

Chapter One

Western Texas
1845

“Girl, your daddy is going to cut a switch and stripe you six ways to Sunday!” Lupe warned.

“No he won’t, Lupe!” Maize said with confidence. Her father *never* raised a hand to her, even though he did bluster and threaten *many* times.

“What if you come across them Comanche?” the old woman asked fearfully. She’d lost her sister and brother-in-law many years ago when they traveled north from Mexico prepared to settle here. When Lupe’s husband insisted they move north so that he could find work to support her, Lupe protested and argued, remembering what had happened to her eldest sister. However, her papa insisted she obey her husband and go with him. Manuel found work on the large ranch owned by Maize’s father, Frank Christian. Manuel was thrown from a horse and killed a couple of years later, and Frank gave Lupe a job helping his wife, Delores, who was expecting their first child. Delores died giving birth to Maize, and Lupe helped raise the girl she loved more than her own life. “You know your daddy told you to stay close to the house, Maize. Them Comanche are on the warpath right now!”

“Up north maybe, but not here, Lupe.” Maize saw the fright in Lupe’s dark brown eyes, and she rushed to hug her. “You know that Daddy is over protective, and I haven’t seen Karen in weeks now. This might be my only chance to have a visit with her before she marries James and he takes her far away from here. Please don’t worry about me, Lupe. I’ll be fine. I have my gun, and you know that I shoot better than most of the ranch hands! I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“What will I tell your daddy? He is going to be furious with both of us!”

“We both know that Daddy’s bark is worse than his bite,” the young woman said with a laugh. “I’ll be back before dark, and with any luck, before Daddy gets home.” She gave Lupe a kiss on the cheek, and another quick hug before leaving the house. Within minutes, she’d saddled her spirited stallion, and started out for the Rivers’ ranch, a good two-hour ride across county.

The immense freedom she felt when riding on horseback was liberating, and exhilarating. It was a beautiful day, too. Not too hot for a change, and it was good to be free of the ranch and everyone’s watchful eyes. She knew that all of her father’s employees were loyal and good people, and they only wanted to keep her safe from all danger, but they did not realize how stifled and smothered she felt at times. She’d asked her parent to take her with him when he went to the Kellogg’s ranch to discuss the sale of some horses, but he’d given her a firm ‘no’ because he felt the trip was too dangerous for her. He’d advised her that her long red braid would attract the wrong kind of attention, and as one man alone, he didn’t feel he could offer her adequate protection should the

Comanche spot them. Frank Christian was an indulgent parent in most things, but not when it came to his one and only child's safety. Maize knew it was pointless to argue with him, so she simply made other plans for her day.

Maize's best friend, Karen Rivers, was due to be married in two weeks, and her Army lieutenant husband-to-be was being transferred to Washington, which was too far for Maize to travel to visit her. It made both of the young women unhappy, but Karen was madly in love with the handsome man, and looking forward to married life and to attending the parties held often in the nation's capital.

Maize dismounted and one of the Rivers' hands came forward to take her horse, offering to give her mount some water, feed, and a good rub down. Maize thanked the man, and then hurried up to the house, giving the front door a perfunctory knock before opening it and marching inside as if she owned the place.

"Maize!" Karen squealed happily, running toward her and giving her a big hug. "Oh, I didn't think I would see you before the wedding! This is a wonderful surprise! Is your daddy with you?" she asked. "Or did one of the hands ride along?"

"I came by myself. Shhh! Don't tell! I don't need any more scolding than I am already in for when I get home! I just had to have one more visit before your special day and before James whisks you away permanently."

"I am so happy to see you. I finished my wedding dress; come upstairs to my room to see it and tell me what you think!" Karen bossed. The two girls giggled as they made their way up the staircase leading to the second floor.

"Ohhh! It is so beautiful, Karen! You will be a vision when your papa walks you down the aisle!" Maize told her, sincere in her compliments. "It must have taken you hours upon hours to sew all the beads on this!"

"It did, and I think I stuck myself a million times! I thought I would have bandages on my hands underneath my gloves!" she exaggerated, and both girls giggled.

The time passed quickly, and Maize regretfully announced it was time for her to head on home. She knew she had to be back by suppertime or her father would have every hand on the ranch out looking for her. As she was putting on her hat and gloves, the door opened and Matthew Rivers walked inside.

"Matt! You're home; you made it!" Karen squealed in delight as her mama came running at the mention of her son's name.

Matt picked up his little sister and spun her around. "I wouldn't miss my baby sister's wedding! Even though I personally think you are too young to get married; why, you aren't a day over fifteen."

