

Love Inspired HISTORICAL

*Special Delivery
Baby*

SHERRI SHACKELFORD

COWBOY CREEK

Sherry Shackelford
Special Delivery Baby

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Instant Daddy An abandoned baby is the last thing town founder Will Canfield expects on his doorstep. He's not the father—and the mother's unknown. But the precious little girl needs a protector. And Will never backs down from a challenge, even if it means caring for a newborn...or dealing with spitfire cattle driver Tomasina Stone. With her father gone, Tomasina's trail life has ended. Yet becoming a polished city lady feels far out of her reach. All she wants is a place where she'll be appreciated, respected...maybe loved. And the more time she spends helping Will care for the baby, the more she wonders if she's found it. She's never wanted to settle down...but Cowboy Creek—by Will's side—might finally give her heart a lasting home. Cowboy Creek: Bringing mail-order brides, and new beginnings, to a Kansas boom town.

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Содержание

Special Delivery Baby	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	35

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Cowboy Creek: Bringing mail-order brides, and new beginnings, to a Kansas boomtown

“Well, if it isn't Daddy Canfield. Taking your baby for a walk again, I see.”

There was something awfully endearing about a man strolling through the stockyards with a babe in his arms. She'd seen little softness from the men in her life. She'd always had to work harder, ride longer and take more licks than the men. A woman in a man's job always had something to prove.

He jabbed her poster with the tip of his cane. “This Texas Tom person cannot stage a rodeo show in town,” he declared. “Those posters will have to be removed immediately.”

“I don't know who put a burr under your saddle, Daddy Canfield, but you sure are a cranky fellow. Maybe fatherhood doesn't suit you.”

“Fatherhood suits me fine.” He shook his head. “I told you before, I'm not a father. This isn't my baby.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Canfield. But you sure are getting comfortable with that babe in your arms.”

“I'll speak with Texas Tom myself. When you see your boss, tell him I'm looking for him.”

“I might be able to save you some time,” Tomasina declared with a wink. “I'm Texas Tom.”

* * *

Cowboy Creek: Bringing mail-order brides, and new beginnings, to a Kansas boomtown.

Want Ad Wedding—Cheryl St.John, April 2016

Special Delivery Baby—Sherri Shackelford, May 2016

Bride by Arrangement—Karen Kirst, June 2016

SHERRI SHACKELFORD is an award-winning author of inspirational books featuring ordinary people discovering extraordinary love. A reformed pessimist, Sherri has a passion for storytelling. Her books are fast-paced and heartfelt with a generous dose of humor. She loves to hear from readers at sherri@sherrishackelford.com. Visit her website at sherrishackelford.com.

Special Delivery Baby

Sherri Shackelford



www.millsandboon.co.uk

He hath inclosed my ways with hewn stone,

He hath made my paths crooked.

—Lamentations 3:9

To my fellow authors in the series, Cheryl St. John and Karen Kirst, for making this continuity series such a wonderful experience. I hope we can revisit Cowboy Creek in the future!

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Bible Verse](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Kansas, May 1868

Four thousand head of longhorn cattle parading through the center of town kicked up quite a ruckus. Three stories below, countless hooves rumbled over Eden Street, shaking the foundation of the Cattleman Hotel. Above Will Canfield's desk the chandelier swayed, the dangling crystals striking a discordant rhythm. The quaking sent a rippling bull's-eye over his coffee.

A knot settled in the pit of Will's stomach. The cattle drive filled him with a mixture of jubilation and dread. Jubilation because tomorrow the town would reap the financial benefits of thriving stockyards. Dread because cowboys fresh off the trail were known for their carousing and brawling. After four years serving in the Union Army, Will's instincts had propelled him to the rank of captain. The war might be over, but he'd learned to trust his gut. Trouble was coming with this bunch. The drovers were two weeks late, which meant those boys would be chomping at the bit.

The sheriff would have his hands full keeping the peace tonight.

A thin keening sound filtered through the commotion; a mournful squalling like the bleating of a baby goat. Will cocked his head toward the door, hearing only the muted roar of the funeral-slow procession below. His ledger vibrated, and the sharp steel nib of his fountain pen jumped. With a sound of frustration he capped his inkwell. He'd finish the accounts later.

By now most of the town had lined the streets for the astounding spectacle. A new band of drovers meant an infusion of cash, and merchants treated their arrival as a celebration. Earlier, Will had caught the fading refrain of a cowboy band playing "Sweet Nightingale" on dulcimer and fiddle.

As one of the town founders and owner of half the buildings in Cowboy Creek, he should join them. Kicking back in his chair, he threaded his hands behind his head and grinned. Instead of worrying about a bunch of drunken cowboys and the trouble they were bound to cause later, he might as well enjoy his success. All of his plans were falling into place. Along with his friends Noah Burgess and Daniel Gardner, he'd set out to make Cowboy Creek a thriving boomtown, and the steady stream of cattle drives into their stockyards proved their achievement.

The faint keening noise caught his attention once more, and he swiveled in his chair. Movement stirred outside the door. Probably the porter, Simon, with his noon meal. When another moment passed but no knock sounded, a twinge of apprehension skimmed along his spine.

Will absently rubbed his aching leg. A piece of shrapnel, a souvenir from the Battle of Little Round Top, remained lodged deep in his thigh. Fearful of sepsis, the doctors had advised cutting off the limb above the wound. Will had forcefully declined, taking his chances with an infection instead. His risk had paid off. Though saddled with a painful limp, he'd kept his leg and finished out his service in the Union Army.

With his cane propped near the door, Will limped the distance. His temporary rooms took up most of the third floor of the hotel. In the luxuriously appointed suite the furniture was covered in plush burgundy velvet. Forest green damask curtains lined with gold fringe draped the windows and filtered out the afternoon sunlight. The space had been designed to impress, and he'd spared no expense. Putting Cowboy Creek on the map meant courting politicians. And if there was one thing statesmen enjoyed, it was being impressed.

Prosperity had the unfortunate side effect of attracting thieves, as well. Upon reaching the door, Will nudged the kick plate with his foot. His senses on alert, he angled his body and peered into the empty corridor.

Nothing.

He glanced down. A lumpy basket of laundry had been abandoned on his threshold. Scratching the back of his neck, he searched for the person who'd left the hamper. Most likely a new maid had made the mistake. The regular staff knew he sent his washing to Chan Lin, who ran the Chinese Laundry on First Street.

The blankets twitched, and Will nearly leaped out of his skin. Heart pounding, he watched with a mixture of horror and wonder as a tiny infant fist attached to a reed-thin arm poked out from

beneath the smothering mound. Though the explanation was obvious, his mind refused to believe his eyes. Keeping his body distanced, he stretched out his arm, flicked back the edge of the blanket and recoiled.

Two drowsy blue-black eyes peered up at him.

There was a baby in that basket, all right. The child's face was red and wrinkled and capped with a shock of dark hair.

Bracing one hand against the door frame, Will extended his bad leg and crouched then studied the odd sight. "Where did you come from, little...uh, person?"

Was it a boy or a girl? He gingerly lifted the opposite edge of the blanket, revealing a minuscule pair of feet encased in soft pink booties. "Girl."

Abandoning any further exploration, he let the blanket fall back into place. He hadn't survived the War Between the States without learning when a calculated retreat was in order. He was taking those pink booties at their word.

Sitting back, he dragged one hand through his dark hair. Clearly the baby had been deliberately abandoned in front of his door. Since there weren't too many women in town, he considered the handful of suspects. Opal Godwin was pregnant, but there was no way this baby was hers. She and her husband were good people with a thriving business. They'd never abandon their child.

Of the four mail-order brides who'd arrived on last month's train, the widow, Leah, had been four months pregnant with her late husband's child. There was no missing her condition, which ruled out the other three women. If Leah was obvious in her fifth month, how did a woman hide a full-term pregnancy?

As Will considered other possibilities, the infant's face screwed up like an apple left too long in the sun. The sound started off innocuous enough. A quiet mewling that barely registered. All too soon the quaint noise intensified into a boisterous wail. Will's eyes widened at the sheer volume the infant produced. Miniature fists pummeled the air and diminutive pink-swathed feet kicked in frustration.

Growing alarmed, he tentatively reached for the bundle, scooping up several layers along with the infant. The child was impossibly light and small. Even with the enveloping blankets, her entire body nestled into the crook of his elbow.

A flash of movement at the end of the corridor snagged his attention. Not wanting to spook whoever might be hiding in the shadows, Will cautiously searched for the cause of the disturbance. From the corner of his eye he spotted a flicker of blue calico. His discovery was quickly followed by the sound of footsteps hastily pattering down the stairs.

He hesitated only an instant before snatching his cane with his free hand and giving chase. The woman had taken the back way. Planning to block her escape, Will took off in the opposite direction, toward the guest staircase.

As he clumsily navigated his descent, his feet sank into the Oriental carpet overlaying the treads. Mindful of the babe in his arms, he traversed the distance in short order, his bad leg screaming at the sudden exertion. He burst into the lobby and caught a glimpse of familiar blue calico pushing through the crowds. Ignoring his shout, the woman slammed through the brass-lined double doors.

His young porter, Simon, shot him a curious glance as he raced past and followed her outside.

The smell hit him first. A wall of dust polluted with the stench of four thousand animals. Bodies jostled. Men discreetly elbowed each other. Heads bobbed, eyes searching for a better look at the spectacular procession.

In front of the horrified onlookers, the mysterious woman charged straight into the parading line of cattle. Someone shrieked.

In a fraction of a second, the scene descended into chaos. People pushed and shoved. The cattle lowed. The crowd parted. Will's heart lodged in his throat as an enormous steer with a great spread of pointed horns lunged toward them. He ducked behind a boardwalk support beam, shielding the infant with his body, then braced for a devastating blow.

A whoosh of air skimmed past their scanty shelter. He glanced up.

A cowboy riding a brown-and-white paint horse galloped into the pandemonium. In a blur of hooves, the rider dodged lethal horns and redirected the steer. Spooked animals set off in a trot. Displaying singular precision, the talented horse and rider feinted and parried, urging the steers back into line and slowing their frantic pace. When one particularly stubborn bull refused direction, the cowboy wheeled his horse around, nearly sitting the animal on its haunches, and forced the steer into line.

In a matter of seconds the drive was under control. Expelling sighs of relief, the crowd surged forward once more, people tittering nervously about the close call.

Will glanced at the infant in his arms and heaved his own sigh of relief. His mad dash had distracted the baby girl from whatever had set her crying earlier.

As the nimble cowboy moved toward him, upstream among the cattle, a smattering of applause followed his progress. Meaning to thank the man for his timely rescue, Will tipped back his head.

The words died on his lips.

A stunning redheaded woman with brilliant green eyes gazed down at him from atop the paint horse. He stared, transfixed. Those big, expressive eyes weren't just green; they were the purest shade of emerald he'd ever seen. Her hair wasn't just red, either; it was a copper fire, curling in abandon around her shoulders, quelled into submission beneath a drover's hat fastened with a string of leather beneath her chin.

Her amused gaze washed over him like a cool breeze off a mountain spring.

Realizing she expected him to speak, he cleared his throat. "Thank you for your assistance, Miss...?"

* * *

Tomasina Stone extended her arm, presenting the handsome stranger with a hand encased in a fringed leather glove. "Miss Stone, if you're looking for a cap to that question."

