giving Dayne a nudge with her elbow.

Anna felt hot all over as there was no mistaking the meaning of the words. Nervously she glanced at her husband-to-be. His cheeks were reddened, his mouth slightly pursed. He looked as embarrassed as she felt.

“Stop this nonsense, Harriet,” another woman said. “They don’t even know each other properly yet.”

It was obvious everyone knew she was a mail-order bride. Anna inwardly cringed but fought not to let it show. She supposed this was the price you paid for living in a small community, with everyone knowing each other’s business.

“I’ll need you both to fill out a few details about yourselves first. We can go into the vestry, then I’ll perform the ceremony out here. No impediment to the marriage?”

“No,” Anna said. “I’ve got a reference from the preacher at the church I attended in San Francisco if you need it.”

They followed the preacher through a door situated behind the pulpit. In the small vestry was a desk with a set of shelves running across the top. It contained a couple of leather-bound books and a bible with gold writing on the spine, an inkwell and a couple of pens.

The preacher lifted down the bible and one of the leather-bound books and placed them on the desk.

“All right, ladies before gentlemen, so you go first Miss Martin. I always have a few pages with the questions already written out to save time when I’m dealing with couples suffering from pre-wedding jitters. All you need to do is answer each question and Dayne can answer below yours, all very simple.” His smile somewhat allayed her nerves.

As she dipped the pen into the ink, Dayne stared at her, his expression inscrutable. No way could she tell whether he was happy or unhappy about getting married to her, especially as she had not been his first choice. Merely a substitute, and in Frankie’s eyes a very poor one.

Chapter Seven

Ten minutes later, with the good wishes of the preacher and the choir ladies echoing in her ears, they exited the church and Anna Martin was now the wife of Mr. Dayne Pengelly and stepmother to Miss Francine Pengelly, for better or for worse.

“Oh well, that was fairly painless,” Dayne said. “I have to admit I was a bundle of nerves.”

“Me, too. I’ve never done anything like this before,” Anna said, then could have kicked herself for saying such a silly thing.

“Yeah, well, it was the second time for me and as I recall I wasn’t as nervous the first time around, even though there was a war going on and I only had a couple of days leave.”

As before, once they reached the buckboard, he helped her up while Frankie climbed aboard and positioned herself in the middle of the seat. “I don’t like weddings,” Frankie said. “I’m never getting married.”

Dayne chuckled. “I guarantee you won’t be saying that in a few years. You’ll be begging me to give my consent so some man can whisk you away from me.”

“I won’t ever leave you, pa. I’m your princess.”

“You sure are and always will be.”

Frankie turned her head slightly and threw Anna a triumphant smile. The expression on her face seeming to say, I’ll never let you come between us.

“I was wondering whether we need to call in on the general store,” Dayne said, turning to Anna. “You might need a few extra things. Frankie and I don’t bother too much about cooking fancy stuff.”

“I don’t know what you have or haven’t got. Maybe we could go into town in a day or so once I check your cupboards and see what you have.”

“We can’t do that, pa is too busy.”

“I’m sure I can find the time. If we want Anna to cook us nice meals, we need to provide her with the right ingredients.”

They drove along in silence for a while. It was peaceful out here and Anna was happy to let the tranquility wash over her. Dayne didn’t wear a gun, although she noticed a rifle positioned at the back of the seat. The track they were now traversing appeared to be cut through the center of a hillside, one side covered with soaring pine trees, the other a mixture of grass, native trees and bushes.

About ten minutes later they arrived at the ranch entrance. Across the top of a wooden beam was a set of large horns atop the name, Pengelly Ranch, which was burned into the wood. In the distance was a double story house constructed from mud brick and timber. A large barn was built out of split logs. Everything appeared well kept and neatly laid out. The one thing missing was livestock. All she could see were a couple of horses in a nearby pasture.

“As you can see, most of my stock is gone. In one of the back pastures, I’ve got a few head of scrub cattle I’ve managed to muster. That’s it.” There was a bitter twist to his well-shaped lips and her heart bled for her new husband, who had lost so much at the hands of unscrupulous rustlers.

“I’m sorry, it must be devastating.”

“It is. Years of work destroyed. I’m not sure the ranch will ever recover.”

Instinctively she clasped his hand, which was now clenched on the reins. “I’m sure it will, even if things appear hopeless now, together, I’m sure we can rebuild it.”

She received a poisonous look from Frankie and quickly moved to include the child. “With Frankie and I helping you, it won’t be as hard as trying to struggle through on your own.

With Frankie's knowledge of the ranch, together we can easily keep it going while you're away."

"Yeah, we can. I know a lot about ranching, pa showed me."

"That's good. If it's going to be your ranch one day, knowing how to run it well is vital." Anna felt like a hypocrite trying to ingratiate herself with this spoiled little girl by pandering to her ego. She had to make the child realize she wasn't her enemy, and in fact, would like to be her friend.

A few lavender bushes grew near the porch and an enormous lilac bush dominated the left side of the front yard. The house rested mellow and tranquil in the bright sunshine. It had two stone chimneys, one at the back and one at the front.

"The place is quite a good size," Dayne said as he drove the buckboard around to the back, where she got a better look at the barn and a couple of other outbuildings. Everything was in good order. There was a large kitchen garden, much to her delight, also a well close to the back porch.

"Yes, it looks nice and homey."

"There are four bedrooms, two upstairs and the main bedroom is on the ground level along with a smaller room next door. We used it for a nursery when Frankie was small as the two rooms had a connecting door. The kitchen is quite large and we normally eat there. Then we have a separate sitting room. The house isn't luxurious; comfortable is the best way of describing it. Of course, it does badly need a woman's touch. Frankie and I have been the only ones living here since my wife, Mary, died."

"It sounds fine." Anna didn't know what else to say when she hadn't seen inside the house, although so far, she was impressed with it.

He pulled the buckboard up in the backyard and climbed down with Frankie scrambling out after him and dashing toward the back porch.

"Well, this is it, Anna. I hope you can be happy here. I know Frankie has not been particularly welcoming."

That was the understatement of the decade, she thought.

“I have over-indulged her; let her get away with far too much.”
He gave a deep sigh. “But she’s all I’ve got.”

“I understand, I really do, but she does need some discipline for her own good.”

“I don’t believe in corporal punishment,” he shot the words out.

“Nor do I. Guidance and a firm yet kindly hand was my way of installing discipline in my pupils and it always seemed to work.”

“As long as we’ve got that clear,” he said as he helped her down. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so blunt, but we might as well start out the way we are going to continue.”

“I agree, Dayne. While you’re around I won’t interfere with how you choose to raise Frankie, but while you’re away, I need to have your approval of my methods even though they do differ a little from yours.”

“You have it. Hopefully, by the time I leave, you and Frankie will be firm friends.”

“I sincerely hope so. I would never presume to try and take the place of her mother and your wife in your lives, as it would be wrong.”

“If we’re being honest, I might as well admit my marriage wasn’t such a good one. I mean, we were happy enough. If Mary could have had another child or two it might have improved things between us. She miscarried twice after we had Frankie.”

“I’m sorry.” He looked so sad her heart bled for him. At least it gave her a better understanding of why he let Frankie rule the roost.

He picked up her trunk while she retrieved her carpetbag. “I’ll see you into the house then attend to the horse. Maybe Frankie could show you around. I um, use the main bedroom, but I can move out if you’d prefer to have it.”

“No, I wouldn’t dream of taking your bedroom, one of the spare ones will do me just fine.” At least she knew where she stood regarding him wanting to claim his marital rights – he didn’t. Would he have wanted to have had a *real* marriage with the beautiful Miss St. George? She wondered why the thought hurt so much. It was better for all concerned this way. If the marriage didn’t work out, they could have an annulment, and each get on with their lives.

Chapter Eight

Once they reached the porch, Dayne placed her trunk outside the door, took the carpet bag from her hand and before she knew what was happening, scooped her up in his arms and carried her across the threshold, then deposited her in the kitchen.

“What did you do that for?” a scowling Frankie asked.

“It’s tradition, darlin’, for a man to carry his new bride across the threshold of her new home.”

“This isn’t her home, it’s ours.”

As if remembering he still held her, Dayne put Anna down and she somehow felt bereft not having his strong arms around her. She had inhaled his clean male scent, felt his strength and liked it.

“It’s Anna’s home, too, now.”

With a pout Frankie stomped out of the kitchen into what was presumably the sitting room. When Dayne went to retrieve her trunk and carpet bag, Anna glanced around. There was a large cook stove set into a stone fireplace. On display, through the diamond leadlight glass of the kitchen dresser, was willow patterned crockery. Everything appeared of solid good taste with nothing flashy about it, which she found appealing.

She stepped over to the stove, opened the fire door and fed a couple of neatly cut logs onto the glowing coals. Dayne had obviously built it up before he left to collect her from the stage depot.

The floor was bare polished boards with no dirt or dust built up on it. The lace curtains on the two windows were a little limp and discolored. A woman’s touch was sorely needed to make it homey, yet she couldn’t complain about the condition

of anything. For a busy rancher bringing up a child on his own, the place was surprisingly tidy.

“I’ll take these to your room, it’s upstairs next to Frankie’s.”

“Thank you. You have a lovely big kitchen.”

He shrugged. “I wouldn’t really know about that, Mary never complained about it, so I guess she thought it was all right. I was born here in this house. It’s one of the reasons I’m battling so hard to keep it. A man needs to fight to keep his heritage. One day it will belong to Frankie.”

“And you will win your battle.” Anna touched his arm. “I know you will.”

“Thanks, with you here, it does give me a better chance. I could be away for about three months.”

“So long?”

“Yes, we’re driving a herd of around a thousand head to Hardyville in Arizona. The man who owns the herd has been awarded a lucrative contract to provide beef for the miners near there. There are apparently gold, silver and copper mines in outlying areas and if that wasn’t enough, there are steamboats plying their trade from Port Isabel in Mexico. Some people have all the luck,” he said morosely.

She followed him up a wide staircase with a carved balustrade. Once again it was made from the same warm, honey colored timber as the floors and walls of the house. A huge cowhide hung on the wall of the landing and on each side, there was a door leading to the bedrooms. He stopped outside the one on the right-hand side. “This will be yours.” He opened the door then stepped back so she could enter first.

“Thank you.” The room was quite spacious with a single bed, a closet and a dressing table. A colorful patchwork quilt covered the bed.

“Your window overlooks one side of the house, Frankie’s the other. I hope you’ll be comfortable. We made the bed up for you and tidied the room, the same as we did the house. If there

is anything you would like to do to make things more comfortable, please just go ahead and do it. I'm happy to give you a free hand."

"Won't Frankie object if I make changes?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, she's more interested in outside work than anything inside. Um, I'll leave you to unpack. I'll go change into my work clothes and..."