"You are just being silly, Matthew Rivers. I am twenty years old and you very well know it, too!" Karen reacted precisely as he'd known she would.

"Son, I am so happy to see you could make it home. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to get through with all the talk of the Comanche raids."

"It's more than talk, Ma. I had to make a wide berth around them to get here, but I made it." He didn't tell her that he'd had a couple of close calls; she didn't need to be frightened.

"I'm glad you are home. Your papa is going to be thrilled to see you, son."

"Where is he?"

"He and several of the hands are out looking for some cattle that are missing."

"The Comanche probably took them for food."

“This far south?” Maize scoffed. Matthew leveled his disapproving dark eyes on her, and Maize was transported back in time to five years earlier:

“What do you two little girls think you are doing?” Matt Rivers demanded, disapproval making him appear stern. His hands rested on his hips.

“It’s not what you think, Matt!” Karen immediately defended them.

“It’s none of your business, anyway!” Maize declared, turning up her chin as she dared him to say another word.

“Karen, do you remember what Pa did to the last person he caught smoking in this barn?” Matt asked her.

Karen nodded, and then started crying. “We just wanted to see what it was all about, Matt. I’ve seen you smoking.”

“It’s not ladylike to smoke, and Pa is going to have a fit when I tell him about this.”

“Noooo! You can’t tell!” Karen pleaded with him, crying even harder. “He’ll whip me.”

“You bet he will, and it’s exactly what you deserve. Now get on up to the house and either you tell Pa, or I will.” It was not a threat, but a promise, and Maize could see how distraught Karen was as she quickly ran toward the house.

“It’s not Karen’s fault, you jerk! I am the one who encouraged her to try smoking. I brought the paper, the tobacco and the matches!” Maize defended her best friend. “It’s not fair for you to tattle on her and get her into trouble. We’ve seen you smoking plenty of times.”

“I am five years older than you are and I am a man. Little girls should not smoke, and no one should smoke in a barn where the straw and hay could go up into flames and burn down the barn, and any horses trapped inside. You may get away with doing things like this on your father’s ranch, but here we hold to discipline. Karen is going to get a good spanking, and that is what you deserve, too!”

Maize had never been spanked, and she was highly insulted by Matthew Rivers’ declaration. She drew back her hand and fully intended to slap him, but he easily caught her hand and then pulled her over to the wooden bench that sat outside the tack room. He sat and then pulled her face down over his lap and started spanking her. Maize was in shock that he would dare such a thing, but as the spanking continued she felt a serious heat building up on her posterior. “Let me go!” she screamed.

“No.”

“Yes!” She tried to escape, but he merely held her tighter and continued to apply his hand in stinging smacks to her bottom. “Stop! You are hurting me!”

“Good!” Matt sounded overjoyed. “You’ve needed a firm hand applied where it would do some good for a long time; ever since I met you, in fact. Don’t you ever do something like this again, Maize Christian. You are a bad influence on my sister, and Pa is going to have a talk with your father if there is another incident such as this one.”

“I won’t do it again!” Maize promised. The spanking hurt and she wanted it to end so that she could get on home and she never wanted to see Matthew Rivers again as long as she lived. “Let me go!”

“Not yet. I’m still waiting,” he told her.

“Waiting for what?” she asked, tears leaking from her eyes as his hand smacked even lower, finding another tender area to spank.

“You’ll figure it out, I’m sure.”

The spanking continued until Maize was sobbing her heart out. When she could no longer stand the pain, she begged him to release her, and he still refused. “Please! I’m so sorry!” She sobbed even harder.

“Finally!” She heard Matt whisper the word as he stood her on her feet. “Do you need for me to hitch up the buggy and take you home, Maize?” he offered kindly.

“No! I hate you and I want you to leave me alone forever!” Maize gave him an accusing look, then she ran to where her mount was tied, and she sat her saddle gingerly as she headed for home. By the time she arrived, she was convinced that there was no skin left on her bottom. She ran up the steps to her room, and when Lupe called her for supper, she claimed she had a terrible headache and didn’t want anything to eat. She was positive she couldn’t sit on her chair at the table, and she wanted to hide in her room and feel sorry for herself. If it wouldn’t upset her best friend, she would shoot Matthew Rivers! And, even worse than the anger she felt toward the man was the anger she felt toward herself for getting her best friend in trouble with her father. If Karen’s backside hurt as much as hers did, then she would probably hate her now.

“Surely you don’t think that people are burning down their own homes, do you, Miss Christian?” His tone of voice told her he thought her a pampered, spoiled brat, and she knew his opinion of her hadn’t changed one little bit in the past five years, even though she hadn’t seen him since that dreadful day.