She'd seen some peculiar sights in her time. She'd seen a cowboy so lonesome he'd howled at the moon. She'd seen a dog raise an abandoned skunk baby alongside her own pups. Once she'd even seen a river in the Colorado Territory run uphill atop the continental divide. However, never in her twenty-two years had she ever seen a sight this odd.

The man standing on the boardwalk in front of her was holding a baby in one arm and an expensive-looking, silver-handled cane in the other. Despite his peculiar circumstances, the man appeared strangely calm and in charge. As though he'd just finished adding a column of numbers instead of dodging a near mauling beneath the deadly hooves of a longhorn steer.

"Was anyone hurt?" he demanded.

"No one was hurt," Tomasina assured the man. "No thanks to that fool woman who tried to cut across the street. She turned back soon enough. Disappeared into the crowd, so I expect she's fine."

The man anchored his cane beneath his arm and clasped her hand in greeting. His touch was firm without being crushing.

"The name is Will Canfield," he said. "Thank you for your assistance, Miss Stone."

"You sure picked a dangerous place to take your baby for a walk, Daddy Canfield. Might want to reconsider your route next time."

The measured expression on his face faltered a notch. "Oh, this isn't my baby."

Having been raised around men her whole life, Tomasina had never given their looks too much thought. This fellow stood out. He wasn't overly bulky, like some of the cowboys she rode with, or reed-thin, like the bankers in town, but something in between. His beard was trimmed in a precise goatee and his head was bare, revealing his neatly clipped brown hair. He was polite, but there was a clever edge in his dark eyes. This wasn't a man easily crossed.

He reminded Tomasina of her first impression of Cowboy Creek; a mixture of the wild, untamed West with the appearance of cultivation brought by the easterners after the war. There was

something more about him, though; an inherent air of authority. She'd give her eyeteeth if he hadn't once been a soldier, and an officer, by the way he carried himself.

She hoisted an eyebrow. "Reckon who that baby belongs to is none of my business one way or the other." She gestured toward the child. "Judging by how that little fellow's mouth is working, you'd best find his mama soon. Looks like he's getting ready for feeding time"

"It's a girl," Will corrected. "She's wearing pink booties. I checked earlier."

"Is that a fact?" Their exchange was turning into a real doozy. Tomasina tucked away the conversation for the next time the boys were telling tall tales around the campfire. "I think your girl is getting hungry. Better get mama."

"That's the whole problem." The man spoke more to the infant in his arms than to her. "Someone abandoned her. I found her on my doorstep just now."

Yep, Tomasina had seen a lot of strange things in her life, but this spectacle topped them all. "I can't help you there. Any reason the baby's mama picked you in particular? Maybe you should start with all the ladies of your acquaintance."

His face flushed. "I can assure you this child's origins are a mystery."

Oddly enough, she believed him. He had the sharp look of a man who didn't miss a detail. Probably someone had left the baby with him because of his wealth. He definitely appeared well-off. Even Tomasina recognized the expensive cut of his charcoal gray suit and the fine workmanship of his crisp, white shirt.

He glanced over his shoulder and then back at her. "The woman—the one who spooked the cattle. Did you see which way she ran? I think this child belongs to her. If not, then she might have seen something. She was hiding in the shadows when I discovered this little bundle."

"Sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

"Did you get a good look at her?" he persisted. "Would you recognize her if you saw her again?"

"Nope," Tomasina said with a slow shake of her head. Much as she'd enjoy assisting the gentleman, her attention had been directed elsewhere at the time. "Everything was a blur. Like I said before, I was focused on the cattle."

Clearly frustrated by her answers, Daddy Canfield muttered something unintelligible.

He grimaced and held the bundle away from him, revealing a dark, wet patch on his expensive suit coat.

Tomasina chuckled. Oh, yeah, the boys were going to love this one. They'd never believe her, but they'd love the telling. Her pa always liked a good yarn, as well. At the thought of her pa, her smile faded. He'd died on the trail a few weeks back, and they'd buried him in the Oklahoma Territory. The wound of his loss was still raw, and she shied away from her memories of him.

"Fellow..." Tomasina said. "As much fun as this has been, I'd best be getting on."

"Thanks for your help back there," Will replied, his tone grudging. "Your quick action averted a disaster."

The admission had obviously cost him. He struck her as a prideful man, and prideful men sometimes needed a reminder of their place in the grand scheme of things.

"Baby or not," she offered with a wide grin, "it wasn't your life I was saving. I was looking out for the bull. My job isn't protecting greenhorns who don't have the sense to stay out of harm's way. It's getting four thousand head of longhorn cattle safely to market."

"Point taken."

Tomasina smothered her disappointment. His easy capitulation had neatly dodged her goading. She'd best watch herself around Will Canfield. He didn't play by the rules.

His gaze settled on the holster strapped around her hips. "You can't carry your guns in town. There's a sign on the outskirts stating the policy of Cowboy Creek."

"I saw it."

"Then you know you need to check your guns with the sheriff during your stay."

“That’s what the sign says, all right,” she answered evasively. There was no way under the sun she was relinquishing her guns. She’d encountered this sort of policy before, though, and she had a few tricks up her sleeve. “Who’s the sheriff?”

“Quincy Davis.”

“You pay him by the arrest?” she asked.

“That’s how it’s done around here.”

“Excellent.” A sheriff paid by the arrest was a sheriff willing to make a deal. “We’ll see what Quincy Davis and I can work out.”

As a lone woman in a man’s profession, she was constantly on guard. Her guns ensured her safety. Especially now that Pa was gone. He’d warned her it was time to hang up her drover’s boots and settle into a regular job fit for a female. She wasn’t having any of it—then or now. Driving cattle was all she knew. She’d never worn a skirt in her life, and she had no intention of starting now. Her pa’s reputation hadn’t been the only thing protecting her all these years. She’d built up her own name. Once this herd was safely delivered to market, she’d carry on as usual.

Her heartbeat stuttered and her eyes burned. Not exactly the same. Pa was gone. She fisted her hand on her knee and straightened. Swallowing hard a few times, she corralled her emotions. The first rule of being a lone female in a man’s domain was to stay tough.

Will Canfield frowned. “You all right, Miss?”

“Right as rain.”

She hadn’t planned on staying in Cowboy Creek long, but the man standing in front of her piqued her interest. If he didn’t like guns in town, he’d probably balk at the idea of a rodeo show. For reasons she couldn’t explain, the thought of provoking him cheered her.

The baby fussed, and Daddy Canfield awkwardly bounced the bundle in his arms.

Tomasina had to give the man credit. He was clearly out of his element but doing his best all the same. A sentiment she understood all too well. Her pa’s death had left her in charge of the cattle drive, but the position was as hollow as it was temporary. The boys had only stayed on this long because of loyalty to her father. Although they’d finish the job, they’d made it clear they weren’t taking orders from a woman. That meant she’d have to join up with another outfit.

She was a drover by trade and a drover by blood. She’d stay a spell and then hire on with another outfit. Same as always. First she’d stage the rodeo show she and her pa had performed dozens of times before. Let the boys blow off some steam after the long, demanding ride. Same as always.

“Daddy Canfield,” she declared. “Since you don’t like guns, how do you feel about rodeo shows? You know, trick riding and fancy target shooting?”

“Not in my town. Too dangerous.”

“Excellent,” Tomasina replied with a hearty grin.

Yep. She felt better already.

[Chapter Two](#)

“Can you at least tell how old she is?” Will asked beseechingly then caught himself.

This was a baby, not a catastrophe, and there was no reason for panic.

While Leah Gardner examined the child, he stood in the archway of the dining room of her well-appointed house. A lifetime ago in Pennsylvania, he and Leah had been engaged. Their lives had changed drastically since then. A month back she’d married his closest friend and fellow soldier, Daniel.

Will couldn’t be happier for the pair.

Five months pregnant with her late, first husband’s child, Leah was the perfect candidate for caretaker of the baby. Surely she’d see the practicality of his plan once he explained his problem.

Daniel’s wife tilted her head and smiled at him with the warmth of a timeworn friendship. “Relax, Will. You’ll wear a hole in my carpet if you keep pacing.”

He caught sight of the depressions his cane tip had left and mumbled an apology.

“I was only teasing.” Leah sobered. “How is your leg these days?”

“Same as always. But at least it’s there. Opal Godwin said the cane makes me look dashing.”

“Opal Godwin thinks the man on the cigar box is dashing.” Leah’s dimpled smile returned. “Sometimes I wonder if you even need that walking stick or if it’s a convenient excuse to keep people at a distance. Half of Cowboy Creek is intimidated by you and the other half is afraid. Most of the townsfolk think you have a sword or a gun hidden in that cane of yours.”

“I’ve certainly never encouraged the rumors. Although a little healthy respect never hurt a fellow. I won’t be seen as weak.” The walking stick was more than an affectation. His balance suffered without assistance. “At least I can hide my affliction. Not everyone is as lucky.”

“Many men were injured in the war. Their wounds don’t make them lesser men.”

Though neither of them had voiced a name, they were both thinking of the same person. Will pictured Noah and the disfiguring burns that covered his lower left jaw, under his ear and disappeared beneath his shirt collar. “The wounds heal but the scars remain.”

“You couldn’t save them all. Noah’s injuries were not your fault. He lived. As did you and Daniel. Many more did not. I know you worry about Noah, but he’s strong. He’ll find his own way by and by.”

Noah Burgess, a friend and fellow soldier, had brought Will to Cowboy Creek. Noah had staked a claim first and his letters had lured Will and Daniel West. Born a Southerner, Noah had fought harder than any Northerner to prove himself worthy. During the Battle of Little Round Top, while taking the place of a brigadier general felled by a sniper, his gun had backfired. Wounded himself, Will had not been able to reach his friend before the flames had engulfed him. The army had discharged Noah due to his injuries, and he’d made his home in Kansas.

“He keeps to himself more and more these days,” Will said with a frown. “He’ll turn into an irascible old hermit soon.”

“Is that why you decided to order a bride for him without his consent? He’ll have both you and my husband tarred and feathered for interfering. Leave him be from now on,” Leah admonished. “He’ll mend in his own time.”

Her words pricked his conscience. Will was having his own doubts about sending for a bride without informing Noah. At the time, the idea had seemed inspired. They were all celebrating the success of the first bride train and the subsequent marriage between Leah and Daniel. He’d been uncharacteristically optimistic. After posting the letter, his enthusiasm had waned almost immediately. Leah was correct. Noah was bound to have their hides once he discovered the interference. At least there were plenty of other eligible bachelors if Noah balked. That thought let Will sleep at night.

“I interfered with you and Daniel,” Will said. “And look how well that turned out.”

“Twisted Daniel’s arm, did you?” She aimed a playful swat in his direction. “I’ll forgive you this once.”

“There was no arm twisting, I can assure you,” Will retorted. “Noah and I only nudged Daniel in the direction he was already heading.”

At the mention of her new husband, Leah’s blue eyes took on a soft, misty look. Will rubbed his knuckles against the recent ache in his chest. Daniel and Leah had found an extraordinary love together. He was happy for them and a little jealous, as well. Their abiding affection was a rare and brilliant thing. If Noah let someone into his heart, he might find something equally lasting.

His buddy’s injuries had taken more than a physical toll. He needed a nudge in the right direction, as Daniel had. Either way, there was no going back now. The letter had been posted. When Constance Miller arrived, Will and Daniel would explain the situation. They’d smooth over any awkwardness.