"You change, but I can unpack later. I'll just get an apron out of my trunk. You need to have something to eat before you go out to work."

"I'm racing against the clock."

"Well, if you get sick because you're skipping meals you could miss the drive altogether. I can quickly whip up a few pancakes for you, then depending on what supplies you have, I'll put on a good substantial supper. How does that sound?"

He grinned. "Good. Thanks, Anna, I appreciate it." Once he strode off, she placed her bonnet on the dresser next to her reticule then opened her trunk.

Within a few minutes she was back in the kitchen, searching through the quite spacious pantry for the ingredients for the pancakes. A large ceramic bin, fitted with a tight lid, had the word flour painted on it. There were matching salt, sugar and rice bins as well. She would have no problems finding her way around this kitchen.

She had the coffee on and was mixing the batter for the pancakes when Dayne sauntered in with Frankie beside him.

"Take a seat," she said, including both of them. "Frankie, will you be going out to help your father or staying..."

"I'm going with pa."

"Don't you want to show Anna around, darlin'?"

"No, I want to help you."

"That's fine with me, Frankie, if you want to help your father. I can wander around and find everything on my own."

“You can’t go into my room.”

Anna gritted her teeth to stop herself from telling the child not to be so rude. “If you keep your room tidy, there’s no need for me to ever go in there, if that’s the way you want it.”

Frankie looked quite taken aback by the statement. She had obviously thought to provoke an argument. As if I would give that cheeky little miss the satisfaction. Plenty of time to pull her into line once she familiarized herself with the workings of the place.

“Do you have any butter?” she asked.

“Yes, we keep it in a stone box in the root cellar. You gain entry from under the stairs. Frankie, you go and collect a slab of butter for Anna.”

“No, it’s all right. How about we just sprinkle a little sugar on them to save time, unless you have some ground cinnamon we could use.”

Dayne gnawed his lower lip. “I don’t think there would be any cinnamon here. I know I’ve never bought any. It’s something you could put on your shopping list.”

“Once you’ve gone to work, I’ll check what you’ve got and make a list of the essentials I think we’ll need. You do seem to be fairly well stocked up, though.”

“I helped pa buy stuff.”

“Oh, good, Frankie, you’ll be able to help me. I’m sure us ladies can come up with a few items men wouldn’t think necessary.”

“Like what?” Frankie asked.

“I’m not sure until I check what you’ve got here. Some nice soap would be good.”

Dayne grinned. “Well, don’t expect me to wash in some rose scented stuff because I won’t.”

Anna laughed. “As if I would. It would be a special treat for us ladies. I do know how to make lye soap.”

“I’m not so poor I’d have to resort to *that*, either. Plain, store bought soap is all I need.”

Anna stepped over to the stove. She had already greased the pan with lard from a tin she had found near the side of the stove. Once the first batch of pancakes were on cooking, she prepared the coffee. She already knew there was no tea in the house, but weak coffee she could drink if it had sugar in it.

By the time she poured out the coffee and a glass of water for Frankie, she needed to turn the pancakes over, and was pleased with their golden-brown color. She wanted everything to turn out perfectly, not so much for Dayne but his eagle-eyed daughter.

When she returned from taking their drinks to the table, the first batch of pancakes were ready. She placed them on a plate and took them over to the table. “Here we are, I’ll leave you to sprinkle your own sugar on them. You’ll know how much you want better than me.”

Dayne’s eyes lit up when he saw the pancakes. “These look good.”

“I hope they taste all right. I only used water instead of milk, which I much prefer, but I don’t know whether you have a milk cow or not.”

“We do,” Frankie said. “And you can milk her from now on. I hate doing it.”

“I don’t mind milking a cow. I have to confess I haven’t done so for a few years, although I heard it was a skill you never lose. Eat up while I get the next batch of pancakes on, then we can all get about our work.”

Frankie looked quite crestfallen that she hadn’t complained about being told to milk the cow. As if she would give the child the satisfaction of knowing she was unhappy about it, which she wasn’t. She liked being busy and ranch chores had never been a problem for her.

If only some of her wealthy students could see her now.

Chapter Nine

After Frankie and Dayne left the house, Anna decided to briefly explore so she could prioritize the work needing to be done. Checking the root cellar was high on her list, as was having a bath to remove all the travel dust she had accumulated. She hated feeling grubby. Thankfully, she had noticed the separate washing room constructed by enclosing part of the back porch, a much better option than sitting in a tub in front of the fire in the kitchen, as she had done during her childhood. Not to be compared with the bathing room at the academy with its large claw-foot bath, though.

By the time she hurried out to the well a couple of times to bring in buckets of water to heat on the stove, Frankie and Dayne were mere dots on the horizon.

Upstairs, she quickly unpacked and hung her clothes in the spacious closet, leaving out a brown skirt and cream blouse and clean undergarments to change into after she had bathed. In the shelves along one side of the closet she stored her smaller items. As she laid her brush and matching hand mirror on the dressing table, she grimaced at her disheveled appearance.

Checking under the bedcovers, she was pleased to find clean white linen on it, as well as the blanket and quilt. Sitting on the bed, she bounced up and down a couple of times to check the state of the springs and was satisfied it would give her a comfortable night's sleep.

Placing her hairbrush in the pocket of her apron, Anna gathered up her clean clothes and left the room. She would never violate Frankie's privacy by entering her room while she wasn't here. Standing in the doorway and peering inside, surely this wasn't trespassing. It might give her more of an idea about the child's personality.

Her room was similarly furnished with the same patchwork quilt on the bed. Sitting against the pillow was a large rag doll and a beaten up, well-handled teddy bear, which showed Frankie did have some sentimental feeling in her. On the dresser was a picture of a young woman, and a much younger Dayne with a toddler sitting between them.

This was the only picture she had seen of Mary Pengelly in the house. How tragic for a wife and mother to die so young.

Feeling sad because the young woman's life had been cut so short, she hurried down the stairs clutching her clothes, and laid them over an armchair in the sitting room. A team of wild horses couldn't have pulled her away from the doorway of the main bedroom.

The large double bed was covered by a similar quilt to those upstairs. Someone had obviously liked quilting, a skill she had never mastered. A bedroom dresser, closet and nightstand made up the rest of the furniture. It was so plain as to be almost austere with not one personal item to be seen. She wondered why Dayne didn't at the very least have a picture of his wife hanging on the wall. Maybe they only had one family photograph and it was right for Frankie to have it as a memento of a mother she would scarcely be able to remember.

Now for the root cellar. From the doorway under the stairs, half a dozen steps led into a small room. With the door propped open it was gloomy yet light enough to see vegetables neatly lined up, potatoes, pumpkins, plus carrots, probably grown in the garden outside at a guess. Several bunches of onions hung from the ceiling along with sacks of what were probably legs of smoked meat going by the shapes. Some of this would be perfect for the stew she proposed cooking for supper. With all these vegetables on hand it would be easy to make a nourishing meal.

On a wire rack were rows of apples, which she would use to make a pie. "You can't complain about a scarcity of food," she muttered.

Two large barrels were marked with the words 'lamp oil'. Once again everything was laid out neatly and clearly labeled. A large tin of molasses caught her eye along with a multitude of other foodstuffs. Maybe she wouldn't need to go into town right away after all. It would depend on whether she could find any herbs growing in the garden. If so, she could do without spices for a while.

Dayne was obviously a meticulous man. If he was so careful with the supplies inside the house, any wonder his cattle breeding program would be so successful. To think some low down skunk had stolen his whole herd. She had never heard of anything so despicable. Even if the rustlers had left him a few head of cattle it would not have been quite so bad, but to take the lot made these men the lowest of the low.

Maybe the bull had just wandered off and might be returned. She sincerely hoped so, but didn't hold out much hope of this happening. Poor Dayne. Then to be rejected by Miss St. George because he didn't have enough money to satisfy her greed, must have been another crushing blow, which would have felled a lesser man.

She had always loathed injustice, and under the circumstances had he asked for their marriage to be a real one, she would have agreed. Would he dispense with her services once he returned from the cattle drive? She didn't know anything about having an annulment, but guessed as long as the marriage had never been consummated, it would be a simple enough procedure.

If that did occur, and she would be powerless to stop it if Dayne requested it, what would happen to her? Returning to San Francisco held little appeal now. Maybe she could go to Carson City and find employment there.

"Stop this dithering, Anna, and have yourself a bath in case the others decide to come back early."

After she finished her bath, she would collect the ingredients she wanted and start the preparations for their supper.

Dayne brooded as he rode along, a lousy fifty head of scrub cattle was all he had now. He wanted to weep at the injustice of it all. He would be joining the drive at a rendezvous point about twenty miles from Virginia City then they would head for Arizona.

He had heard of the job from a friend in the Virginia City Cattleman's Association and had jumped at the chance of earning extra money, even though he didn't know the owner of the cattle or the trail boss. Fortunately, he did know the ramrod, which assured him the drive was legitimate and there would be no problem collecting his pay at the end of it.

"Pa, I could come with you tomorrow and help you find more cattle." Frankie's voice interrupted his brooding.

"Not tomorrow, darlin', you've got school."

"I don't want to go. School is stupid."

"You had today off, so you need to attend tomorrow."

"I bet you want to spend the day with *her*," she shrilled.

He couldn't understand why Frankie had taken such a dislike to Anna, who not only had a pleasant disposition but was pretty, too. Maybe he shouldn't have been so hasty about insisting on a marriage in name only. What was he thinking? He had enough on his mind already without adding emotional problems to his woes.

"I won't be with her; I'll be out working and she will be fixing things in the house. There's so little time, Frankie, for me to get everything done before I go. I'm relying on you to help Anna and not cause her trouble. You know the ranch, she doesn't. Besides, it will be nice for you to have another woman around."

"Why?"

"To well, you know, talk woman's stuff."

"What stuff?" Frankie demanded.

He was beginning to wish he'd kept his mouth shut. "Oh, about clothes and things," was the best he could come up with. "Um, she might be able to teach you how to sew."

"I don't want to learn how to sew, that's for girls," she scoffed.

"You are a girl, Frankie, and you need to learn these things. You can't be a tomboy all your life."

"Why not?"

She had a determined tilt to her chin and a glint in her eyes which usually meant trouble. He would have to stop giving in to her all the time. He knew it, yet it was hard to deprive her of anything, because he wanted to compensate her for the loss of her mother. He had hoped having another woman around the place would help. What if it didn't?

It was a relief when the ranch house came into view. The smoke curling up from the chimney did give him a feeling of comfort. Anna was used to girls; surely, she would be able to get through to Frankie. It was obvious she wasn't used to men, though, and he forgot that at his peril. On such a short acquaintance he liked her, even though he probably shouldn't.