“But, those reports are for incidents north of here,” she argued. “Surely the Comanche wouldn’t travel this far south? There is a fort just ten miles east of us.”

He just shook his head. “The Comanche are working their way south, and you definitely should not be out gallivanting around the countryside by yourself. Not even *your* father would be so permissive he would want to see your scalp hanging from some brave’s belt?”

“My father was completely unaware of my decision to ride over here today,” Maize defended her parent, her cheeks burning with temper as her green eyes flashed angrily.

“Meaning you sneaked off the minute his back was turned,” Matt announced.

“I am an adult and I do not need permission to visit with my best friend,” Maize said in a cold, sarcastic voice. She then gave Karen a final hug. “I’ll be here early on your wedding day. In the meantime, try to relax and enjoy your last days as a single lady.”

“Relax? Do you realize how much I have yet to do?” Karen squealed.

“Mostly sewing, and since you love that, you’ll be fine.”

Maize waved goodbye to Mrs. Rivers and was on her way out the door when Matt said, “You can’t go off alone, Miss Christian. It just isn’t safe. Give me a minute to saddle a fresh horse and I’ll take you home.”

“I don’t need your company. I have my gun,” she told him.

“You can’t hold off very many braves with one gun, little girl. Stop being foolish and wait for me,” he ordered, stomping off to the barn. He was no sooner inside the barn and he heard her riding off, hell bent for leather! In his opinion, the feisty redhead hadn’t grown up one little bit in five years. She needed her fancy butt blistered, and he was more

than up for the job he decided, as he saddled a fresh stallion in record time. He wanted a horse that had a prayer of staying up with hers.

Matt gave chase, praying she didn't draw any unwanted attention before he could catch up to her and make sure she used some caution. As if she wasn't enough of a prize for any Comanche brave, the stallion she was riding was sure to attract plenty of attention. What kind of father put his daughter on a horse like that one? He was a grown man, and knew that particular horse would be difficult for him to handle, much less for a little girl like Maize!

Maize angrily swiped at the tears on her cheeks. Why did it matter so much to her what Matthew Rivers thought? She had a right to visit her best friend without him telling her she was perfectly foolish. And without listening to him make disparaging comments about her daddy. Maize also didn't believe the Comanche were foolish enough to raid this far south. They never had before. And that was that. Matthew Rivers was just running scared.

She hadn't ridden far when she heard a horse coming her way at full speed. She quickly guided the stallion off the path and behind some trees, positive that Matt Rivers was on her tail, and she'd put up with as much of the man as she could tolerate for one day. She hid, and he would have ridden right past her if the stallion hadn't betrayed her by rearing and letting out a whinny. It was as though he was calling out to the horse that the ranger was riding.

Matt reined in his animal, his temper causing him to swear under his breath. "I told you to wait for me, Miss Christian."

"I told you I did not desire your company, Mr. Rivers," she answered in a snooty voice, somehow managing to look down at him even though he was well over a foot taller than she was. "Let me pass!" she imperiously ordered.

"No. I have to protect some poor Comanche from taking you captive and making his life an everlasting hell. Of course, if the man had any sense he would cut out your tongue first thing, and then beat you daily to teach you some obedience!" He knew he was being mean, but she brought out his worst; she always had. The next thing he knew, she was slapping at him with her reins and trying to charge past. All that accomplished was to nearly unseat the both of them when their horses reared.

Maize managed to control Raisin; she prided herself on being an accomplished horsewoman, in spite of the fact her father absolutely forbade her to wear britches to ride. She rode in a split riding skirt, which satisfied her need to ride astride, and her father's desire for clothing that was feminine in appearance. She noted that Matt was as at home on the back of a stallion as she was and he quickly calmed his mount, too. Then he dismounted, reached up and lifted her from her saddle with one arm around her small waist. "Let me go!" she sharply ordered.

"Not on your life," he growled. "That was a damn fool stunt, girl. You could have been thrown and trampled!" He was stunned that she hadn't lost her seat.

"Not a chance! I've been riding since I was two years old," she argued, and then realized that he wasn't putting her on the ground. No, he was still carrying her, and the last time he'd done that, he'd spanked her like a naughty child. "Let me go!" she insisted.

“No. You need a damn good spanking, and you’re going to get one. You have no more sense now than you did five years ago!” he told her. She suddenly started struggling and he was caught off guard.