“I’ll forgive you because I adore Daniel with every fiber of my being.” Leah touched her cheek. “I wasted so much time when the perfect man was right there waiting for me all along.”

Her head bent, and Will admired the pale gold hair caught in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. “We were all young and foolish.”

“Perhaps children are supposed to be foolish,” she remarked lightly. “We’ve all changed.”

Growing up in their hometown in Pennsylvania, he and Daniel and Leah had been inseparable. When Will and Leah had gotten engaged, they’d been little more than children making the awkward transition from playing with slingshots and splashing through streams into adulthood. The war had changed everything.

The war had changed everyone.

He and Leah had gradually drifted apart during the years of his enlistment. The fragile threads of their romantic connection had not survived the physical distance between them. Deep down, both had known they were best suited as friends and nothing more.

During their years serving together in the army, Will had realized Daniel’s feelings for Leah had been far deeper than his own had ever been. With death constantly looming near, Daniel had never given voice to his yearnings, and Leah had eventually married another man.

Will had not expected to see Leah ever again, so her arrival in town had been a shock. With the original collection of dilapidated shanties growing into a thriving community, the three friends soon realized Cowboy Creek needed women to flourish. Only four women had arrived on that first train and, much to Will’s amazement, Leah had been one of the prospective brides. Her ill-fated marriage had abruptly ended when her husband had been shot by a jealous spouse. Pregnant with her late husband’s child, she’d needed to remarry quickly.

Will’s lips quirked. He recalled how he, along with Noah, had urged Daniel and Leah to wed. Their intervention had been inspired. After a rocky start, Leah and Daniel had admitted their feelings, both past and present, and were now more in love than ever. Their success gave him hope that Noah would find the same.

Leah cooed at the baby propped on her rounded belly. “This sweet little thing can’t be more than a few days old. She appears healthy enough. Her mother must have nursed her.”

“What now?” Will spread his hands. “How do we feed her? What do we feed her?”

“I have some glass bottles. As you well know, I’d planned on serving as the local midwife, and I brought along a few supplies when I came to town.” She patted her stomach. “Of course, any work will have to wait until after this baby is born.”

Normally a whirling dervish of activity, Leah instead called for the maid and dispatched her instructions. The telling gesture left Will uneasy. Though married to her first husband for several years, Leah had been unable to carry a child successfully to term. In deference to her health, Daniel treated her with kid gloves. He’d hired the undertaker’s spinster sister to help out, and his friend kept a close and loving eye on Leah. He’d probably pitch a fit if he knew Will was here pestering her about the abandoned baby instead of letting her rest.

Narrowing his gaze on the infant, Will considered his options. “The hotel restaurant has fresh milk delivered each day.”

“That’s probably best. With the general lack of women in this town, I don’t suppose Booker & Son carries pap. Might be something you should look into before long.”

“I haven’t checked, but you’re probably right. We haven’t had much call for infant supplies.”

When he and the other two men had invested in the town, they’d anticipated most everything. They’d built a church and a school. They’d even hired a doctor trained in one of the finest schools back east. Too late, they’d discovered the doctor hadn’t been as interested in delivering babies as he was in other forms of medicine. Leah’s arrival was fortuitous in more ways than one.

They’d thought of a lot of things but, being men, they hadn’t thought of everything.

Leah lifted the baby and grimaced at the damp spot on her skirt. “You’ll need more nappies, as well.”

She rested the infant on the dining room table and peeled back the layer of blanket.

The basket had been stuffed with a supply of miniature outfits. Tiny dressing gowns of yellow calico had been carefully pressed and folded then nestled beside crocheted booties and knit caps. The loving craftsmanship of the work and the expense of the materials were obvious.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” he said. “Someone planned for this baby. Someone sewed that clothing. Someone carried this child for nine months. Why abandon her on my doorstep?”

“Because you’re wealthy.” Leah shrugged one shoulder. “Because you’re one of the town founders. Because you’re known for your compassion. You’d seem a logical choice to me.”

“I’m not compassionate,” he grumbled. “And none of that explains why a mother would abandon her baby.”

Leah tucked a stray lock of blond hair behind her ear. “There are all sorts of reasons. You know that full well. Maybe the woman’s husband passed away. Maybe she didn’t have a husband. Maybe she fell on hard times.”

Will stared in rapt fascination as Leah rapidly divested the squirming infant of her wet nappy and deftly exchanged it for another. The maid returned with the washed and filled bottle.

“It’s Miss Ewing’s day off.” Leah motioned toward a rocking chair set at an angle in the corner of the dining room. “You’ll have to feed the child while I check on supper.”

Will limped back a pace. “I should be going...”

“Oh, no, you don’t.”

She moved around him, crowding him toward the chair until he had no other choice but to sit.

Reluctantly accepting the wiggling bundle, he appealed to Leah’s better nature. “Can you watch her for a few days? Just until I decide what to do?”

“I’d help you, Will. You know I’d do anything for you.” She protectively cupped her growing stomach. “But I can’t right now.”

Tears pooled in her eyes, sending a kick of guilt straight to his gut.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

He knew full well how much she wanted her baby born healthy. How frightened she was that something might happen.

“I’m a watering pot these days.” Leah wiped at the moisture on her cheeks. “I don’t mind the asking as long as you respect my answer. You have more money than you know what to do with and enough space in your suite of rooms to house an orphanage. Hire someone. Then wait. There’s a good chance the mother will come back for her child. Sometimes...sometimes people make decisions they regret.”

Her words were an obvious reference to her past. As she handed him the bottle, he touched her hand. “We’re all praying for you, Leah.”

“I know. This time is different. Everything feels different. Everything feels...right.”

She did look beautiful. Joyful. Yet despite their past connection, the only thing he felt for her was a deep, abiding friendship. “You and Daniel will have a whole passel of children before you know it.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for.” Her expression turned sympathetic. “I’m sorry about what happened with Dora.”

“You did me a favor. There’s no need for an apology.”

Until a few weeks ago he’d been engaged to Dora Edison. Leah had overheard Dora bragging about how she was marrying Will for his money. When he’d confronted his fiancée, Dora had eventually admitted her true motivation. The breakup had been more humiliating than heartbreaking. While he’d enjoyed Dora’s company before he’d discovered her deception, he’d never looked at her the way Daniel looked at Leah. Perhaps he simply lacked the capacity for an abiding love.

His thoughts drifted toward a certain stunning redhead dressed in leather chaps, and he quickly marshaled them. That particular female was a thorn in his side, and he’d already had enough aggravation to last a lifetime.

He'd vowed to do everything in his power to keep the country from sinking into war once more. To that end, he'd dedicated his life to politics. The peace between the northern and southern states was uneasy at best. The country was torn apart, and only men who understood war were fit to put it back together again. He'd devoted himself to the cause of former soldiers as well as the widows and orphans they'd left behind. Miss Stone with her six-shooters strapped to her hips was nothing but an example of disorder and chaos. She was a distraction he'd rather avoid.

Will wanted peace and quiet and children to dandle on his knee. He did not want to get mixed up with a beautiful vagabond who possessed magnificent horsemanship skills. Her clear and quick thinking had averted a disaster, and for that he would always be grateful. But she was too clever by half and would make his life miserable. Gorgeous, intelligent, quick-witted and capable, Miss Stone had already occupied too much of his time.

The infant in his arms howled, yanking him back to the present. "She's hungry, all right." Will chuckled. "And letting us all know it."

"Babies have a way of getting what they want. You'll find that out soon enough."

Will accepted the bottle of warmed milk from Leah. The infant puckered her lips then stuck out her tongue, pushing it away. He retracted his hand, and her tiny mouth worked. Smiling at her confusion, he replaced the tip against her lips again. With only a little more coaxing, the child ceased her fussing. Having finally accepted the bottle, the baby suckled greedily.

Once she'd settled, Leah quietly left the room. Will braced his boot heel against the floor, gently rocking his chair. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been around an infant. There were plenty of camp followers during the war, but he'd discouraged the practice around his own regiment. The battlefield was no place for women and children.

Sometime during the war, death had gotten its teeth into him and hadn't let go. He'd seen so many boys die, he'd lost track of the count. The realization kept him up at night and haunted his dreams when exhaustion finally overtook him. He'd been responsible for those lads, and they'd fought and died beneath his command. He'd penned letters to their families when there was time and signed the letters his secretary had prepared when there wasn't. There'd been far too many letters; their sentiment weak and inadequate next to the tragedy they represented.

Cowboy Creek was a fresh start. Too many soldiers couldn't go home again, their farms and livelihoods destroyed. Some of them, like Noah, had needed a fresh start. They'd traveled west instead, building new lives and putting the past behind them. He'd give those men a chance at least. Despite all the work he'd done and the money he'd made, the voices of all the soldiers he'd lost whispered in his dreams. Was it hundreds? Was it thousands? He'd never know, and that was his penance. Cowboy Creek was his atonement.

His hold on the bottle grew lax, and the babe in his arms turned toward him, her rose-petal lips working.

Will adjusted his grip. "All right, little lady, I'm paying attention."

The boundary between life and death was incredibly fragile. This child represented everything he'd fought for...what he was rebuilding. She represented a better future. If he kept her safe, cared for her and saw that she found a loving home, then the deaths of all those boys would not have been in vain. This little girl, born in a time of peace, represented their sacrifice. He'd settle up whatever debts he had left when his own time came.

His chest tightened with emotion. "What shall we call you?"

His first officer had been killed during the Battle of the Wilderness. Collecting the soldier's belongings, he'd discovered a picture of an infant swathed in her christening finery. The name "Ava" had been scrawled across the back. The memory of that photo had stuck with him.

"How about Ava? Someone told me the name means 'bird.' One day you'll fly away from here. Won't you, little bird?"

The infant's eyes blinked slower and slower. The frantic suckling grew lax. She was utterly defenseless, utterly dependent. A fresh sense of purpose filled him. If he could protect her innocence, maybe then he'd be whole again.

Leah tiptoed into the room and peered at the sleeping baby. "She looks all tuckered out. How about you?" she whispered. "How was the cattle drive this morning? I heard the excitement all the way from Eden Street."

"Much as you'd expect," he grumbled. "We'll be cleaning up the mess and repairing the street for days. Sheriff Davis already has three of the cowboys in jail drying out."

"Cattle built this town, Will." She straightened and crossed her arms. "You can't run the drovers out."

"The railroad will put an end to the cattle drives, mark my words. We'll have to find another way to survive eventually."

"The railroad?" she scoffed. "I don't see thousands of head of cattle riding the rails."

"Change is coming whether we like it or not. The railroads are already experimenting with icebox cars."

"I hope the change doesn't come too soon. The stockyards account for a large portion of our income." Leah's expression remained skeptical. "Whatever the future holds, those drovers are here now. And you'd best make them feel welcome. The merchants in town need their business."

Will recalled the talk he'd heard on the way over about a rodeo show the cowboys were planning. "They can spend all the money they want here, but I'm putting a stop to any rodeos they're planning. All the boys can talk about is this sharpshooter called Texas Tom. There's liable to be other events, as well, and bull riding is too dangerous." He tucked the blanket more snugly around the baby. "The last time the drovers held a show, the doc fixed up two broken legs and administered more stitches than I can count. If one of those bulls breaks free, Miss Stone won't be around to save the day."

"Miss Stone? Who is Miss Stone?"