They dismounted outside the barn, quickly unsaddling their mounts and releasing them into the corral. It was empty, too, but at least he did have a few horses in one of the far paddocks. Stop being so full of self-pity, he inwardly scolded. He was normally forward-looking and cheerful although this rustling had severely eroded his optimism. Cut the ground from under his feet, if he were honest.

If the rustlers had only left Rascal behind, it wouldn't have been so bad. Some of the scrub cattle mated with him would have produced reasonable offspring.

Frankie rushed on ahead as he sauntered along, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his brow furrowed in thought. This marriage had to work. Frankie needed a woman in her life and he should have done something about it sooner, not waited until he was forced into a position, with no other option but to remarry.

As he stepped on to the porch his mouth watered at the mixture of appetizing aromas emanating from the kitchen. Whatever else she might or might not be, Anna was obviously a competent cook.

Pushing the door open, he stepped inside and skidded to a halt. His breath caught in his throat when Anna straightened up from the oven and swung around to face him. Her cheeks were slightly flushed from the heat of the stove, while her hair hung like an auburn cape around her shoulders.

“Oh, Dayne, I didn’t expect you back so soon.” She touched her hair. “I washed it and wanted to let it dry a little more before I pinned it up. I better go and do”

“No. Don’t.” He leaned over and curled one of the long tendrils around his finger and stared at it. “I like it loose.” And he did, even though he shouldn’t.

Chapter Ten

Anna stared at Dayne in surprise. Other than help her in and out of the buckboard he had made no effort to touch her at all, now he was wrapping her hair around his finger. She wasn't so naive that she couldn't see he liked what he saw.

"You're not going to slap my face for taking such liberties?" He cocked one eyebrow.

"No. I guess I'm flattered. I haven't ever received much interest from men."

"The men in San Francisco must be blind, is all I can say. Something smells good."

"It's only a stew. I hope you don't mind, but I ventured down to the root cellar and helped myself to the ingredients, also I've got an apple pie on cooking."

"I thought I could smell that, too."

"Well, there are some oatmeal cookies resting on the wire rack on the table, you're welcome to try one or two of those."

"Thank you. I appreciate all your hard work, Anna. You don't need to ask me, just help yourself to anything you need. This is your home now and I want you to be happy here. I know we didn't have the best of starts, but I'm sure the situation will improve."

"I hope so, too. What I've seen so far, I really like. You've got a good ranch here. My father's ranch was only small, with ground that was dry and hungry, so we always had to fight for a living out of the soil. Not that I'm complaining, my childhood was happy."

Dayne stepped over to the table and picked up a cookie. "Mine was, too. I've spent all my life here, except for when I was away at the war."

“Was it terrible? The war, I mean.”

“Yes, I never speak about it. It’s a time in my life I want to forget ever happened.” Sadness passed across his face and darkened his eyes, causing her to back away from questioning him further. She had seen this same expression with other war veterans. The horrific events they witnessed would never be completely erased from their minds. Dayne must have found out how to cope with his demons, many other veterans weren’t so lucky.

“Will supper be ready soon?” Frankie dashed into the room. “I’m hungry.”

“It won’t be long; you’re welcome to help yourself to an oatmeal cookie while you wait.”

“These are good,” Dayne said, giving his daughter a grin. “Try one.”

Frankie stared at the cookies for a moment, as if she didn’t know what they were, then took the one her father held out and quickly bit into it.

Because she wasn’t expecting any praise from the little girl, Anna wasn’t disappointed when none came, although Frankie gobbled the first one and reached for another.

“No more than two each,” Anna admonished. “Otherwise, you won’t be able to eat supper.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that,” Dayne said. “I’m hungry enough to eat a horse.”

“Yuk.” Frankie screwed her nose up. “I’d never eat horse meat.”

“Hopefully, you will never be hungry enough to want to,” Anna said as she stirred the stew. “I did taste it once and I didn’t like it.”

“Were you dirt poor?” Frankie asked.

“No, not dirt poor, but it wasn’t at home where I got to try it. One of the girls at the academy brought in strips of dried horse

meat for everyone to have a taste. Only a couple of the girls liked it, the rest of the girls and staff felt the same way as me. We'd have to be starving to eat it."

"We better go and wash up before we have supper, Princess."

"I've left a dish of water, soap and a piece of towel on the porch for you."

"Pa and I always wash in here, don't we?"

"If Anna prefers us to wash up outside, we can easily do it."

"This is our house. She can't boss us around."

"She isn't bossing us around, and this is now Anna's home, too. She's worked hard to provide us with a nice meal, the least we can do is wash up where she wants us to."

With a pout, Frankie headed out the door, while Dayne mouthed the word sorry.

Anna turned away and stirred the stew some more, even though it didn't need it. No point getting into an argument over something as trivial as this.

He hesitated for a moment, as if he wanted to say something, then obviously thinking better of it, swung on his heel and walked out the kitchen door. Until Frankie intruded on it, there had been a closeness between her and Dayne. Had the child done it on purpose? A few cookies obviously wouldn't be enough to win her over.

She could hear Frankie chatting away with her father but not what was being said. It was tempting to sneak over to the door and listen. "You haven't sunk that low," she muttered. Not yet, at least.

Supper went off well, if you took into account how quickly the food was demolished; otherwise it proved a disaster. Frankie had spoken to her father on topics Anna could not join in because she didn't know the people or places mentioned. Once or twice Dayne had tried to include her in the conversation, but he gave up in the end and let his daughter prattle on, saying very little himself.

“What time does Frankie leave for school in the morning?” Anna finally asked. Thankfully, the stew had turned out well because she’d had such good ingredients to work with.

“I’m not going to school, I’m helping pa.”

“No, we discussed this before. You have to go to school,” her father said emphatically.

“You only want to get rid of me so you can be with her,” Frankie accused.

“No such thing. You need to go to school to learn and I need to get on with my preparations to leave on the drive. I’m sure Anna will have plenty to do without wanting to have me hanging around interrupting her. Frankie leaves here at eight o’clock at the latest, and rides to school.”

“On her own?” Anna queried.

“No, a couple of kids from a bit further on than us meet her and they ride together.”

“Minnie Riley is my best friend,” Frankie said.

“That’s nice, you can spend time together after school.”

“No, they aren’t allowed to play after school, they’ve got to help with chores.”

“The mother is hardworking, but the same can’t be said for the father,” Dayne said. “I don’t encourage them to come here because their father is no good, if you ask me. Between you and I, I wouldn’t trust Abe Riley as far as I could kick him.”

“He hits Mrs. Riley,” Frankie said. “With his fists,” she added with relish. “Minnie told me. They always run and hide when he comes home in a bad mood.”

“That’s terrible,” Anna said. “Can’t he be stopped?”

“I’m afraid not,” Dayne said. “She has complained to the sheriff a few times, but there’s nothing he can do unless Abe gives her a severe beating, and he’s too cunning for that.”

“I think it’s disgraceful, men hitting women.”

“I do, too, but there’s little anyone can do to stop a man doing what he wants in his own home. She’d be safer leaving him, although with two little kids, how can she, without relatives or friends prepared to give them sanctuary? Would you like me to help you with the dishes, Anna?”

“No thanks, you’ve had a busy day. I’m fine. Maybe Frankie might like to help me?”

“No, I’ve had a busy day, too. I might go to my room and read my new book. Goodnight, pa.” She blew her father a kiss, then skipped off, leaving Anna fuming. Rude little minx.

“I’m sorry, Anna. Would you like me to call her back?”

“What for? If she doesn’t want to wish me goodnight, fine with me. It saves me wasting my breath exchanging pleasantries with someone so ungrateful and rude.” She heard Dayne’s sharp intake of breath.

“I’m sure she doesn’t mean to be so rude.”

“For heaven’s sake, of course, she does.”

“Well, um, if you don’t need my help I’ll go and do some bookwork.”

He almost scurried out of the room. She didn’t want to be confrontive but wasn’t prepared to excuse such behavior even if he was. Frankie’s attitude didn’t bode well for their marriage working.

Chapter Eleven

Anna had a couple of jack rabbits baking in the oven for their supper the next day. Dayne had surprised her by returning to the house around midday with them. They had been able to share a quick meal together, and she had to confess to liking his company, without having to be on edge because of Frankie.

She wouldn't condemn the girl to him, that wouldn't be fair, as it could not be easy for the child to have to share the father she adored. I am prepared to make allowances, she thought, picking up a cookie which was still warm from the oven and nibbling on it. How to get the child on my side without giving in to her every whim like her father did, that was the question.

Voices floating in through the open window at the side of the kitchen interrupted her musing. Who could be visiting them at this hour? Suddenly she heard Frankie say. "It's true."

"I've never heard of a red-haired witch," an unknown girl's voice came to her.

"Yeah. Why would your father marry a wicked witch?" That was a boy's voice.

Obviously, Frankie had brought home a couple of school friends to see the 'witch.' She didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the description. *Maybe I shouldn't let on about hearing the nasty comments. But why should I ignore it?*

The kitchen door opened and Frankie entered, followed by a girl of about the same age and a smaller boy. The children's clothes were clean although patched and worn.

"Where's the witch?" the girl asked. "It smells good in here."

"I'm hungry," the boy said.

"We can have a cookie," Frankie said.

“I’m not sure whether you should do that, as a witch I might have put in a few snails and toad’s legs. Just give me a minute to put my broomstick away.”

“You’re the witch?” the boy asked. “You don’t look like one.”

“Frankie obviously thinks I am.”

It gave Anna almost a feeling of pleasure to see a slight flush color Frankie’s cheeks.

“Well, you just look like a witch with that awful red hair, I meant.”

Glancing at the other two children, she could see them hungrily eyeing the cookies. “The cookies are safe to eat. How about you have one with a glass of milk? Frankie can take the first bite, just to reassure you they aren’t poisoned. If she grows horns and huge fangs and turns green, you’ll know not to eat them.”

“Go on, Frankie, you go first,” the boy urged. “You aren’t really a witch, are you, lady?”

“No, I’m not, even if Frankie says I am.”

Anna was so annoyed with Frankie’s nasty comments she wanted to teach her a lesson. A witch, indeed. What she had told the other students and the teacher at school, Anna shuddered to think. These children were obviously the ones who lived on the neighboring ranch Dayne had mentioned.

Frankie took a bite of the cookie. “See, I’m not frightened of her.”

Anna handed the boy and his sister a glass of milk. “Help yourself to a cookie. What are your names?”

“I’m Minnie and he’s Ned.”

“I’m Mrs. Pengelly.”

The children didn’t need to be asked twice and quickly grabbed up the cookie and gobbled it down.

“These tastes good,” the girl said.