Maize was not going to suffer the indignity he planned for her. Once was enough, thank you very much! She fought with all the pent up anger she still felt for the first time he had dared to give her a spanking. Even though she *was* a child at the time and since then she’d seen her daddy fire men for doing the same thing, cursing over them at the supper table and telling her that, ‘only a damned fool would do something so foolish as smoke in a barn full of hay and straw!’ She still didn’t intend to allow him to treat her like a naughty little girl.

When Matthew dropped her, she quickly came to her feet and started running, her intention to hide until he gave up hunting for her. Unfortunately, Matthew Rivers was used to dealing with criminals and he was after her in the next second. After all, no Texas Ranger worth his salt was going to let some little girl get the best of him.

Maize cried out in anger when Matthew scooped her up once again. “You’d best stop trying to fight with me, little girl! You’re only making me angry, and I get mean when I’m angry.”

“You’re always mean!” She did her best to insult him, but it didn’t seem to make a difference. This time she wasn’t able to free herself by fighting fair, so she resorted to using her teeth.

Matt howled when her sharp teeth sunk into his arm. He grabbed her hair and yanked hard, and she quickly stopping biting him to yell that he was hurting her. “You let me go, Matthew Rivers! I am a grown woman now, and *this* time I *will* tell my daddy if you manhandle me,” she threatened.

He laughed as he took a seat on a large rock and hauled her over his knee. “You just do that, you sassy little brat. If your daddy has any sense at all he’ll thank me and offer me a reward for doing what no one else seems willing to do!” He promptly put the flat of his hand on her backside in a stinging spank. She yelped, and the sound encouraged him to continue with the spanking he felt she deserved. The little hellion was grown now, not a child, and as far as Matt was concerned, the reckoning was long overdue. He didn’t know why Frank Christian couldn’t bring himself to discipline the feisty redhead when everyone else could see how much she needed a firm hand.

Maize couldn’t believe what was happening. Matthew’s hand was hard, like a board, and her poor bottom was already throbbing mercilessly. The arm he had wrapped around her waist was so strong that she didn’t stand a chance of freeing herself and she was trying with all of her might too. “Let me go!” she screamed at him.

“No. You’ve needed this for a long time!”

“How would you know? You haven’t been home for years, and you haven’t seen me when you were home. Now stop this; I am an adult now!”

“There is more to being an adult than the number of years you’ve lived on this earth,” he pointed out with several more hard spanks on her rounded bottom. “It means being a responsible person, making decisions that don’t put yourself and others in danger or worry them senseless. But then, you are a selfish little girl who only thinks of herself, right?” he taunted, spanking her again and again. “Maybe by the time I finish with this lesson, you will see things in a much different light.”

“I am not yours to discipline!” Maize told him, hurt to the very core by his words. “I have a father, you know.”

“A father who has let you have your way all of your very spoiled life.”

“He does not!” she argued, crying out in pain once again when he started spanking lower, striking the backs of her upper thighs and doing his best to set them on fire to match the inferno of her bottom cheeks. “Stop! Let me go, please!” Maize hated begging, but she was in some serious pain. “You are a real brute, do you know that?”

“I know that it will take a strong man to tame you, Maize Christian!”

“And if I don’t want to be tamed?” she demanded.

“Too bad, and I pity the man who thinks to make you his.”

“Stop! Oh, stop!”

Maize finally couldn’t fight the tears any longer and she started crying, much to Matt’s satisfaction. He’d never met a female with such a strong will. She was in no position to argue, but that didn’t stop her. She would drive a sane man crazy; that was for sure. He continued to spank her, catching the spot where she put most of her weight when she sat. This time her cries of pain were earnest and she tried once more to escape, but Matt expected her to do just that and he held her tight and continued to spank her, making sure he reheated areas already well spanked.

“Please, Matthew! I’m begging you. Stop! Have mercy.”

“You know what you need to say,” he firmly replied.

“You have no right to ask that of me!” she protested, her pride warring with her need to have the painful punishment end.

“What? You rode out after I told you not to, after I said I would escort you home. Then you attacked me. Have you forgotten that I am a Texas Ranger, little girl? I am used to being obeyed.”

“You are nothing but an overgrown bully, Matthew Rivers!” she sobbed the words, hating him even more, if that were possible.

“Maybe I am, but I am the overgrown bully who is holding you over his knee and spanking the snot out of you. So, if you want this tanning to stop, you know what to say.”

“Go to hell!” she immediately replied, then wished she hadn’t when Matthew promptly spanked her even harder than before. “Ow! Ow! Ow! Please stop! I’m sorry. I’m sorry!” she yelled the words she knew he was waiting for.

“You’re just sorry I’m spanking you, brat.”

He showed no sign of stopping.