"No one. Never mind," he mumbled. That woman was trouble, and he always avoided trouble. Especially beautiful trouble with dazzling green eyes. "I'll shut down Texas Tom before the week is out. I don't want the new brides trampled before they find husbands. We promised them a nice, safe town. A good place to raise a family. I can't risk a stray bullet."

"I see there's no changing your mind," she said with a plaintive sigh. "What about the baby? Have you decided what to do about her?"

"Yes," Will replied resolutely.

He'd never been one to shy away from a difficult decision, and he wasn't about to start now.

* * *

A week after her arrival in town, Tomasina dipped her push broom into the bucket of glue and shook off the excess. The printer had done a fine job with the posters, even though she'd rushed him. Normally, James Johnson, a fellow drover who usually rode with their outfit, traveled ahead and arranged for the printing.

James had been like a son to her pa, and Tomasina treated him like a brother. Her brush stilled midair. Something had been troubling James since their trip to Harper, Kansas, last September. He'd been so distracted, he'd nearly been gored. Worried about his safety, they'd argued and James had ridden with another outfit this time out. She'd discovered James was in Cowboy Creek, as well, but he'd been avoiding her. She sure hoped the kid had finally gotten his head on straight or he'd be no use to anyone.

Tamping down her annoyance, she spread the thick adhesive on the outside wall of the stockyards' office then reached for another poster and smoothed it over the glue.

Yep. A shoot 'em rodeo show was a prime diversion. Judging by that handsome, uptight fellow she'd met that first day, the whole town was crying out for a little entertainment. A place called Cowboy Creek deserved some excitement. A rodeo and a sharpshooter contest were just the thing.

A sound caught her attention, and she whirled. Her jaw nearly dropped before she caught herself. “Well, if it isn’t Daddy Canfield. Taking your baby for a walk again, I see.”

There was something awfully endearing about a man strolling through the stockyards with a babe in his arms. An unexpected rush of tenderness washed through her. She’d seen little softness from the men in her life. She’d always had to work harder, ride longer and take more licks than the men. A woman in a man’s job always had something to prove. These past few weeks without her pa had taken a toll on her endurance. She didn’t want to be better than everyone else. She simply wanted to be good enough.

Will didn’t look as though he cared a whit what anyone thought of him. He looked...well, he looked rather appealing, all things considered.

Tall and commanding, he wore his charcoal suit with dapper charm.

Her goodwill lasted until he jabbed her freshly glued poster with the tip of his cane, ripping the damp paper. “This Texas Tom person cannot stage a rodeo show in town,” he declared. “And a sharpshooter contest is out of the question.”

“You’re not much for small talk, are you?”

“No guns. I believe I mentioned that before.”

“I believe you did. You even posted your own signs, if I recall.” She ran her hands over the jagged tear, mending the edges. “Have a little care. These posters don’t come cheap.”

“Those posters will have to be removed immediately.”

“You don’t have the authority to give me orders.” She planted her hands on the gun belt strapped around her hips. “The sheriff enforces the law around here.”

Quincy Davis, the sheriff of Cowboy Creek, had already proved himself rather cooperative. He’d even accepted a week’s worth of fines levied against her for wearing her guns in town, saving her several trips to his office.

Will Canfield shook his head. “I understand your reasoning for hosting the show, but we’ve had problems in the past. Serious injuries. Last time we had a sharpshooting contest, Walker Frye dug two bullets out of the side of the livery wall. What if someone had been standing where those bullets struck? We’ve got more settlers with children living in town.”

“I don’t miss what I aim for.”

“No one is perfect. Eventually, you’ll miss.”

“No one will get hurt.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ve seen this show staged a hundred times before. Never had a problem yet.”

“You need permission to put up those posters, as well.”

“You got a rule for everything, don’t you, fellow?” The glue on her palms had adhered to her gun belt. She pried her hands loose and rubbed them together, pilling the adhesive. “You must keep mighty busy caring for that baby of yours and making up all those ridiculous rules.”

“If we don’t limit the number of posters people hang, they wind up three and four deep. The fence behind the Drover’s Place collapsed beneath the weight last spring.”

“Then build a stronger fence.”

The frown line between his brown eyes deepened. “I don’t know what you’re used to, but this is a civilized town.”

He was probably one of those foolish men who considered a woman in trousers a disgrace. “A civilized town, huh? Where the ladies wear the skirts and the men wear the pants? I wouldn’t be too picky if I was you, seems like this town is short on ladies already.”

“This has nothing to do with your attire,” he snapped. “It’s about following town law. If everyone thought they were the exception to the rule, there wouldn’t be much point, would there?”

She lifted her chin a notch. “I have permission to hang these posters. Just ask the fellow who manages the stockyards.” A couple of silver dollars in his outstretched palm hadn’t hurt her case. “He’ll tell you.”

“Daniel Gardner, the owner of these stockyards, might have something different to say than his foreman.” Will flashed her a stern look. “You’ve wasted your time and Texas Tom’s money. He’s not putting on a rodeo show in this town. All they do is incite the cowboys to shoot guns and carouse. Like I said before, I won’t have someone shot by a stray bullet.”

“I don’t know who put a burr under your saddle, Daddy Canfield, but you sure are a cranky fellow. Maybe fatherhood doesn’t suit you.”

“Fatherhood suits me fine.” He shook his head, uttering something that sounded suspiciously like a growl. “I told you, I’m not a father. This isn’t my baby.”

The wind shifted, and she caught his distinct scent—a mixture of starch and bay rum. For once she didn’t find the odor nauseating. The boys sometimes doused themselves with the stuff before going into town, but Will showed more restraint. He actually smelled quite nice.

She’d had the chance to study plenty of men in her life, and they all fell into certain categories. There were the bullies and the heartbreakers, the men who stuck to themselves and the men who always seemed to have a crowd around them. Will was unlike any of them. He kept her off balance, and she wasn’t used to being off balance.

Her pulse fluttered. “Whatever you say, Mr. Canfield. But you sure are getting comfortable with that babe in your arms.”

His caring for the child set him apart, as well. None of the men of her acquaintance would have ever been caught dead holding a baby.

Her father had been a good man, and he’d loved her, but he was a hard man. There’d been no time for coddling in the Stone family. He’d treated her like one of the boys. Come to think of it, everyone treated her like one of the boys. Maybe that’s what was different about Will. Even though he was clearly annoyed with her, he regarded her with a deference she was unaccustomed to receiving.

“I’ll speak with Texas Tom myself.” Will tucked the sleeping infant into the crook of his elbow. “When you see your boss, tell him I’m looking for him.”

Tomasina grinned up at him. If having a baby dropped on his doorstep wasn’t shocking enough, he was about to receive another surprise. “I might be able to save you some time.”

“Do enlighten me.”

He’d fight her tooth and nail on the rodeo, and she was going to enjoy every minute of their sparring. He’d lose eventually. She had the sheriff in her pocket, after all.

Daddy Canfield had finally met his match.

“I’m the one you’re looking for,” Tomasina declared with a wink. “I’m Texas Tom.”

Chapter Three

Tomasina marched down the boardwalk, her spurs jingling with each step. Quincy Davis had refused her appeal. The rodeo show was off unless she convinced Will otherwise. Daddy Canfield had obviously gotten to the sheriff first. With no other choice, she was bearding the lion in his den.

Once inside the Cattleman Hotel, she flipped off her hat. The strings caught on her neck and she adjusted the knot. If Will Canfield thought she was canceling her rodeo show on account of a silly town ordinance, he was about to be sorely disappointed.

She paused in front of an enormous oval mirror framed with gold filigree. Turning this way and that, she studied her reflection. She wasn’t a bad-looking woman, but she was definitely rough around the edges. Since she’d never seen Will with a hair out of place or stains on his crisp white shirt, she’d better put her best foot forward.

As she pondered how to improve on her appearance, a porter hustled by holding a tray topped with several glasses and a pitcher of water.

Tomasina snagged the young man’s coat sleeve. “Hold up there a minute.”

She grasped the pitcher, leaving the porter struggling with his unbalanced tray, then poured a measure of water into her palm and replaced the pitcher.

“That’ll be all, fellow.”

Ignoring the porter's glaring reflection, she rubbed the water between her palms then smoothed her hands over her hair. For one brief, shining moment her curls remained plastered against her head. The next instant they sprang free, leaving her hair damp and more disordered than before.

Tomasina shrugged. Her hair was a lost cause. At least the rest of her looked presentable enough. She'd worn her newest chaps today instead of the pair with half the fringe missing. Her clothing was freshly laundered and her face was clean. Brushing her hands down her best chambray shirt, she searched for any remnants of her breakfast. She wasn't giving Mr. Canfield any reason to find fault with her.

Feeling almost respectable, she approached the desk.

The young porter scowled. "Can I get you any more water, Miss?"

"Nope. I'm here for Mr. Will Canfield."

"He's busy. Everyone's always busy since that baby arrived."

The porter was young, maybe fifteen or sixteen, and handsome in the sort of way that probably sent the young girls swooning. He kept his dark hair slicked back neatly beneath his round cap, and his bottle-green uniform was crisply pressed, his collar starched and white. He had the appearance of someone who liked to keep things orderly. From what Tomasina had heard, newborns had a way of creating all sorts of chaos and disorder.

"You don't say." She leaned forward and pitched her voice low. "What if I told you I had information about a certain abandoned baby?"

The young man's eyes lit up like a kid let loose on penny candy. "Third floor. Room 311. Up the stairs and take a left. The sooner that infant is out of the hotel, the better. That child has thrown the whole place into an uproar. We've lost our best housekeeper to babysitting duties, and now the maids are running amok."

Tomasina grinned. This was even easier than she'd expected. "I'll see what I can do."

The porter proudly straightened his cap. "The name is Simon if you need anything else."

She touched her forehead in thanks and pivoted on her heel. She hadn't lied. Not exactly. She'd asked the young man a what-if question, and he'd replied. No harm in that.

Her conscious clear, she took the stairs two at a time. Huffing by the third floor, she braced one hand against the wall and pressed the other against the stitch in her side. They must have high ceilings on all the floors, because it sure was a long way up those stairs. As she caught her breath, a distinctive racket filled the corridor.

Even if she hadn't known the room number, there was no mistaking Will's suite. She followed the sounds of the squalling baby and rapped on the solid wood panel.

The door swung open, revealing Will with a familiar, red-faced bundle in his arms. "It's about time." He caught sight of her, and his hopeful expression fell. "Oh...it's you. Never mind."

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"Clearly." He elbowed shut the door.

"Not so fast." Tomasina stuck her booted foot over the threshold. "You and I have business."

"I believe we concluded our business yesterday, Miss Stone. Or shall I call you Texas Tom? I should have realized it was you immediately." He grimaced as he clutched the squirming, angry baby tighter in the crook of his arm. "Except I've been distracted lately."

"Tomasina will do just fine." She scowled. "You have no right to interfere with my rodeo show."

"The town ordinance is clear, as I'm sure Sheriff Davis informed you."

"I'm guessing you spoke with him first."

The sheriff's previous conciliatory mood had taken a sudden turn for the worse. It hadn't taken a genius to figure out who had changed his mind.

Will moved deeper into the room, and she followed close on his heels.