“They’re all right,” Frankie grudgingly agreed. Anna kept her hands in the pockets of her apron in case she was tempted to reach out and give the child a shaking. What a nasty little person she was.

“We better not be late getting home,” Minnie suddenly said. “If pa’s home he might take his belt to us.”

“Your father belts you?” Anna asked, not even trying to disguise her shock.

“Yes, he beats ma, too, when he comes home drunk,” Minnie said, causing Anna’s heart to bleed for these two little mites. And here was Frankie, given all the love and possessions possible for a child to have and yet being so ungrateful about it. Well, to be honest, the ingratitude did not extend to her father, just me.

“How about I give you a couple of extra cookies to eat on the way home, would you like that?” Anna asked.

Minnie and Ned nodded. She hated seeing children sad eyed and beaten down by poverty like these two obviously were. Maybe she could do something to help the family.

“Well, off you go. You don’t want your mother to be worrying about you.”

“Thanks for the cookies,” the girl said, “they were good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them. Here, one more each to eat on the way home.”

She walked to the door with them. “I don’t think you’re a witch,” Minnie said. “Or an evil stepmother.”

“I’ll come outside with you and unsaddle my horse.” With a wave, the children left with Frankie in the lead.

Anna watched all three dashing over to their ponies. Frankie’s pony was a chestnut color and well cared for. At least she had to give the little girl credit there, she did look after the pony well. Her saddle was a specially made child’s one by the looks of it.

Minnie and Ned's ordinary looking ponies were old and the children rode them bareback. Didn't Frankie realize how lucky she was?

Anna started to peel the potatoes and carrots ready to place in the baking dish with the rabbits. The aroma of the roasting meat made her mouth water. She would make a treacle pudding for dessert, too.

The vegetables were on roasting by the time Frankie returned to the kitchen. "Oh good, you're back. You and I need to have a serious talk."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like you telling lies about me behind my back," Anna said bluntly.

"I don't think it's a lie. Besides." Frankie stood with her hands on her hips. "I can say what I like."

"Not about me, you can't. Like it or lump it, your father married me. I am his wife and entitled to receive respect and so is your father."

"I do respect pa."

"And what do you think it does for his reputation around the district to be married to a witch? It would be humiliating for him to be known as the man who married some useless old hag of a creature, because he couldn't find anyone else. How do you think that is going to make him feel?"

"I didn't think about it."

"Well, how would you like me to spread it around the district about Miss St. George not wanting to marry your father when she arrived here, because you were a brat and he had lost all his money?"

Frankie's mouth dropped open; her eyes widened with surprise. "Are you going to tell pa?"

"I haven't decided yet. You are not a baby, Frankie. You are old enough to understand the reasons why your father had to

marry me with such haste. He is a nice man who I could grow to like, if you didn't continually cause trouble."

"He could find someone better than you."

"Well, why didn't he? Let me tell you why. Not many women would want to marry a man who already has a child, especially one whose livelihood has been stolen from him. To build this ranch up is going to take a lot of money and hard work. Where do you think your father can get the money if he can't go on this cattle drive? He can't leave you behind, and there is obviously no-one he can leave you with."

"Why did you marry him, then? Why couldn't you get another man," Frankie shot back

The cheeky little minx was obviously never at a loss for words.

"The school where I worked and lived suddenly closed. Employment opportunities in San Francisco were hard to find for someone like me. I had no relatives to fall back on and I knew my savings wouldn't last long. Becoming a bride through a marriage bureau was the last thing on my mind. I always thought if I was going to get married, I would choose my own husband in my own good time, but I didn't have that luxury, as it turned out."

Anna took a deep breath before continuing. "Your father came highly recommended by the lady at the marriage bureau, otherwise I wouldn't have even contemplated coming here. I would have taken my chances on finding a job and suitable accommodation. I know the situation isn't perfect but sometimes we can't always get what we want and have to make do with second best."

"My father isn't second best."

"Sorry, that didn't come out right. No, your father definitely isn't second best. He's a fine man who was dealt a raw deal. We've both had to compromise, but things can work out between us if you give it a chance."

"I don't want to share pa with anyone."

Ah, the truth was out, just as Anna suspected.

“Your father has you now, but what will happen when in a few years you might get married or take a job away from here? What happens to your father then? He could end up being a sad, lonely man.”

Frankie stamped her foot. “I won’t leave here.”

“You can’t guarantee that because things change with the passing of years. Please, just think about what I’ve told you. If we can’t be friends, at least we can treat each other in a polite and reasonable manner. Promise you’ll think about it.”

“Do you want me to set the table?” Frankie asked with a slightly sulky droop to her lips.

“Yes, please, that would be very helpful.”

Thankfully, there was a truce between them now. How long it would last was anyone’s guess.

Chapter Twelve

Dayne arrived home at dusk. Anna heard his booted feet on the back porch and waited, wondering whether he would use the dish of water she had left outside to wash in.

After a couple of minutes had passed, the door swung open and he stepped inside, taking his hat off as he did so. He sniffed appreciably. “Something smells good.”

Her eyes became rivetted on his upper torso, where droplets of water could still be seen on the tips of the fine hair on his chest. “Y...Your rabbits.”

“Howdy, pa.” Frankie rushed into the kitchen and took his hat and hung it on a hook behind the door next to his black slicker. “Where’s your shirt?”

“I had to leave it outside on the porch.”

“Why?”

“Because, Princess, I rounded up a few more of those wild cows and one was ready to drop her calf, in fact it was half out. In the end I had to help her birth it and got covered in muck for my trouble.” He grinned. “Mother and baby appear to be doing well, though. I’ll just go find a clean shirt.”

Anna watched him saunter off. Did he know what effect his half naked body had on her? Except for her father, she had never seen a man wearing so few clothes. She took a couple of deep breaths to get herself under control.

“Why are you so red in the face?” Frankie asked.

“T...the oven. I was just checking the baking dish when your father strolled in. Everything is ready to serve. All I need to do is make gravy, once I lift the meat and vegetables out,” she babbled, hoping Frankie would believe the excuse, weak though it sounded.

The child gave her an intense, speculative stare yet said nothing.

“Do you have a meat platter?” Anna asked. “It might be easier if we serve ourselves. I can put the greens in a bowl, then set to work on the gravy.”

“There’s one matching the plates. We’ve only used it a couple of times.”

While Frankie stepped over to the kitchen dresser, Anna removed the baking dish and rested it on the stove top. She would use the water drained from the greens and scrape up the fragments of meat and vegetables clinging to the bottom of the baking dish once she emptied out the lard. This was her favorite way of making gravy and it always tasted delicious. She had already mixed up a cup of flour and water to thicken it. Tasty, nourishing meals might just be the way to penetrate the wall of hostility the child had erected between them.

By the time Dayne returned wearing a clean blue shirt and with his hair neatly combed, everything was ready to be served except the gravy. Once this was done, Anna poured it into a jug and took it over to the table.

“Would you mind if I said grace,” she asked.

“No, that would be nice. With only the two of us, Frankie and I have gotten into bad habits.”

All three of them joined hands and bowed their heads. “For the bounty of what we are about to receive, Lord, make us truly grateful. Amen.”

Anna didn’t normally go in for self-praise, although this meal had turned out even better than she expected. With a good stove and the right ingredients, it was not hard to cook a nice meal.

“This is the best meal I’ve eaten in quite a while, Anna, thank you. I couldn’t eat another bite,” Dayne said after finishing a second helping of pudding.

“It was nice.” Frankie’s praise sounded slightly grudging, but she was glad to accept it.

“Anything interesting happen at school?” Dayne asked.

Frankie swiveled her head toward Anna. “Um, not really, the same as any other day.”

“And your day, Anna. How was that?”

“It was fine.”

“Are you sure? I thought you looked a little down at the mouth.”

“Just tired, I think I tried to do too much too quickly. I get impatient when I see things needing to be done and I just have to do them right away.”

“You should try to pace yourself more.”

“I guess so. I was thinking about the bookwork you did last night. I could probably manage that if you show me how you do things.”

“I could do it,” Frankie piped up, not to be outdone.

“Exactly, you could take charge of the bookkeeping if you keep up your arithmetic.” Anna couldn’t resist the opportunity to put in a plug for the necessity of a good education.

“I’m already good at sums.”

“I know you are, darlin’, you’re good at everything.”

Frankie flashed Anna a triumphant grin while her father wasn’t looking.

“But you need to be better if you want to take over doing the accounts for your father. You have to do more than just add and subtract, you know.” Anna secretly hated herself for jumping on any chance to make the child see reason. Confrontation had never been her way. With someone like Frankie she had to use any means that came to hand.

Dayne sighed. “Anna is right, you do need a good education.”

“I’m not going to boarding school.”

“I’m sure your father doesn’t want to send you away to boarding school. The education here would be quite adequate if you applied yourself. I’m assuming the school goes up to grade eight, and I’m qualified to help you go to an even higher level if you wanted to.”

“It does go to the eighth grade. I attended there, then taught myself everything else I needed to know. I’ll help you with the dishes. Frankie can go and do her homework.”

“I don’t have any homework.”

“I’m sure you can find something to do, Anna and I need to talk.”

“What about?” Frankie flashed her a guilty look.

“I need to give her all the information she’ll need for when I’m away. Tomorrow, I can show her the important things which will need to be done outside to keep the ranch going until I return.”

“Oh, all right,” Frankie flounced off.

Dayne grimaced. “I’m afraid she can be a little trying sometimes.”

His words would have to be the understatement of the year. “Yes, she can be.” If only you knew exactly how trying your daughter was. But only to me, Anna thought, feeling sad. Things weren’t turning out the way she had hoped they would. Why couldn’t Frankie have been a docile, obedient child instead of the little obstructionist that she was.

It was understandable, her not wanting to share her father with a stranger, but surely it wasn’t too much to ask that Frankie try to like her. *I’m not a horrible person nor am I hard to get along with. I’ve never had any problems with children not liking me before.*

Chapter Thirteen

Four days passed and Dayne was finding it harder to keep his distance from Anna. She was a beautiful woman from the top of her auburn hair to the tip of her dainty feet. Trying to keep this to a marriage in name only, was one of the hardest things he had ever done in his life. Especially when she looked at him with those big, emerald eyes of hers. He sensed her sadness, or was it despair, but didn't know how to erase it.

He had always been clueless when it came to women, even his late wife. Theirs had been a passionless marriage, now he thought about it. A hasty wartime meeting, an indiscretion leading to pregnancy, followed by a forced marriage, no wonder it was doomed to failure. Frankie had been the only thing holding it together.

"I don't want to go to bed yet," Frankie's raised voice rudely intruded into his thoughts and he glanced over the top of the newspaper he hadn't read even one word of for at least the last five minutes.