Blowing out a low whistle, she gaped. His suite was positively dandified. Fancy fringed curtains the shade of pine needles hung from the windows, and the furniture was covered in wine-colored

velvet fabric. She'd never seen the White House, but she imagined this room was fit for a president. Well, except for the nappies strung out to dry across the archway and the blankets and tiny clothing littering the furniture and the floor. She didn't suppose those were the usual accoutrements of the White House. Despite the mess, peeking out from beneath all that clutter were some fine pieces of furniture. Having lived most of her life out of a tent, she savored the feel of the cushy rug beneath her feet.

"You sure live fancy," she declared.

"This is only a temporary residence."

Tomasina collapsed onto a tufted chair and draped her arms over the sides. "I could get used to some temporary quarters like this."

Closing her eyes, she let her body sink into the cozy stuffing. Rarely had she enjoyed such luxury. Chairs of any kind were scarce on the trail; she preferred traveling light. Most times she sat on the hard ground. Occasionally she rustled up a stump or a rock. This chair was pure bliss. Not even the wailing baby could put an immediate damper on her enjoyment.

"Looks like you have your hands full." She opened one eye and squinted. "Where's your housekeeper? The porter said she was helping out."

"Not that it's any of your business, but Mrs. Foster is on her lunch break."

"You ought to hire someone else. I hear the maids are running amok."

"Simon talks too much." Will leaned heavily on his cane. "If you must know, the reverend's daughter has offered to assist, as well. She's coming by this evening."

The infant's wailing continued unchecked, and a sharp pain throbbed behind Tomasina's temple. "Word of that baby sure spread fast." She drummed her fingers on the arm of the chair. "You think her mother will ever come back? Most mamas are protective of their young'uns."

"That's what I'm hoping for."

"Then again, maybe she won't. I once saw a heifer reject her calf. Almost killed the poor thing before we separated them."

Clenching his jaw, he glowered down at her. "Your optimism is comforting. Truly. If you've finished cheering me up, you may go."

"I'm not leaving that easy," Tomasina retorted. "About the rodeo..." She leaned forward and raised her voice over the squalling baby. "Look, we've been on the trail for more than three months. The boys just need to blow off a little steam."

"You're a tenacious little thing, aren't you? When cowboys blow off steam, property is damaged."

"I'm not little. And nothing will be damaged. The boys can be a might rowdy, but they're good men. All of 'em. I can vouch for that."

Will quirked a brow. "You can vouch for all of them?"

Okay, he had her there. Tomasina wrapped a curl around one finger. Drovers were a nomadic bunch by nature. While she knew most of the men on her crew, there were always new faces coming and going. "Most of them."

Will barely spared her a glance, his attention now fully focused on the fussy baby. The infant's arms stretched out wide, and her face screwed up. Silent for a breath, she seemed to be struggling for air. Her arms and legs flailed. The next instant she let out an earsplitting wail, her lower lip trembling with the effort.

Will held the baby away from his body and juggled her lightly. "There, there, Ava," he crooned. "There's no need to fuss."

"I didn't know she had a name." Tomasina paused. Giving the baby a name made her more real somehow. Not that the baby wasn't real before. She was just easier to dismiss. "It's a nice name."

"I had to call her something until her mother returns."

“Have you fed Miss Ava lately?” The baby’s distress was getting to her, and Tomasina temporarily abandoned her argument. “Maybe she’s hungry.”

“She has been fed. She has been burped. She has been changed. There is absolutely no reason for this behavior.”

Tomasina stood and peered at the infant’s scrunched-up face. “Did you hear that, li’l missy? Daddy Canfield doesn’t think you’re being reasonable.” Tomasina sighed and reached for the bundle. “Here, let me have her. You’re doing it all wrong.”

Will hesitated for several long seconds before handing over Ava.

He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes and heaved a breath. “I don’t know how such a tiny creature can make such a racket.”

“Maybe she misses her mama.” Tomasina tucked the baby snugly against her body. “I bet your mama misses you, too, Ava.”

Tomasina had only meant to quiet Ava, but a curious warmth enveloped her. Pacing back and forth, something unfurled inside her; a gentle awakening. She’d been around lots of baby animals in her life, and they were all plenty cute. Ava was different. Once she quit her squalling and Tomasina got a good look at her, she marveled at the change. As those beautiful eyes blinked, long, dark lashes swept over plump cheeks. Her chubby hands fisted restlessly against the blanket. Tomasina had never seen such tiny, perfectly shaped fingernails. Ava even smelled good. The infant’s sweet scent teased her senses.

Nuzzling her forehead, Tomasina whispered comforting words. The tune of an old camp song tugged at her memory. Unheeding of Will’s curious stare, she sang softly.

“O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where coyotes howl and the wind blows free
In a narrow grave just six by three—
O bury me not on the lone prairie
It matters not, I’ve been told,
Where the body lies when the heart grows cold
Yet grant, o grant, this wish to me
O bury me not on the lone prairie.
I’ve always wished to be laid when I died
In a little churchyard on the green hillside
By my father’s grave, there let me be,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.”

With each verse, the infant gradually calmed. Ava’s eyes drifted shut, and her breathing grew deep and even.

Will sighed. “I don’t know how you did it, but I thank you all the same.”

“Babies are no different than any of God’s creatures. Everyone wants to know that someone loves them.” Caring for Ava had eased the tension between them a notch. “What will you do if you can’t find her mama?”

His face softened. She sensed that something had shifted in their relationship. They were shared victors of a sort—soothing the savage beast. The baby had given them something in common. Tomasina snorted softly. The baby was about all they were likely to find in common. She couldn’t imagine two more opposite people.

“I always have a plan,” Will said a touch wearily. “First I’ll give her mama the chance to change her mind.”

A grudging respect for the man sifted through Tomasina’s annoyance. After holding the tiny new life, she sympathized with his dilemma. “Sometimes people make decisions they regret later.”

“You’re the second person who’s told me that in the last week.”

“I guess most folks have a regret or two. You better hire some good help.” The baby squirmed, and Tomasina lowered her voice to a whisper. She’d already made herself a new personal rule to never wake a sleeping baby. “You have your hands full with this one. She’s got a mind of her own.”

“I trust your judgment on difficult females.”

Tomasina relinquished the infant and stuck her hands in her back pockets. There was no need to get all soft and squishy over one little baby girl. “I know you’re looking out for Cowboy Creek, but I’m looking out for my crew. They’re gonna let loose one way or the other.”

“The answer is still no.” Will took the seat she’d vacated earlier. “I don’t suppose we’ll be seeing each other again. Best of luck, Miss Stone.”

“Oh, I don’t know...” Tomasina replaced her hat and tightened the strings beneath her chin. “I have a feeling we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other real soon.”

He’d thought he’d won, but she wasn’t giving up the fight just yet.

* * *

Will’s cane kicked up dust with each thudding stride.

Texas Tom had defied his orders.

His anger growing with each step, he followed the festive crowds swarming toward the stockyards. Chatter and laughter swirled around him, and a sense of excitement filled the air. Enterprising merchants had set up booths for food and drink along Eden Street, and knots of people clustered around the offerings. The scent of fresh-roasted nuts teased his nose. Carriages and wagons clogged the way, but no one seemed to mind the wait. The unofficial town band played near the temporary fairgrounds, and the chords of a toe-tapping melody drifted above the chatter.

Will caught sight of his friend Daniel Gardner and picked up his pace.

Daniel loped over then slapped him on the back. “Looks like the whole town turned out for Texas Tom’s Rodeo Show. I hope she’s a crowd pleaser.”

“Then you know Texas Tom is a girl?”

Daniel lifted his hat and raked one hand through his chestnut hair. “Doesn’t matter to me as long as she puts on a good show.”

“I can’t believe you encouraged this risky display.” Will didn’t bother hiding his annoyance. “The last time someone staged a show, two men suffered broken limbs. A fight broke out in the saloon, and someone knocked over a kerosene lamp. Nearly burned down half the town. Mr. Frye dug two bullets out of the livery.”

“You’re not the captain anymore.” Daniel’s jaw tightened. “You’re not in charge.”

“We agreed on the rules for the town.”

“We did. Except the stockyards aren’t part of the town proper.”

Not only had Texas Tom gone around Will’s back, she’d enlisted the support of his closest friend.

The betrayal smarted. “It’s your choice.”

“Look, if I’d known you were dead set against the show, I’d have acted differently. It’s too late now.” Daniel shrugged. “I’ll help you keep an eye out for trouble. Sheriff Davis is here, as well.”

“What about Leah?”

“She stayed home. She’s resting.”

“Probably for the best.” Will’s anger waned. They’d been through too much to let something like this alter their friendship. “I need you on lookout.”

“You’ve had one of your hunches, haven’t you?”

“Something like that.” During his years in the war, Will had learned to trust his instincts. His men had learned to do the same. “Keep a sharp eye out.”

“I own the stockyards, remember? I’m not letting anything happen.” They’d nearly reached their destination, and Daniel slowed his pace. “I’m sorry about the rodeo. I didn’t think you’d care as long as we kept it outside town. How long are you going to be sore?”

“I’m not sore.”

His friend visibly relaxed. “Hey, Leah told me about the abandoned baby. What—?”

“Daniel!” someone shouted.

They turned and caught sight of Sheriff Davis jogging in their direction. He halted in front of them and stated without preamble, “I’ve got some bad news.”

The sheriff was a tall, broad-shouldered and lean-hipped man with a thick mustache that enveloped his upper lip. He was dressed in his usual uniform of a brown vest and jacket over a white shirt. A good man, he’d been a fine choice for keeping the law in Cowboy Creek.

Will smoothed his beard with a thumb and forefinger. “What is it this time?”

“We caught some fellows by the railroad cars.”

“Not again.” Will and Daniel exchanged a glance. “Did they take anything?”

“Not that I know of.” The sheriff leaned closer. “They were sniffing around the supplies again.”

Will made a sound of frustration. The saboteurs had caused plenty of problems already. They’d burned a shipment of wood, stolen supplies and poisoned several dozen head of cattle. The town council had hired extra guards for the railcars and the lumberyard. Instead of backing down, the vandals had grown more brazen.

“Do you think it’s the Murdoch Gang again?” Will asked.

“Maybe, maybe not.” The sheriff shrugged. “Those boys robbed a church in broad daylight. I don’t see them keeping to the shadows.”

“You’re probably right.” With most of the town gathered for the rodeo, this was the perfect time for another strike. “Why don’t we—”

Raucous applause drowned out his words. Will and Daniel exchanged another glance before heading toward the corral. Since most of the townsfolk knew Daniel owned the stockyards, the crowds parted for them. People lined the entire circumference of the corral and crowded two and three deep in some places. Only a few feminine hats stood out against the mostly male crowd.

Upon reaching the fence, a distinctive paint horse carrying a redheaded rider galloped through an open gate. In a blur the pair sped around the corner and cut a diagonal across the center of the corral. Dirt clods kicked up by speeding hooves peppered the delighted audience. As Tomasina raced by, the men waved and shouted encouragement. With a flying lead change, the duo switched courses and curved across the opposite side, then galloped back toward the center once more.

The rider pulled up short. At the sudden stop the animal’s hooves cut trenches in the soft earth. The horse sidestepped left and back again. Horse and rider wheeled in a tight circle then changed directions just as quickly before stilling once more. The boisterous spectators shouted and whistled.

Tomasina Stone, better known as Texas Tom, waved to the crowd from her perch. Only then did Will notice the horse wore no saddle or bridle. Tomasina had controlled the racing animal with nothing but her legs and heels. The dawning realization sent a collective gasp erupting from the audience.

Clearly feeding off the attention, she bent one knee and braced it on the horse’s haunches then pushed off until she was standing. She wore her familiar leather-fringed chaps and blue chambray shirt with mother-of-pearl buttons on the flap pockets. Hatless in the afternoon sunlight, her flowing red curls glistened.

Save for the flicker of its tail, the horse remained motionless. The crowd grew hushed. Balancing on the paint’s back, Tomasina swooped her arms higher, urging the men into a cheer. Her plea was met with thunderous whoops and hollers.

Even Will had to admit she was magnificent. Her smile was infectious, her confidence alluring. Every man in the audience was admiring her, as well. An unexpected surge of jealousy caught him by surprise. The urge to protect her was nearly overwhelming. Not even Dora had inspired this confusing flood of emotions. Yet this slip of a girl he’d only met a handful of times had him captivated.

In an instant the mood changed. Her balance faltered. The horse lunged forward. Tomasina vaulted into the air. Strangled cries sounded from several onlookers. Will instinctively pitched forward. She landed in a crouch then popped upright and swept one arm across her stomach in a shallow bow. Her trick drew deafening applause. A vein throbbed in Will's temple. The whole thing had been a stunt.

She whistled, and the horse veered straight at her. Though Will knew by now her act was all for show, the muscles in his shoulders tensed. At the last second Tomasina neatly sidestepped and caught the horse's mane in both hands. Using the forward motion, she swung one leg over the animal's haunches and resumed her seat once more.

Will's knuckles whitened around the top rail of the corral fence, his heart thundering in his chest as he watched the scene unfolding before him. Tomasina spun her mount and trotted toward him. Her vivid green eyes pinned him in place.

Halting in front of his spot on the fence, the horse's hooves kicked more dirt over his boots.

With her mischievous grin firmly in place, Tomasina winked at him. Apprehension snaked up his spine. His instincts were correct once again.

Texas Tom meant trouble.

She flourished one hand. "For my next trick, I need a volunteer from the audience." She sidled her horse nearer Will's vigil and extended her arm, indicating him with a hand encased in a fringed leather glove. "How about you, kind sir? Are you man enough to take on Texas Tom?"

Chapter Four

Before Will could react to her unexpected challenge, a commotion at the far end of the corral distracted Tomasina. He followed her gaze. A saddled but riderless horse, almost identical to the one she rode, trotted toward them. Loose reins trailed in the dirt while empty stirrups flapped against the animal's sides.

Tomasina's stance instantly focused on the odd sight. Her fingers flexed on her horse's mane. Her attention sharpened. Though the proud lines of her profile remained inflexible, Will sensed something was wrong. Her curls fluttered in the soft breeze. This wasn't part of the show. Uncertain as well, the crowd remained hushed in anticipation.

Waiting.

Tomasina sat straighter. A crash sounded.

An enormous white bull galloped into the corral, thrashing and snorting. The nostrils on the riderless horse flared, and the animal lunged away from the steer's path. Tomasina spun her mount and charged toward the bull.

His heart racing, Will dropped his cane and vaulted over the fence. Upon his landing, pain shot up his leg and rattled his teeth.

Daniel grabbed for his coat. "What are you doing, Will?"

"Don't be a fool!" Quincy Davis called out.

The riderless horse bolted past, and Will caught the reins, yanking the animal to a halt. Using his good leg, he stuck one foot in the empty stirrup and hoisted himself into the saddle. The animal danced beneath him, frightened and confused. Grasping the pommel, he squeezed his legs, asserting his dominance over the skittish horse.

Quickly snagging the second rein and establishing control, he searched for Tomasina and the bull. Cornered at the far end of corral, the horned animal reared and snorted. Tomasina sidled her mount toward the fence. Nostrils flared and sharp hooves pawed the earth. The animal was set to charge, and she'd positioned herself directly in its path.

An icy chill pooled in the pit of his stomach.

Placing two fingers in his mouth, Will let out a sharp whistle. Distracted from its closest prey, the bull shook its enormous head. Will waved his hands above his head. The bull changed direction

and charged toward him. Keeping his mount steady, Will held his position to the last second. Feinting left, he narrowly escaped the sharp horns.

A flash of red caught his attention. Blood darkened the animal's fur. The bull had been injured, though not badly enough to slow it down. In preparation for the bronc-busting contest, a rope had been fastened around the bull's middle along with a halter around the snout. If Will caught hold of that halter, he might be able to flip the bull. If Texas Tom was the marksman she claimed, he'd buy enough time for a shot. Will spun his mount and intercepted her.

She waved him toward the opposite end. "Help me herd him back to the gate."

"No." Will shook his head. "Too dangerous. That animal is hurt. He's better off in the corral, where he can thrash about." He followed the bull's frantic bucking. "Let the cowboys clear out the spectators, then I'll grab his head and flip him. You take the shot."

There was no other way.

Her expression revealed an embarrassing level of skepticism. "Have you ever flipped a bull before?"

"No time to argue." He'd seen the trick plenty of times, but he'd never actually performed the task. If the war had taught him one thing, it was that sometimes a man learned skills on the fly. "Grab your guns and prove you're a sharpshooter."

"It's too dangerous," she shouted. "I won't let you."

"You don't have a choice."

The more time they wasted, the more they risked. Wild with pain, the bull charged toward the corral fence. The crowd scrambled away. Startled cries rippled through the fleeing audience. The white bull kicked and bucked, its back legs smashing the fence, splintering the rails.

With the enclosure breached, the whole town was in peril. Will dug his heels into his mount's sides and galloped the distance. He maneuvered his horse between the bull and the broken fence. A horn caught his horse's flank, and the animal brayed. A second lunge narrowly missed Will's thigh.

People pushed and shoved, madly fleeing the area.

Tomasina frantically gestured toward the cowboy at the far end of the corral. "Grab my rope."

They had to keep the bull occupied until the majority of the crowd dispersed. The animal kicked at the fence once again, cracking the top railing in two. Time was quickly running short.

With the bull breathing down his neck, Will galloped toward the exit. "Open the gate for Tomasina!"

Several cowboys frantically unlatched the fastening.

He gestured toward her. "Get out of here."

There was no reason for both of them to take the risk. His only chance at limiting injuries to onlookers was to keep the animal contained.

He glanced over his shoulder, and his heart skittered and stalled. Instead of galloping toward the gate, Tomasina approached the bull at a dead-on run. She worked a rope in her hands, winding her arm in a rhythmic motion. Like a furious Valkyrie, her focus remained fixed on her target, and her hair streamed behind her. Twirling the lasso high above her head, she launched the loop and neatly snared the animal's head then yanked her horse to a halt.

Shocked by the sudden obstruction, the bull's speed faltered. The animal shook its head, bucking and snorting. The steer sat back on its heels and spun in a taut circle. Tomasina held tight. Will whistled again, and the frightened steer paused only a moment before resuming its agonized pitching.

Tomasina's hold faltered. Time slowed. First one hand broke free then the other. The rope caught her legs and yanked her from her mount. Fear urged him forward. She'd be pulverized beneath the bull's hooves in an instant. Will slapped his horse's hindquarters with the extra length of reins and charged. The steer pawed the ground, and Tomasina scuttled away. The steer ducked its head and plunged forward. The tip of one horn grazed her head.

Tomasina dug in her heels and frantically scooted backward. Will galloped between the pair and leaped from the saddle. He grasped the bull's horn and concentrated all his weight into the collision. Twisting his body, he landed on his back, hauling the bull to its side in the process. The air whooshed from Will's lungs and stars shot like shrapnel behind his eyes.

A gunshot sounded.

The cowboys sprang into action. Bodies swarmed them. Will shook the fog from his vision and kept his grip, draping his leg over the bull's neck. Another shot sounded and the animal went still.

Will collapsed onto his back and stared at the cloudless sky. His breath came in harsh gasps. The enormous steer lay sprawled in the center of the corral. He touched the animal's side, felt a great heaving sigh and then nothing. Pushing off, he lurched away and gritted his teeth against the pain firing up his leg.

Thrown from her horse, Tomasina sat back on her heels and brushed at her pants.

The events of the past few moments played out in his memory with sickening detail. She'd nearly been killed.

Daniel appeared in front of him. His friend stuck out his hand and helped Will up, discreetly passing him his walking stick in the process.

Daniel shielded his eyes against the sun. "You all right? That was quite a show you put on."

"I'm fine." Will mumbled his thanks.

"Quincy and I will start assessing the damage."

"I'll join you in a minute."

Once his friend had walked out of earshot, Will advanced on Tomasina. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

She staggered upright, a relieved grin on her expressive face. "That was a real humdinger. I didn't think you had it in you, Daddy Canfield."

"Do you have a death wish?" he thundered. "Did you actually think you could slow thousands of pounds of charging bull?"

He couldn't recall the last time he'd raised his voice to anyone, let alone a woman. Normally his rage was a cold thing. He'd discovered early in his military career that low tones were more lethally effective than shouts. Tomasina was singularly unaffected by his ire, which only increased his fury.

"Don't get riled at me." Her expression morphed into annoyance. "You jumped on him!"

"We're not talking about me."

She lifted her eyes heavenward. "And I suppose because you're a man you think you're the only one who can risk his life?"

"It's not about who can risk their life, it's about being sensible."

"You didn't look too sensible when you were diving toward those horns." She blew out a heavy breath. "I don't think men are as interested in protecting women as they are in taking all the glory."

"Glory? I can assure you, glory was the very last thing on my mind."

She scowled, circled the steer and then knelt near its haunches. "Look at that."

"If you'd listened to me, none of this would have happened." He realized she was no longer engaged in the conversation. "What's wrong?"

"Someone speared this animal." She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, smearing red across her face. "This didn't happen by accident. We check all the animal pens for weaknesses and breaches. How did this bull get into the corral in the first place? Someone released him on purpose." Glaring at Will, she demanded, "Did you have anything to do with this? You wanted my show shut down from the beginning. It's as good as over now."

"My whole concern was the safety of the spectators." He looped the horse's reins in his hands. "Why would I endanger them this way?"

"All right, all right." Her shoulders slumped. "It's just that I promised no one would get hurt. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Ever."

“I’m not exactly thrilled that my premonition was accurate.”

Will crouched beside her and unfurled his handkerchief.

He reached for her head and Tomasina flinched away. “What are you doing?”

“You’ve got a cut on your forehead.” He dabbed at the flow of blood then pressed against the wound. “You’ll need that stitched.”

“I’m fine.” She pressed her gloved hand over his. “I don’t need stitches.”

Despite her bravado, he felt the delicate trembling of her hand beneath his fingertips. Her face was pale, and her eyes were wide and glassy. The adrenaline gradually drained from his veins, leaving him oddly lethargic. His gaze dipped to where their hands touched. His mouth went dry. He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He’d never lost his temper after a battle or crises. He’d always been known for his cool head, and yet he’d been raging like a lunatic only a moment before. What was happening to him?

“If you don’t want stitches, that’s your choice.” His words were strained, his voice husky. Slipping his hand from beneath her fingers, he left the handkerchief in place. “You’ll be left with a scar.”

Free from her touch, his head cleared. Her expression remained mutinous.

“So what? I ain’t looking to impress no one.” She squinted into the distance, her brilliant green eyes flashing. “I don’t mind killing when killing needs to be done, but someone deliberately wounded this animal. There’s no call for this kind of cruelty.”