"Let her stay up for a little while longer." The moment he uttered the words he could have bitten his tongue out. Frankie gave Anna a triumphant smirk and Anna, well, he wasn't sure what her expression meant. Anger? Resignation? Sadness?

"Do as you please. I'm going to bed."

He watched in open-mouthed amazement as Anna stood and made a dash for the stairs.

"See, you're not the boss of me," Frankie yelled after her. "Pa lets me do what I want."

"Now don't be so cheeky. Maybe Anna's right and you should go to bed."

"Oh, pa, I want to stay up with you."

“Well, I’m going to bed soon myself.”

“You are?” she asked incredulously. “This early?”

“Yeah, it’s not too early.” He sighed. “Why can’t you be nicer to Anna?”

“I don’t want her here. I want it to be just you and me like it was before *she* came.”

“I can’t take you with me, and I can’t leave you here alone. Anna has been good to you. Well, to both of us. She cooks us nice meals, keeps the house clean and tidy; not to mention doing the milking for you because she knows how you hate it.”

“I don’t care.”

“What if I told you that I, um, like her – a lot.”

“You loved ma.”

“Your mother has been dead for several years now, it’s time for us to move on with our lives. She would want us to.”

“No, she wouldn’t. Ma was beautiful and so good at everything.”

He had made a rod for his own back by extolling and exaggerating Mary’s virtues over the years. Frankie had been too young when she died to really remember her mother.

“Your mother was a good woman, but like everyone else, she wasn’t perfect. I tried to make out she was, because that’s how I wanted you to remember her. I still do, but you’re old enough now to know, we can’t grieve forever. I don’t mean forget her, but we do have to move on with our lives.”

“You don’t love ma anymore because of Anna,” Frankie accused. She stood with her hands on her hips and stared him down.

“That isn’t true. A girl your age needs a mother and I um, need a wife.”

“Why her? You should have married Miss St. George.”

Dayne wondered why the smoke wasn't pouring out of his ears. "You were there; you heard what she called you, and how she wanted me to send you away to boarding school. She admitted not wanting to marry me because I wasn't rich like she'd thought I was. What kind of life would we have led with a selfish, spoiled woman like her? I guarantee she's never washed a dish in her life."

"She was beautiful."

"Looks aren't everything. I think Anna is beautiful, too, but in a different kind of way."

"She's got red hair."

Well, your grandfather on your mother's side had red hair, so did your uncle if you must know."

"Did not."

"Don't talk back to your elders, just go to bed, Frankie. You are beginning to annoy me."

After Frankie flounced off, he muttered a frustrated curse. Couldn't he do anything right? He had let his daughter get away with so much over the last few years to compensate for the loss of her mother and in doing so, had turned her into a selfish, cheeky little brat.

Tossing the paper to one side, he stood and paced the floor wondering what he could do to put things right. Apologize to Anna for not supporting her endeavors to discipline Frankie was the first thing. Making sure the child didn't run roughshod over him from now on was definitely a priority. So much to do and so little time in which to do it.

He stalked off to bed because there was simply nothing else for him to do.

Anna lay in bed with tears pouring down her cheeks even though she fought to stop them. She had heard Frankie stomping past her door a while ago, and a few minutes later, Dayne must have snuffed out the lamp as the house was

plunged into darkness. Not total blackness because the moonbeams threw out some light.

Despite Frankie's poor behavior, she was developing strong feelings for Dayne. When the child wasn't with them and they could relax in each other's company, everything was good. They agreed on most topics of conversation. Frankie was the only fly in the ointment. If only she could get through to the child that life would be much better if they all got on well together. As it was, every chance Frankie got to undermine her she did. Most of her meanness was brought about by jealousy and the fear of losing her father's affection. Anna knew this and understood it, yet it was hard to bear. In four days, she had made very little headway with the little girl who looked on her as an adversary rather than a friend.

Maybe I'm not as good with children as I thought. Had she been deluding herself into believing she was a good teacher who was liked and respected by her pupils? "You were. You were," she muttered. "Don't let one child's low opinion of you ruin what you know to be true."

She punched the pillow several times knowing she would never sleep while being wound up like this. Maybe a cup of warm milk might relax her. She waited for a little while longer to be sure the rest of the household slept, then climbed out of bed and quietly made her way downstairs.

On reaching the kitchen, she opened the fire door on the stove and threw a log onto the glowing embers and left it open. The glow emanating from the fire would now throw out enough light for her to see. She stepped over to the kitchen dresser where a stone pitcher of milk sat in a bucket of water to keep it cool.

As she poured milk into a saucepan, a sound had her swinging around. The breath caught in her throat because, standing in the doorway wearing only his drawers, was Dayne holding a gun.

His mouth dropped open in shock as he stared at her. "Sorry, I heard a noise and thought maybe, well...I've been robbed

once and didn't want..."

"I couldn't sleep after the confrontation I had with Frankie. I thought some warm milk might calm me down. Do you want some?" she babbled, hating herself for sounding like a gibbering idiot.

He placed the gun on the table. "No thanks, no milk." He stared at her, looking as if he was mesmerized and wanting to speak, but somehow not being able to.

The tension quickly built up between them until it became so thick, she could almost cut it with a knife. She didn't know what to say. What to do.

"I...I." He swallowed a couple of times. "I...I want you. As my wife. A *real* wife. I've developed feelings for you, Anna."

"You, you, have?" She wondered whether she was dreaming and discreetly pinched herself on the back of her thigh to make sure. The sharp pain told her it was no dream.

"I have strong feelings for you, too, Dayne."

The words had barely left her mouth before he leapt across the room and dragged her into his embrace. "Oh, Anna, my sweet girl. It's been breaking my heart to see you looking so unhappy. Things will get better, I promise. I've already spoken sternly to Frankie tonight, and I'll back you up from now when you try to install good values into her."

"I only want what's best for her. I want to be her friend, only she won't let me."

"She can be stubborn, but I'm sure she'll eventually come around, she's not normally a mean-spirited child."

Once their lips met, Anna's arms came up to encircle Dayne's neck and she never wanted him to stop what he was doing.

Chapter Fourteen

Anna woke up and wondered why she didn't feel so snug and cosseted anymore, then she realized Dayne's side of the bed was empty. The sun streamed through the open curtains, making her realize she had slept in. Frankie had to get ready for school.

She pushed the tangled bedclothes away and jumped out of bed. Why hadn't Dayne woken her? Glancing down at his pillow she spotted a pink rosebud lying there. He must have cut it off the bush growing in the back garden. Picking it up, she gently caressed it and inhaled the perfume. What a romantic thing for a man to do.

Still in her nightgown, she dashed out to the kitchen. Two empty plates and cups greeted her. Frankie and Dayne must have eaten breakfast and left. A quick glance at the clock on the mantel over the stove left her in no doubt as to why. It was nine o'clock. Never in her whole life could she remember having slept in so late. And never in her whole life had she felt so good. She was Mrs. Dayne Pengelly in every sense of the word now.

Hurrying upstairs, she poured water from a white jug on the dressing table into the matching bowl and washed before dressing. As she sat in front of the mirror to brush her hair, she noticed a slight reddening of her cheeks from where Dayne's beard stubble had grazed her skin. Did she look any different than before? She certainly felt it. Would anyone else notice that she was now a woman who had been well and truly loved by her husband? And what about Frankie?

"Stop dithering," she scolded herself. "You are now Dayne's wife, and the child will have to get used to sharing her father." There was plenty of love to go around for all of them. If only it was that simple, she thought, giving a deep sigh.

Downstairs, Anna cracked a couple of eggs into the already used pan and fried them for breakfast. Washed down with a cup of coffee, it was a big enough meal for her. What to do for the day was the next question needing to be answered.

Glancing out the window, the sun shone brightly from a blue sky slightly flecked with soft white clouds. A slight breeze stirred the leaves on the trees. Today might be a good one for doing the washing. There was still enough time to boil a few pots of water and get everything out on the line in time for it to dry. She would have to keep busy to pass the time quickly, so it wouldn't seem too long until Dayne returned from doing his ranch chores. Would he come back for a midday meal?

Once the dishes were washed and put away, the kitchen cleaned and the water for the washing heating on the stove, she returned to the main bedroom to tidy up there. Now she was truly Dayne's wife, she would move her clothes down here and share the large closet with him as they had discussed last night. As she hung her clothes up next to his it seemed a somehow intimate act. "Anna Pengelly, you sure have got it bad for your husband."

After promising Frankie not to enter her room, she had to do so to collect a heap of dirty clothes lying in the corner. Other than that, the room appeared tidy with the bed neatly made up.

What to cook for supper. She would have liked something special, but they had had the roast last night. Maybe a stew with dumplings in it. There was plenty of dried beef on hand, not to mention a plentiful supply of vegetables. She wondered what they did about fresh meat, other than rabbits. Frankie had mentioned them having a fishing hole where she and her father used to go when he had any spare time.

All this information Anna stored away in her mind for future reference. Once Dayne left for the cattle drive, they would have to be completely self-sufficient except for the few necessities they would need to buy from the general store.

Once the house was tidy, and it didn't take much effort to get it up to her high standards, she wondered what else to do. Sitting

around doing nothing had never been part of her nature. Relaxing with a piece of embroidery or reading a book had been things she had enjoyed in the evenings at the academy. Maybe she could teach Frankie how to sew.

Dayne did return at midday. She had been watching, waiting and hoping he would. Once she heard his booted feet on the back porch she dashed out and into his arms.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said.

He grinned as he tightened his arms around her. “I’m glad to be here, if this is the kind of welcome I can expect.”

After a long, toe-curling kiss he let her go and stepped back. “Something smells good.”

“Freshly made biscuits just out of the oven. I was hoping you would come and eat with me. I’m sorry I slept in and didn’t get up in time to see Frankie off.”

“You were exhausted. I guess I expected too much from you last night. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” she said softly, feeling suddenly shy.

He ran his tanned finger along her cheek. “Let’s go inside. I’m hungry.” He hesitated for a moment or two, “for some of your hot biscuits.”

Once they were inside the kitchen, she motioned him to a chair. “Will biscuits on their own be enough?”

He grinned. “If you’ve cooked plenty of them.”

“You can have as many as you can eat. I feel bad about not getting Frankie off to school, though.”

“Stop worrying, she’s old enough to get herself off with a little guidance from me. It just means I started work a little later is all. I um, we discussed, well, you know,” he said, sounding flustered.

She didn’t blame him for being embarrassed. It would have been no easy task explaining things to Frankie. “I was going to um, ask you about what we should say.”

“I just told her married people usually shared the same bedroom, and now that we’d gotten to know each other, it was exactly what we were going to do.”

Anna spread several biscuits with butter and placed them in the middle of the table within easy reach of them both. “What did she say?”

“She gave me one of her pouty stares then concentrated on eating her breakfast. I got myself all het up for nothing, I think. Give her a little time to come around. She’s a good kid really.”

“I hope so. I want her to like me and to be happy I’m here.” Anna wasn’t too hopeful given Frankie’s animosity, but didn’t like to say so. She was prepared to be patient with the child, and hopefully this attitude would eventually bear fruit.

After Dayne left to return to work, she decided to venture outside, a little further afield than the chicken coop and the barn where she milked the cow each morning and night. Frankie detested this chore and was glad to rid herself of the burden of performing it.

Anna didn’t mind it at all, particularly as the milk cow was docile. As a child she could remember the freezing mornings when her breath rose in little puffs and hung in the damp air, and her hands turned almost blue with the cold. Sitting on a three-legged stool with her head resting against the cow’s warm body and her fingers wrapped around the teats had always chased away the cold.

About a hundred yards from the chicken coop and outhouse, she discovered a creek with crystal clear water flowing quite fast. Obviously, this ranch would have plenty of good quality water available even during the worst drought.

A huge willow tree grew near the edges of a section which opened out into a pool where the water flowed much more slowly; this must be the place where Dayne fished. It would be perfect for a picnic, she thought, vowing to organize one, hopefully before he left on the cattle drive, as a special treat.

Thinking about a midnight swim with him had heat suffusing her body.

A family of ducks swam out from behind a large clump of reeds and floated along as if they didn't have a care in the world. Most probably they didn't. It was so peaceful; she could have stayed here for hours only, there wasn't time, as chores beckoned.

She wanted to have everything done before her confrontation with Frankie.

Chapter Fifteen

Dayne had only been gone for a few days and Anna was shocked at how badly she missed him. How could a sensible schoolteacher fall in love so quickly? He had never said in as many words what he felt for her in the first few days of their marriage, although he had shown it in many ways. The night before he left, as she lay in his arms, he finally said the words she had craved to hear. "I love you, Anna, with all my heart."

Instantly she reciprocated by saying, "I love you, Dayne, and always will."

Tears formed at the back of her eyes. In vain she tried to blink them away as Dayne rode off. She had to physically restrain Frankie from throwing herself at him. Whatever her faults, the child sincerely loved her father.

"We must be brave and resolute, so pa won't ride away feeling too upset at leaving us behind. We don't want him worrying about us while he's gone. He'll have to cope with enough problems as it is, without us adding to them," she told the child.

Anna stopped from specifically mentioning the dangers he might be exposed to. Cattle drives could be dangerous, and men were sometimes killed in stampedes or river crossings. She didn't delude herself on this point. Dread slithered along her spinal cord.

She and Frankie were now getting along reasonably well, once Anna discovered the way to get the little girl on her side. She was bossy for a child of such tender years, and if she thought she ruled the roost, things ran smoothly. It was the coward's way out and Anna secretly despised herself for it. But a woman must do what a woman must do, as Miss Simkin at the academy, always used to say.

Because it was Saturday, Frankie didn't need to attend school. Midafternoon, she came rushing inside screaming at the top of her voice. "He's back. He's back."

Anna almost collapsed with relief. "Your father is home?" Oh, thank you, God, for returning him safely to me.

"No, not, pa. Rascal."

"Rascal?"

"Our bull. The one who was stolen has come back. I herded him into the corral for now and gave him some hay."

"That's good, your father will be pleased. I wonder where's he's been hiding all this time?"

"Someone stole him and he escaped because he's such a clever bull. Pa hand raised him because his mother died a couple of days after he was born and none of the other cows would give him any milk."

"Do you think we should put him in with those cows your father rounded up?"

Frankie gnawed her bottom lip, just as Dayne did when he was pondering a situation. "He might make them have calves."

"I don't think your father would mind that under the circumstances, it's not as if it's a big herd and you do have a good water supply here, which means plenty of feed all year round. He's desperate to build up his herd again and Rascal would be the bull to do it."

"Yeah, I think we should. I'll saddle my horse and take him to the cows. It will be easier and safer that way."

"Are you sure it won't be too dangerous? Maybe I should go with you," Anna said worriedly, even though Frankie was a competent rider.

"Rascal doesn't know you and might get frightened. He knows me because I used to hand feed him sometimes. He even lets pa pat him, well, when he isn't near the cows."

“I’ve never heard of a tame bull before, still, if your father hand raised him, he obviously still remembers.”

“He does because pa and I still give him treats sometimes. He loves molasses.”

Rascal was the strangest bull she had ever heard about. Still, it was to their advantage for the animal to be tame enough for them to deal with him without a man’s help. Once she heard from Dayne and had a forwarding address for him, they could write to him and give him the good news. Maybe now the bull had returned he would come home. His hopes of finding his herd would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, because the brands would have been changed by now and they could be scattered all over the countryside.

Next week, when Frankie was at school, Anna decided she would drive into town to buy some essential supplies. Dayne had left a few dollars and told her he had an account at the general store and to use it to purchase what they needed.

Hearing a loud bellow through the open window, Anna dashed on to the porch and saw Frankie riding behind a huge black bull. Her heart leapt into her mouth. The beast only had to turn around and charge them and both horse and child could be killed. What had she been thinking to allow such a thing? If something happened to Frankie it would destroy Dayne.

Perspiration formed on her brow then trickled down her cheeks. She wanted to dash out after them, yet couldn’t, in case her sudden movement frightened the bull and he turned on them. Those couple of hundred yards, until Frankie reached the start of the fenced pasture where the cows grazed, could have been miles. Her mouth dried up and she clung to the porch post to keep standing upright. “Please, God, don’t let anything happen to her.” Over and over, she repeated the desperate prayer inside her head.

Frankie leaned down and opened the wooden gate and with a bellow Rascal trotted in without a backward glance and headed over toward a group of cows. He was obviously a

ladies' man and an impatient one. Anna laughed with relief while her heartbeat returned to normal.

Maybe she could get Frankie to help her bake a cake, that was a safe thing to do. Before her shocked eyes, the child wheeled the horse around and galloped in a different direction. Where was she off to now?

The responsibility of looking after a child and a ranch on her own was frightening. Thankfully, she was not weak or inexperienced, although it was an awesome responsibility she had taken on.

Lest Frankie think she was spying, Anna returned inside and picked up some darning, all the while keeping an eye on the window so she could know when the child returned.

Tomorrow, they would attend church. She had missed not going, having been a regular worshipper in San Francisco.

As Dayne and Frankie had known the preacher who married them, it was obvious they had attended Sunday service regularly before her arrival on the scene.

Glancing over at the partially closed door, she missed seeing Dayne's hat and slicker hanging there. It was the small things she noticed the most, like Dayne's boyish grin, the patience he had with his daughter, his strength and determination when it came to his work. He had a tender side, too. Just a fleeting touch of his hand against her cheek as he walked past caused the blood to pound in her veins. The way he stared at her like she was a tasty morsel he wanted to devour and his tenderness in their marital bed.

Oh, Dayne, how am I going to cope without you for so long? He had only been gone a few days, yet it felt like months. She had never realized the pain and ecstasy involved when you loved a man with all your heart.

Chapter Sixteen

Dusk was falling as Dayne finally rode into the drover's camp. It had taken him longer than he anticipated to catch up with them. They had obviously made good time with the herd because the conditions were favorable. His heart had dropped to his boots on reaching the rendezvous and finding them gone. Still, they had left a clear enough trail for him to follow.

Sleeping out on his own had never worried him before, now it did. He missed Anna so much he could scarcely believe it. The perfume of her skin, her soft, sweet body. Having always suspected his marriage to Mary had left a lot to be desired, now he knew for certain it was true. To be brutally honest she had probably been as disappointed with their marriage as him. The only glue holding them together had been mutual respect and Frankie. Unwittingly, Miss St. George's selfishness had been a blessing because it had brought him Anna.

Hopefully, she and Frankie would be getting along better now. Not having him around would probably help because his daughter wouldn't be jealous of any attention he paid to his wife. He had tried not to be overtly affectionate in Frankie's presence, even though it was hard trying to keep his hands off his beautiful new bride, when all he wanted to do was touch and kiss her.

"Hey, Dayne, you made it," Rusty Urquhart, the ramrod, strode up to him and they shook hands. "We were beginning to think you'd gotten lost."

"No, you left such a clear trail, even a half blind man could follow it. I got married since I signed up for the drive, that's why I was a bit late in getting here."

"I understand." Once Dayne dismounted near one of the wagons Rusty thumped him on the back. "You always said you wouldn't bother getting married again."

Dayne grinned. "A man is allowed to change his mind, isn't he?"

"I guess so. Stow your gear in the back of the supply wagon then I'll take you to meet the boss, Fred Mawson."

"What's he like?"

Rusty scowled slightly. "He's the man who owns the cattle. The day before yesterday, he had one almighty row with the trail boss who quit on the spot."

"What!" Dayne could scarcely believe his ears. Trail bosses didn't quit in the middle of a drive. Instinct told him there was something not quite right about this situation. The hair on the back of his neck suddenly prickled.

"Don't worry about it, Fred is competent to take charge. Well, they are his beeves, so he won't let anything go wrong. It would cost him too much money."

A tall, slightly overweight man lumbered over to them. His tanned face had the texture of dried out leather and his eyes were a little too closely set for Dayne's liking. It gave the man a sly look which instantly bothered him.

"Fred, this is Dayne Pengelly," Rusty introduced them.

"Howdy, Fred."

"Howdy, you took your time about getting here, didn't you?"

"Yes, I was held up a little, but you did leave early," Dayne said, not wanting to bear the blame for what was only partially his fault.

"Stow your gear, then get yourself some grub. Slim has got it on cooking."

"Yes, I could smell the food. Thanks, I've already stowed my gear."

"We're starting at daybreak tomorrow; I want to get a good few miles in."

"I don't know what the big rush is," Rusty said.

“I want to get into Arizona, then we can ease up a bit.” Fred swung on his heel and left them.

“He can be a pig of a man,” Rusty growled. “But he pays me well, so I do whatever he tells me. A few more jobs like this and maybe I can retire.”

Not if he kept gambling, he wouldn't, Dayne thought. Rusty had once been the Marshal of Dusty Bend until he had been fired for helping himself to money he wasn't entitled to. Rusty had left quietly without a fuss and the unsavory incident had been hushed up. He wouldn't have known only the deputy had told him.

“Come on, Dayne, let's get some grub, I'm hungry.”

“I could do with a good feed myself. I've only had cold pancakes and a few sticks of jerky since I left home. I had planned on catching up with you before this.”

They sauntered over to the chuck wagon to collect their eating utensils, then wandered over to the fire where a large coffee pot dangled from a tripod, and a large pot of aromatic stew was simmering.