“Which leaves the obvious. Someone deliberately riled that animal during your performance.” Will stood and surveyed the trampled grass and scattered debris. Most of the crowd had dispersed. Only a few huddled knots of people remained. He limped toward the fence for a better look at the damage. “You have an enemy, Miss Stone.”

“Me? You’re the one with all the rules and regulations. Maybe someone is tired of following ’em. Maybe your loyal subjects aren’t as happy with the leadership as you think. Maybe somebody has it out for Cowboy Creek. There’s no reason to assume this is my enemy.”

Her words struck too close to home. Was the Murdoch Gang involved? They’d been having trouble with those fellows since the snow melted. One of the gang had been grazed by a bullet in their last encounter with the law of Cowboy Creek. Rubbing his forehead, Will considered the possibility. Something didn’t quite fit. The Murdochs were far bolder than this slipshod attempt at revenge. Men who robbed churches in broad daylight didn’t hide their actions. No. The Murdochs weren’t behind this particular event.

This message was for Tomasina. Will tightened his fists, his heart still racing from the fear he’d experienced when she’d fallen from her horse. Even in death the enormous steer was intimidating, its carcass stretched across the dirt.

He stared at the flattened grass and the hats and other items abandoned by the fleeing crowd. His vision swam, and he was back at Little Round Top once again. His nostrils burned with gunpowder and a haze of smoke hung low in the sky. Men writhed and screamed. They were the lucky ones. Others were still. Horse carcasses littered the field.

The stench of blood filled the air. Will’s trousers were damp with it. A pall of grief settled over him. He’d never become accustomed to losing horses in such a grizzly fashion. At least the men understood what they were facing, what they were fighting for, in those horrific battles. But the animals were innocent. As innocent as children. As innocent as the babe asleep in his rooms at the Cattleman Hotel.

Grasping the reins of his borrowed horse, he approached a cowboy loitering nearby.

“He’s been injured,” Will said. “Hindquarters.”

The cowboy grasped the horse’s lead.

Two men leaned over a prone figure, and Will leaned heavily on his cane.

Tomasina touched his sleeve. “Are you all right?”

He shook off her hold, forcing himself back to the present. He wasn't at Little Round Top. The war was over. He wasn't the captain anymore. But this was his community. He'd sworn to protect this town, and he was a man who kept his word.

"There's been an injury." He grit the words out. If the man hadn't risen by now, it must be serious. "Find Doc Fletcher."

Tomasina followed his gaze. "Do you think it's bad?"

Had she realized how close he'd come to slipping back into his memories? Had she sensed his agony? He couldn't let her see him like this. He couldn't let anyone see him this way. He wouldn't be seen as weak.

Channeling his shock at the unexpected reaction, he snapped, "Well it sure isn't good."

The flash of hurt in her eyes stabbed him with regret. He'd apologize later. And say...what? How did he explain the scars he carried from the war that remained out of view? He'd never let anyone see inside his pain.

Weak men made poor leaders.

* * *

Tomasina retrieved her hat and reached for her horse. She pressed her forehead against the animal's haunches and sucked in a deep breath. Her heart continued to pound painfully in her chest. She'd have laid down her life to prevent that bull from crashing through the fence. She'd taken precautions. Her pa had always stressed the importance of safety and common sense. She'd made a promise that no one would get hurt, and she'd believed in her own word. Nothing like this had ever happened before. She'd staged dozens of shows without incident.

Clenching her jaw, she straightened. This had nothing to do with her. She didn't have any enemies.

"Let me help," she called toward Will. "I'll send one of the boys to fetch the doc."

"You've done enough already," he barked over his shoulder. "Don't make this any worse than it already is."

Her whole chest ached. She could have weathered his anger, but his disappointment was her undoing.

Someone had sabotaged her show, and she wasn't resting until she discovered who had spooked that bull. The act was deliberate; it had to be. She'd seen plenty of animal wounds over the years, and she recognized full well when an injury was man-made.

Several of the cowboys clustered around the downed bull. She motioned for one of the younger men and bid him to fetch the doc. Eager to help, the cowboy sprinted off.

A man she recognized as Theo Pierce, a drover of her father's generation, rubbed the back of his neck. "That bull is going to cost you."

"You shot him." Tomasina crossed her arms. "Why do I have to pay?"

If Will had listened to her from the beginning instead of treating her as though she needed protection, she might have saved the animal. His interference rankled. Mostly because she hadn't expected his prowess. Though he always moved with an inherent grace, his horsemanship was faultless. Picturing him as a staid banker whose only skill rested with ledgers and numbers had insulated her against the bewildering feelings he stirred. Seeing this other side of him, the fierce warrior, had shattered the last vestige of her illusion. Will Canfield was a dangerous man.

"That animal was on loan to your show," Theo said. "That makes its death your responsibility. We already lost more than a dozen on the trail. I can't afford to lose any more." He leaned closer and touched the reddened flank. "This isn't from a gun. What happened?"

"I'd ask you the same thing. Someone speared this bull and sent it into the corral." She gauged the other men's reactions, searching for any sign of guilt. "Are you telling me that no one saw anything?"

“My outfit was watching the show,” Theo replied easily. “Same as everyone else. We had plenty of time before the bronc busting, and that’s the only event any of the boys entered.”

The men appeared as confused as Tomasina. No one looked away or shuffled their feet.

“Which means someone opened the gate and speared that poor animal without anyone seeing anything. Seems far-fetched to me. Who was closest to that end of the corral?”

She’d find the person who had been standing near that gate and see if he had anything more to say outside the prying eyes of the other cowboys.

Theo rubbed the back of his neck. “James Johnson was the last fellow I noticed near the gate.”

Tomasina took an involuntary step backward. James. He was right smack-dab in the middle of trouble yet again. She spun around lest someone see the tears welling in her eyes. Was Will correct? Did she have an enemy? Had the man she considered a brother done this deliberately? They’d argued, but this action was malicious even for James. It was high time the two of them had a showdown. They’d gone through too much together. He’d been avoiding her for far too long.

Truth be told, she’d been avoiding him, as well. He was a reminder of her pa. A painful reminder of all she’d lost. Tears threatened once more, and she clenched her jaw. Pa was gone, and blubbering about it wasn’t going to bring him back. There was work to be done.

“Theo,” she said, turning back. “I’ll pay you fair market price for the bull. Throw a picnic for the rest of the boys. Tell ’em it’s from the Stone outfit.” She might as well spread some good will. Who knew what the future held. “The rest of you fan out and help with the cleanup. We’ve got injured folks.”

Another drover she recognized as a fellow named Dutch grumbled. “They’ve got their own folks who’ll see to the injured. It ain’t our responsibility.”

“It was our cattle that caused the ruckus.” Dutch wasn’t known for going out of his way, but he was a good man at heart. “If someone had been keeping watch, this never woulda happened. I think we owe these townfolk some decency.”

Theo chucked the man on the shoulder. “Come on, Dutch.”

“If you say so, boss.”

Tomasina clenched her teeth. Dutch wasn’t opposed to taking orders, as long as those orders didn’t come from a woman.

“That’s right Christian of you, Dutch,” she grumbled. “I bet your mamma would be real proud.”

“Aw, don’t get sore at me. I could use your help. You’re the best tracker we got. Can you come around tonight? The fellows on the last drive lost a few of their cattle along the creek bed.”

“I’ll help.”

She’d always be the lowest ranking drover. The men had never been much for taking orders from her even when her pa was alive. They didn’t treat her as a woman so much as an adolescent. They admired her skill and joked with her around the campfire, but she was never an equal. The distance had grown more pronounced following her pa’s death. The cycle had begun anew, and once more she had to prove herself. Another reason she had to ride better, shoot better and take the jobs the other men didn’t want.

Shoving those worries aside, she rounded up the remaining men and gathered bandages and supplies before setting off to assist with the injured. Most of the wounds were minor cuts and scrapes from getting pushed and shoved by the fleeing crowd, and most of those folks had dispersed already. If the doc was around, she didn’t see him.

She passed by the two cowboys tending the injured horse.

“It’s not bad,” the taller one said. “Just a scratch.”

Relieved, she marched on. Will knelt in front of a red-faced man clutching his ankle. She squared her shoulders and approached him. He didn’t look up. She cleared her throat and held out a roll of bandages.

When he continued to ignore her, she planted her hands on her hips. “You gonna be mad at me or you gonna let me help?”

Without lifting his head, he waved her nearer. “Hand me those bandages.”

Tomasina blew out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding and knelt beside him. His acknowledgment wasn’t exactly a declaration of forgiveness, but at least it was a start.

After a quick examination they concluded the man’s ankle wasn’t broken, only badly sprained. During her ministrations, the man alternately cursed and gritted his teeth. She sat back and unfurled a length of bandage. Will supported the man’s leg while she tightly wound the bandages around the man’s ankle.

Will kept the man’s attention diverted with a steady stream of questions. Nonsense mostly. He even had the man laughing at one point. Their banter shut her out, and a strange little ache settled in her chest. No matter where she traveled, she was always the outsider. Even surrounded by dozens of cowboys she was alone. She was alone because she was different. As she completed her task, Will helped secure the wrapped end.

She served as the unofficial doc in the outfit for minor injuries; another duty that had somehow fallen on her. Until now she hadn’t realized how telling it was that the boys had assigned her that duty. They let a woman do the nursing.

“You’re a good medic, Mr. Canfield,” she said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “You’ve done some doctoring before.”

A shuttered look came over his face. “In the war.”

A flush crept up her neck. Her own brush with the war had been brief but memorable. Mostly she and her pa had worked and stuck close to Texas. Her father had been too old to fight. Though he couldn’t serve, he’d done his bit to support the war effort.

An army traveled on its belly, and there was no better supply for the southern states than Texas longhorns. Her pa had gone to work for an outfit that raised and sold cattle to the army at a fair price. While driving a small herd east, they’d come across the remnants of a previous skirmish. Men lay dying on the blood-soaked field. The heat of the day had been excruciating, and the bloating bodies had heaped on the misery. The stench was nauseating. They’d done what they could, but it wasn’t enough. She’d never seen such a ghastly sight, and she prayed she never saw the like again.

The soldiers who survived that day had gone on to fight other battles. How did someone witness bloodshed over and over again without stitching the horror into their very souls? Did those stitches ever unravel?

Will wiped his palms on his trousers and stood. Hobbling, he kept his weight off his bad leg. Two men who’d been hovering nearby flanked the injured man Will had been assisting. They draped his arms over their shoulders, and the trio limped toward town.

She glanced around, noting the field had cleared. The cowboys had gathered most of the litter left behind and were attending the steer left in the corral.

“I think that’s everyone,” Tomasina said.

“I hope so.” Will shrugged into his jacket once more. “We got off lucky.”

The damage might have been worse, much worse.

She’d barely breathed a sigh of relief before another man approached, a child in his arms. “We need a doctor, Will.”

Her throat tightened. The man held a boy of no more than nine or ten years old. A child. The bandage wrapping the boy’s head oozed red.

Recognition flickered across Will’s face. “I’ve sent for the doc, Mr. O’Neill. Bring him over here.”

She caught sight of the doctor making his way toward them at a brisk clip, his leather bag clutched in his hand. She’d seen him checking the chalkboard outside his office on her walks through

town. In his late fifties, the man was rail thin and small framed, and his kind gray eyes were bracketed by laugh lines. Waving her arms, she frantically motioned him over.