“Slim, this is Dayne, he'll be working for us this trip,” Rusty said as the cook stirred the pot.

“Pleased to meet ya.” Slim ladled the food on to Dayne's plate. “Help yourself to a slice of bread and the coffee.”

“Thanks, this smells good.” Dayne sniffed appreciatively.

With his plate in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other he wandered over to where Rusty and several others sat. He much preferred his own company but didn't want to appear rude. Some men could be mighty touchy and take offence when none was meant and he didn't want to cause any discord, especially not on his first night. All he wanted was to do his job, collect his pay and return home without any problems.

Rusty introduced him to the men who acknowledged him with either a nod or a brief howdy, and he returned their greeting in a like manner. He was here to work, not make friends.

“I hope you haven’t put me on night owl duty again,” a young man said. “I’ve done it twice already, not to mention three days riding drag.”

“I haven’t, but I’ll deploy you anywhere I see fit,” Rusty said. “Stop whining, you men are all getting well paid for this job.”

Dayne couldn’t understand why the ramrod and the men appeared to be getting paid more than the expected wage. It didn’t add up. He had a bad feeling about this job and was beginning to regret coming here. Once they reached Hardyville in Arizona, he would collect his pay and head for home as quickly as possible. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be put on drag and eat the cattle’s dust for miles on end. The job was usually reserved for greenhorns, but as he was the last man to arrive, he could hardly complain if he ended up there.

“Do you mind riding drag for a day or so?” Rusty must be a mind reader. “I know you’re an experienced cattleman...”

“I don’t mind doing it for a day or two,” Dayne lied, hating the very thought of being given the worst position any drover could get.

“It’s not too dry, so the beeves shouldn’t kick up too much dust. Your main job will be keeping an eye out for any stragglers,” Rusty went on.

“Yes, I’ll do it.”

Dayne sat with the men and listened to their conversation without adding anything. Apparently, Mawson had bought cattle from a few different ranchers, and kept them at his son’s ranch to fatten up before driving them to the buyer at Hardyville. It was a weird set up; in fact, the whole drive felt strange to him. The uneasy prickling of the fine hairs at the back of his neck started up again. He always acted on his gut instinct, which was screaming at him about something being wrong. But what? He was glad he wore his six-shooter now and wouldn’t be taking it off anytime soon.

In his heightened state of awareness everything seemed to have sinister undertones. He knew Rusty from a few years

ago, but didn't altogether trust him after the unsavory episode in Dusty Bend. A heavy gambler was a man who often needed quick money, making him vulnerable to temptation.

He didn't have to feign a yawn because he was weary after the long ride and number of hours he had put in on the ranch over the last few days. "If you boys don't mind, I might turn in. I've had a long ride."

"Yeah, and he's newly married," Rusty said, causing the other men to snigger. When one man made a suggestive comment, it took all the willpower he possessed to stop himself from ramming his fist down the skunk's throat.

Chapter Seventeen

Fingers of pink had started to spread across the sky when Rusty roused the men. Dayne groaned as he maneuvered himself out of his blanket. He stretched a few times to get the kinks out of his back. He had obviously been sleeping on a soft mattress for far too long.

A few of the men were griping and complaining as they stumbled over to the chuck wagon where hot biscuits, eggs and beans were being served. Dayne helped himself to a cup of coffee first. He certainly needed this to wake up.

As soon as they had finished eating, the men headed for the remuda to collect their mounts and rode off to their various positions. Dayne nodded to the men who were returning to camp after acting as night owls, a job every man detested yet had to do. It was the lack of sleep that was the main problem, out most of the night with the cattle, coming back for a bite to eat and an hour or so of sleep, then having to put in a full day of work.

“You’re too old for this,” he muttered. He didn’t like sleeping in his clothes or going for days on end with minimal washing and only a quick shave, either. You’ve become soft over the last few years, Pengelly, he told himself.

Rusty was right, there wasn’t too much dust being kicked up by the cattle, although he pulled his kerchief up over his mouth just in case. He could live without swallowing a throatful of dust.

A heifer broke out of the pack and made a run for it, quickly followed by a couple more. That’s what he got for not concentrating. Wheeling his horse, he galloped after the escapees and quickly herded them back.

Mid-morning, he passed by a small water hole. It wasn't big enough for cattle to drink from as they would have had to walk through yellow mud to get to it. A few scattered trees and bushes grew along the edges.

A sudden bawling sound had him taking a closer inspection, and he spotted a cow from the herd stuck in the mud. The harder it fought to get out, the deeper its legs sank in the mire. He lassoed it, and it didn't take too long to pull the steer clear. "You foolish beast, you should have known better than to step into mud, you couldn't have been that thirsty," he scolded, giving a snicker for being foolish enough to talk to a cow. What would he have done if the creature had answered him back?

Instead of heading back to the herd, the steer stood near a tree with its head hanging slightly and one of its back legs held at a strange angle. Dismounting, Dayne strode toward it, fearing the leg might be broken. A quick examination told him it was. "I'm sorry, pardner." He patted the steer's neck. "I hate having to put you down, but I've got no choice."

The shot broke the stillness, and as he holstered his gun he checked the brand. His heart thudded against his ribcage; the blood pounded in his ears as fury surged through him. A closer inspection showed the steer to be one of his and the brand had been altered. Mawson was a thieving polecat. He would have to discreetly check some of the other brands, but didn't doubt there would be more of his, and probably some from neighboring ranchers whose cattle had been rustled around the same time as his. Now everything about the strangeness of this drive was becoming clear. He was helping move a herd of stolen cattle. No wonder Mawson was eager to cross the state line and get into Arizona. Did Rusty know? Of course, he would, he answered his own question.

As if thinking about the man, it made him appear. Rusty galloped toward him. The moment he pulled his horse up he leapt from the saddle. "What's going on? I heard the shot."

“I pulled this steer out of the bog and had to put him down because his leg was broken.”

“Yeah, I hate it when that happens.”

A loud crack split the air and instinctively Dayne jumped back as the tree they were near suddenly started to fall. Rusty wasn't so nimble and Dayne grabbed him and shoved him out of the way before the tree crashed to the ground.

It was a miracle they hadn't both been killed. Sweat rolled down Dayne's cheeks. They had cheated death by mere inches.

“Y...y...you saved my life,” an ashen faced Rusty finally got the words out. “I didn't see it starting to topple. The trunk must have been eaten away by white ants.”

“Yeah, I reckon.” Dayne shoved his hands in his pocket so the ramrod wouldn't see them shaking.

“Thanks, Dayne, I owe you.”

“No, you don't. I'm sure you would have done the same for me. The steer I shot was one of mine, part of the herd that was rustled.”

“No, it wasn't.”

“It was. Even though the brand has been altered a little, I can still recognize it. Did you know, Rusty?”

“Well, um, yeah, I guessed some of the herd was gotten unlawfully, but I didn't realize any of them were rustled from you.”

“What were you thinking, getting involved in this kind of illegal racket?” Dayne asked.

“I didn't have much choice, I owed Mawson money and I'm working it off like half the other men here. He owns a gambling den in Reno, and well, you know me.” Rusty grimaced.

“Surely you've realized by now, gambling is a fool's game.”

“Yeah, but it doesn't stop me.”

“I’m going to front Mawson when I get back to camp. He’s not getting away with this. I want my cattle back,” Dayne went on furiously, “then I’ll put him into the law.”

“Listen to me.” Rusty grabbed his arm. “You saved my life, so I owe you. Accuse Mawson and you’ll cop a bullet in the back like the trail boss did.”

“What!” Dayne rocked back on his heels.

“Yeah, he was shot because he realized half the herd was stolen and confronted Mawson. Half a dozen men here are hired guns and one of them drew and shot the trail boss. Of course, no-one saw anything.”

“You should go to the law.”

“I can’t. I owe the money and have to pay or I’m a dead man. As for you, ride out of here as quickly as you can and go back to your wife and kid. If you want to report what happened when you pass by Virginia City, it’s up to you. If Mawson becomes suspicious of you, he won’t ask no questions. Won’t give you any second chances. He’ll order one of his hired guns to shoot you in the back and no-one will see anything, if you get my meaning.”

Dayne got the message, loud and clear. Rusty was right, if he wanted to stay alive, he kept his mouth shut and remained with the herd, and if they happened to be caught, he risked being accused of rustling. Either that, or he rode away and didn’t look back. It went against the grain to run but he had to think of Frankie and Anna. What would happen to them if he were killed?

“You’re right, but how do I get away without raising suspicions?”

“Easy, we’ll be arguing as we ride in. I’ll accuse you of carelessness and you can tell me where to stick my job,” Rusty said. “It’s reasonable, drovers can be volatile, and it’s not as if Mawson is short of men.”

“I guess I’ll have to do it, even though I’ve never liked turning tail and running.”

As they rode along Dayne wondered what he could say and do to make it convincing. Rusty would be fine, he was probably used to subterfuge because of his gambling addiction.

When they reached camp a few of the men had already come back for a quick bite to eat, while Mawson lounged against the supply wagon chomping on an unlit cigar.

“Hey, boss,” Rusty yelled before he even dismounted. “I want this man fired.”

“What!” The cigar fell to the ground. “Why?”

“Incompetence,” Rusty snarled. “I won’t have men who can’t do their job properly.”

“I did my job properly,” Dayne growled as he dismounted. “It wasn’t my fault the steer got bogged in the mud and I had put the poor critter down.”

“You left your post. It took me half an hour to round up those steers that escaped from the herd. If you had been riding drag like you were supposed to be and watching the beeves, instead of mooning about your wife and kid...”

“You’re accusing me of carelessness. I...I thought we were friends.” Dayne only hoped Mawson fell for their act. Men like him had a rat cunning and wouldn’t be easily fooled.

“Yeah, once we sort of were. I want him gone, boss. He’s a danger to the herd and the rest of the men.”

“Well...” Mawson leaned down and picked up the discarded cigar while a few of the men edged closer.

“It’s either him or me, boss! I knew hiring Pengelly was a fool thing to do. A rancher.” Rusty spat on the ground in disgust.

“Well, it’s better than being a filthy, low-down gambler,” Dayne shot back.

“Why, you, you sonofa...”

The next thing Dayne knew, Rusty’s fist connected with his jaw and he almost toppled over, more from shock than the force of the blow. Scrambling to his feet, he let fly with his

fists. By the time one of the men pulled them apart the fight was starting to get serious.

“Right, Pengelly, get your gear and get out,” Mawson snarled. “I won’t have disharmony on my drive.”

“I’m going, but what about my pay?”

“You didn’t do anything,” Rusty sneered. “Except cause trouble. The boss should make you pay for the steer you shot.”

Dayne twisted away from the hands that were restraining him. “I ought to...”

Rusty drew his gun. “You heard the boss, git and don’t come back.”

Muttering obscenities, making sure they were loud enough to be heard by the men closest to him, and feeling ashamed of even thinking, let alone using such vile language, Dayne strode over to collect his bedroll and saddle bags. Once everything was securely in place, he mounted his horse and galloped away, half expecting a bullet in the back.

Chapter Eighteen

Dayne had been gone for over a week and Anna and Frankie had started up a wary friendship. It had probably been born out of necessity in the beginning because there were only the two of them and they needed to work together to survive. She was confident it was strong enough not to be broken by Dayne's return.

Glancing out the kitchen window, she was shocked to see Dayne riding in. His clothes were dusty while the horse was sweat stained. It was obvious they had travelled a long way.

She dashed out of the kitchen as he dismounted near the porch. "You're back. Is everything all right?" She flung herself into his arms, disregarding his dusty, sweat stained clothes.

He didn't speak, just held her close and kissed her with the desperation of a starving man having his first meal in days.

"I've missed you so much," he said, on finally raising his head.

"Me, too."

"Is Frankie all right?"

"Yes, she's been really good. We are kind of friends now, whether it will last or not now you're back I'm not sure. I think it will." Anna suddenly remembered that he was supposed to have been away on the drive for weeks. "How come you're back early?"

"It's a long story. If you make me a cup of coffee and something to eat, oh, and put some water on for me to take a bath, I'll tell you all about it."

"You're not hurt?" she asked worriedly, noticing a slight bruise on his jaw under the dark beard stubble.

“No, I’m angry, not hurt.”

She didn’t question him further even though she wanted to. He just looked too worn out. A long soak in the bathtub would do him a world of good. Maybe she could offer to wash his back. Heat surged through every nerve ending in her body at the thought of doing anything so bold or wanton.

“I’ll have to see to my horse first, we’ve had a long, hard ride.”

“All right, I’ll get the water on and maybe cook you a few pancakes.”

He grinned. “Sounds good.”

After he walked back to the horse, she wondered whether it was her imagination or not because he appeared to be limping slightly. What could have happened to make him return early? Had the trail boss refused to give him the job when he arrived at the herd?

Anna had the pancakes cooked, coffee in the pot ready, and her two largest saucepans were full of water and on the stove when she heard Dayne’s booted feet on the porch. He didn’t come inside, so she guessed he was washing his hands before he entered the kitchen.

As he stepped inside, he sniffed at the air. “Something smells good. I’m starving.”

“Wasn’t the food any good on the drive?” she asked, pouring his coffee then one for herself.

“The food was fine; it was the company.”

“What do you mean?” She placed a plate full of pancakes on the table and he reached for one immediately.

After biting into one, he grinned. “These are good. I’ve been craving some of your cooking.”

She laughed. “Flattery will get you everywhere. Frankie made ginger cookies, so you’ll have to try them. She’s become quite a competent cook since I showed her how.”

“I’m glad you’re getting on better; it worried me thinking you might have problems with her while I was gone.”

She touched his hand. “I’m a little worried about how she’ll behave now you are back to be honest, although I think everything will be fine.”

“I’m sure it will be okay. I’m not up to any fighting or such carrying on at the moment. These last few days have been terrible.”

Anna sat quietly while Dayne told her what had happened.

“They were the ones who stole your cattle? What would be the odds of something like that happening?” she asked in astonishment.

“I don’t know, but it would be a lot. I saw the sheriff in Virginia City and told him everything. He’s going to telegraph one of the towns near the border and see if anything can be done, but he doesn’t hold out much hope.”

“Well, I forgot in the excitement of you coming back. Frankie and I received a pleasant surprise the other day.”

“What is it? I could do with some good news.”

He looked so sad and defeated it nearly broke her heart.

“Your bull has returned.”

“What!” Dayne exclaimed.

“Yes, he just trotted in a few days ago, and Frankie rounded him up. She said he must have escaped from whoever stole him.”

“I can’t believe it. Thank God. If we’ve got Rascal back, I don’t feel quite so bad about things now.”

“Rightly or wrongly, we put him in with those wild cows you rounded up, and I think he got to work pretty quickly. Well, Frankie said he did.”

Dayne grinned. “I hope he was a very busy boy. I can’t believe how well everything has turned out, after all.”

“I just thank God you weren’t killed by those murdering thieves. What will happen to your friend, do you think?”

“I don’t know, but Rusty was always a survivor. If it wasn’t for his gambling he would be a good man, but it’s got such a hold on him, he can’t seem to stop. You should have seen the performance we put on, so I could leave without any problems. Maybe I should have been an actor and not a rancher.”

“No.” Anna squeezed his hand. “I love my rancher just the way he is.”

“So, you wouldn’t love me if I were an actor?” He cocked one eyebrow.

“I’d love you know matter what you did, Dayne Pengelly.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I was thinking maybe I should ride down to the gate and wait for Frankie. I’ll have enough time to clean myself up.”

“I think it’s a wonderful idea, she’ll love it.”

“You come, too,” he said.

“No, I’ll wait here. It’s only fair for Frankie to have you to herself for a little while. I can’t kill the fatted calf, but how about I sacrifice one of the chickens and we’ll have a special welcome home meal for you. I’ll find a pretty dish and Frankie’s cookies can take pride of place on the table.”

“Sounds good. What did I ever do to deserve such a treasure as you, Anna?”

“You’re a good man, Mr. Dayne Pengelly, and I count myself a lucky woman to be your wife.”

They sealed their joyous reunion with a beautiful kiss.

Epilogue

Three years later

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Frankie said to Minnie and Ned, as they arrived at the entrance of the Pengelly ranch.

“See ya tomorrow,” Ned yelled as he galloped off.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Minnie waved as she rode off at a more sedate pace than her brother.

With a slight frown Frankie rode under the archway. She felt sorry for her friends who had a drunkard for a father, and a mother who was so beaten down she meekly did everything her husband ordered.

I’m lucky, she thought. On remembering how terrible she had been to ma when she first arrived at the ranch, shame washed over her. It had taken about six months to feel comfortable about calling Anna ma, now it came naturally.

Their ranch was prospering now. Pa had been able to build up their stock numbers with Rascal’s help, and some of their stolen cattle that had finally been returned. Most of the rustlers had been killed or apprehended by the law, and she didn’t feel one bit sorry for them after all the heartache they had caused. Rusty, the man who pa had once considered a friend, had somehow managed to escape and disappear. Pa always said he wasn’t a bad man, merely a gambler who had let his addiction ruin his life, whatever that meant.

Her and ma had come to a compromise over clothes. She wore the pretty dresses ma sewed for her whenever she left the ranch, but pants and a shirt when she did ranch chores. Dresses weren’t so bad, she supposed. Bobbie Henderson said they made her look beautiful. He was only a year older than her, and lived on a neighboring ranch, so what would he know. Still, it was flattering, she supposed, now she was almost

grown up to have him like her so much. She liked him, too, even if she was only prepared to admit it to herself.

When he had sneaked a kiss during their lunch break, she couldn't believe how much she liked it. Oh, she was used to kissing. Ma and pa did it all the time, and she had always been puzzled by the strange, glazed look ma used to get in her eyes. Now she knew. It meant she liked it – a lot.

Pa was a hard-working, dedicated rancher and thoroughly good man. As for her mother, well, she was hard working, too, kind and generous. Frankie liked that each day, ma always packed extra food in her lunch pail, so she could give some to Ned and Minnie, who often used to come to school with only a couple of pieces of bread to eat.

“Tell them I packed too much and you can't eat it all, and would they mind eating some so you don't have to take it home again. This will keep their pride intact and not make them feel bad.” Ma's words echoed in her head and she knew they were true. How must it feel to wear ragged clothes and not even have a proper lunch? *I couldn't bear it.*

In the distance, she saw ma standing on the front porch holding two-year-old Dayne, who they all spoiled because he was such a beautiful child with his pale auburn hair and green eyes. He didn't have much in the way of the Pengellys when it came to looks, but even at this young age, he had their determination.

As she rode into the front yard, ma had to restrain little Dayne to prevent him dashing out and ending up being trampled by the horse. All he could do was frantically wave his arms and yell out. “Fankie, Fankie.”

She waved to him and rode up to the porch so ma could place him on the horse for a short ride. Quickly her lunch pail and books were exchanged for one small, wriggling brother. This routine had become somewhat of a ritual now. The strange thing was little Dayne always woke up from his afternoon nap in time to greet her.

“How did your day go, sweetheart?” ma asked as she settled Dayne on the horse. Immediately the chubby baby hands wound themselves around the horse’s mane.

“It was good. I’m sorry for being late but we were held up leaving school. Where’s pa?”

“He’s down in the far paddock trying to dig out some of those rocks.”

“I could have helped him if he’d waited until the weekend.”

“I know, but you know how impatient he becomes once he gets an idea fixed in his head.” She smiled indulgently and Frankie knew her mother wasn’t really mad at him. It was strange how her parents never got mad at each other, must be a grown-up thing.

“Once your brother has had his ride, I’ll take him inside and you can take care of your horse in peace. I made ginger cookies today.”

“Yum, my favorites after your lemon drop cookies.”

“Fankie, Fankie.” Little Dayne’s bare feet flailed against the horse. “Faster, Fankie, faster.”

Frankie nearly fell off her horse with the shock. Ma’s mouth hung open in amazement, too, then they glanced at each other and laughed. “Your father probably taught him that word.”

Frankie was proud of her baby brother who was a little cowboy in the making.

Inwardly, she thanked God for her happy family and all the other blessings He had bestowed upon them. At church on Sunday, she would send up an extra special prayer.

The End

If you enjoyed reading this story, a short review on Amazon would be much appreciated.

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About Author

Margaret Tanner is an award winning, bestselling author, who has written over a hundred Historical Western Romance books. Her stories are drama laden and exciting but written with Christian values in mind.

In her earlier writing days, she wrote some Australian Historical Romance and also a few Contemporary Romance novels. These earlier books had a touch of steam in them.

She loves delving into the pages of history as she carries out research for her novels. No internet site is too boring, no book is too old or tattered for her to trawl through, no museum too dusty.

Her love of Westerns came about because of the movies and TV shows of her childhood. Some of her favorite series were Gunsmoke, Bonanza, Wagon Train, and Little House on The Prairie.

Many of her novels have been inspired by true events, with one being written around the hardships and triumphs of her pioneering ancestors. She once spent a couple of hours in an old prison cell so she could write about the chilling cold and fear.

Margaret was a Sunday School teacher for many years. Apart from her family and friends, writing is now her passion.

Margaret is recently widowed. She has three grown up sons and two gorgeous little granddaughters.

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