Together with Will, the man rested the boy's still form on the ground. Shucking his coat once more, Will balled the material into a pillow, and Doc Fletcher knelt beside him.

The doc pulled out his stethoscope. "Are you the boy's father?"

"Yes. The name is O'Neill. This here is Owen."

"Did you see what happened, Mr. O'Neill?"

"We were all here for the show. Owen and I were standing on the north side of the corral when the commotion started. People started running. Someone knocked me aside and Owen fell. I think —" The man fisted one hand over his mouth. "I think he was kicked in the head."

Looking grim, the doc nodded.

Will placed a hand on the father's shoulder and led him a short distance away. Tomasina hesitated another long moment before turning away. There was nothing more she could do here. She pressed her hand against the pang of longing in her chest. They'd shut her out. She was the outsider.

Feeling as though her cowboy boots were made of lead, she melted into the background. Will already blamed her. There was no use sticking around for more accusations. None of this had been her fault, and there was only one way to prove it.

Outsider or not, she vowed to find whoever had incited that bull and make him pay.

Turning away, she didn't see when Will reached for her then let his hand drop against his side.

[Chapter Five](#)

The following day Will had barely sat down, loosened his tie and closed his eyes before he was summoned once more. Between the cattle drives, the baby, the rodeo and the subsequent injuries and investigation, he hadn't had a moment's peace. His questions had yielded no answers about the incident at the rodeo. Neither had he located Tomasina for an apology. A task that required his immediate attention.

His behavior had been inexcusable.

After wearily rising, he winced with each step as he made his way to the sheriff's office and discovered Noah waiting for him.

"I didn't expect to see you," Will said.

Tall and broadly built, Noah was dressed in his working clothes, his lengthy blond hair visible beneath his hat, his scars shaded by his brim. Since Noah rarely came to town, his business must be important. Will put his confession about the letter on hold. Though he wasn't normally given to maudlin sentimentality, he owed his friend. As his commanding officer, he owed Noah the life he should have had before the war had ravaged more than just his body. The battles might be over, but loyalty among soldiers never faltered. There was a woman worthy of Noah; a woman who'd see past the scars. Was it so unlikely that the bride they'd sent for might be that woman?

Noah motioned Will inside. "You won't believe what I discovered on my way to the feed and grain this morning."

Whatever Noah had discovered must be exceedingly unusual for him to linger in town. Will followed his friend through the building, and they paused in front of the jail cell.

A feverish man writhed on the single cot, a dirty bandage wrapped around his head. His clothing was damp with sweat, his face ashen. Doc Fletcher had taken a seat beside the prone man, a deep crease between his eyes.

Will started. "Is that Zeb Murdoch?"

"I reckon so."

A few weeks back Zeb Murdoch had been winged in the ear by one of the Cowboy Creek deputies after he and his gang had robbed the church. The gang had subsequently made their way to Morgan's Creek, where they'd stolen horses and robbed a saloon. One of the witnesses had identified Zeb Murdoch and noted his injury.

The wound had obviously gone septic. The skin visible beneath Zeb's scraggly beard was pale and waxy. Dark blood matted his greasy blond hair, while his painfully thin frame bordered on gaunt.

The doc leaned over the outlaw and gingerly lifted the edge of the bandage, grimacing at the oozing wound. "He'll live, but he'll wake up with one less ear."

Though Will had seen plenty of lacerations in his lifetime, the angry infection had him wincing. He asked Noah once more. "Where did you find him?"

"He was propped up behind the laundry on Fourth Street. Wolf sniffed him out."

Noah's dog was part wolf and, though intimidating, the animal was an excellent tracker and fiercely loyal.

"How long was he there?" Will asked.

"Since yesterday, I'm guessing. He didn't have his horse, and there were two canteens of water set out. Like someone left him there." Noah doffed his hat and threaded his fingers through blond hair that nearly touched his collar. "I heard from the deputy that you had some trouble at the stockyards, as well. Anyone hurt?"

"Someone riled up a bull and set it loose. No serious injuries. Cuts and bruises from when the crowd panicked and ran. A sprained ankle. Owen O'Neill fell down and took a boot to the head, but he was only grazed. Last I saw him, he was having pie at the Cowboy Café." Will paced in front of the jail cell. "I don't believe in coincidences. The Murdoch Gang left Zeb behind the laundry about the same time that bull cut loose in the ring."

"The timing works out," Noah agreed, replacing his hat and running his thumb and forefinger over the brim. "He didn't get here by himself. Not in his condition."

The pieces fell into place with sickening clarity. "Which means the Murdoch Gang created a diversion and dumped him."

Remorse socked Will in the chest. He'd accused Tomasina of having an enemy, and she was innocent. He already owed her one apology. Now he owed her a couple of them.

"Why go to all that trouble?" Noah mused. "Why didn't they shoot him or leave him for dead?"

"Who knows? Family loyalty. Honor among thieves. Seems like Xavier wants his brother healed."

"But why travel forty miles south with a sick man? Why not leave him in Morgan's Creek?"

"The sawbones in Morgan's Creek died last fall. If they were riding south anyway, and Zeb took a turn for the worse, Cowboy Creek is the logical choice."

"Good point." Noah braced his forearm on the bars and studied the outlaw. "Zeb gets shot during the holdup at the church. The gang robs Morgan's Creek, but Zeb's wound turns septic."

"There's no doctor in Morgan's Creek," Will said. "Xavier can't kill his own brother. Can't leave him for dead, either."

"Instead they create a diversion and dump him in Cowboy Creek. They've been here before. They know the town. They know we have a doctor."

Will crossed his arms. "What now? If Xavier risked his life saving his brother, he won't let us hang him."

"Which means he's sticking close."

"Bad news for Cowboy Creek. If the gang is in the area, they're bound to be a nuisance."

"Not necessarily." Noah pushed off from the bars. "They'd be fools to stir up trouble. Not with Zeb in our jail cell. I'm guessing they'll lay low for a while, let things cool off and wait for Zeb to heal. That's when we worry."

"We'd best double our guards anyway. The Murdoch Gang will need supplies. And they can't exactly waltz into Longhorn's and buy grain for their horses." Zeb groaned and Will studied the sick man. "Let's hold them off as long as we can. If anyone asks, Zeb is near dying. That's not far from the truth."

"What if we spread the rumor he's already dead?"

“Too risky. We can’t chance pushing the Murdochs to retaliate.”

“Too bad,” Noah said. “One less Murdoch is one less problem. You’re right about Xavier, though. He went to a lot of trouble to save his brother. He’s not going to let him hang.”

Will slanted a glance at the outlaw. “Which means they’ll be back to bust him out.”

“We better be ready when that happens.”

“Don’t worry.” Will spoke with grim determination. “We’ll be ready.”

By the time he’d finished at the jail, Tomasina was nowhere to be found. According to Theo, one of the drovers, she was tracking strays along a creek bed. There’d be no apology today. He’d seek out Tomasina tomorrow. And that meant he’d be carrying another burden for a spell.

The day stretched out ahead of him, bleak and lonely.

Lonely.

He was accustomed to solitude. An only child, he’d grown up without the constant patter of siblings. In the army, his rank had kept him isolated. He valued his privacy. He should be relieved the preacher’s daughter had taken Ava for the afternoon. He could catch up on his work. Yet the thought of spending the day alone left him oddly empty. The feeling itched like wet wool beneath his collar.

Any chance at peace was a long time coming for him.

* * *

Tomasina’s first step was to find James Johnson. A fellow named Butch directed her toward the saloon. Inside, she spotted James’s distinctive fringed vest. He’d had the back beaded in the shape of Texas, and leather fringe dangled from the hem. She thought the vest atrocious, but James had bragged about the ladies admiring his style. She snorted softly. When it came to a handsome face, sometimes ladies didn’t have the sense of a peahen.

Unheeding of the curious stares, she stomped across the saloon, planted a hand on James’s shoulder and spun him around.

His scowl lasted an instant before he masked his temper with a cool grin. “I thought you didn’t like saloons.”

“I don’t. But you and I need to talk.”

He turned his back on her and lifted his drink. “I got nothing to say to you.”

Tomasina planted her boot on the brass foot rail and leaned close. “Pa is dead and you’ve got nothing to say? I thought he meant something to you.”

James’s hand stilled midair, then his drink hit the bar with a thud, splashing his whiskey. “What happened?”

“He went to sleep and never woke up. Smitty thought it was probably his heart.” Her throat tightened. “You didn’t know, did you?”

“Nope.”

The chill in his voice sparked her anger once more. “He never got over you leaving. You know that, don’t you? We took you in when you had no one.”

Not a flicker of emotion showed on his face. That was James, all right. Always stoic. Why did men figure that showing their feelings made them weak? There was nothing wrong with sorrow. Except with James, there was always something to prove.

James appeared to gather himself. “Your pa was a good man, but he was too old for the trail.” Taking a long draw from his whiskey, he fixed his gaze on the mirror behind the bar. “He shoulda quit years ago. He only stayed on as point man ’cause of you.”

“That’s not fair and you know it. He stayed working because the trail was his life.”

“Think about it, Tom.” James cast her a sidelong glance. “Your pa was always working and saving for your future. You weren’t getting married or anything. And he knew once he was gone, you’d never be able to protect yourself. So he worked and he saved. Worked himself right into the grave.”

His words picked at her conscience like buzzards on a carcass. She shook her head. No—James was lashing out to hide his grief. Her pa hadn't worked himself to death because of her. He'd always been a frugal man. They'd never needed much between the two of them.

"You're being hateful because of your guilt," she said. "Taking out your anger on me isn't going to bring him back. Near broke his heart when you left, and you know it."

James had all the charm in the world when a pretty face was nearby, but none for her. She wasn't a woman as far as he was concerned. She was one of the boys. She wasn't worthy of his fawning attention. That suited her fine. His fake charm was wasted on her. His words were as shallow as a creek bed in a drought.

"Too bad." James ducked his head. "Maybe your pa should have had a stronger heart."

"How can you say that?" She hitched in a breath. His indifference cut her to the quick. "After everything he did for you?"

She didn't know James anymore. He wasn't the boy she'd grown up with, the boy she'd considered family. This was a stranger. A hateful, bitter stranger.

"I'm not arguing with you anymore, Tom." He turned away. "I said all I got to say."

"This isn't who you are, James." She felt as though her whole world was tipping upside down. First she'd lost her pa, now she was losing James. "Why are you acting like this?"

He stumbled back from the bar and glared at her. "Why is everyone trying to tie me down? To change me? This is exactly who I am. I do what I want when I want. I'm not beholden to anyone. I stayed on with your pa's outfit because it suited me. Nothing more." Shrugging his shoulders, he mumbled, "Doesn't matter anyway, now. Without your pa, the Stone outfit is finished."

"At least he didn't live to see this." She fisted her hands against her sides. "I'm glad he's not here to see what you've become."

"Take my advice, Tom. Find a job in town. Your days on the trail are over. Without your pa, you'll never be safe."

"Fine talk coming from you." Though angry, she grasped for one last shred of hope. "There's no reason you and I can't carry on the Stone name. We can build on that name and create our own reputation."

"I'm not a Stone, Tom. And I'm sure not riding trail with a girl."

"Oh, so I'm a girl now?"

"Let it go, Tom."

She blinked rapidly before recalling the reason she'd come in the first place. "You were supposed to be watching the corral gate at the rodeo. Someone let a bull loose during my show. Spared the animal. Almost killed me. You know anything about that?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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