

Chapter One

"What kind of joke is this?" JT Zane felt the familiar burning on the back of his neck that signaled his famous temper was on the rise. "I hired a Sam Prescott!"

"I am Sam Prescott," the tiny female replied, turning up her chin so she could bravely meet the tall man's fiery blue eyes.

"You. Are. A. Female!" JT all but roared, enunciating each word separately and clearly.

"The female you hired, Mr. Zane," she calmly replied.

"No one said anything about you being a female," he declared. "Our agreement is off."

"Fine. Pay me the five hundred dollars you owe me and I will be on my way and you can find someone else to locate your sister," Sam told him.

"Pay you? What for? You haven't done anything except waste my time." JT drew himself up to his full height of well over six feet and looked down at the tiny figure before him, his distaste for her evident in his expressive blue eyes. Why, the chit couldn't be much older than his little sister. She was dressed like a man and had a gun strapped around her slim hips. Someone needed to take her in hand, and he almost wished he were the someone.

"Waste your time?" Sam sputtered indignantly. "You are the one who telegraphed me, mister. I expect to receive the fee I was promised."

"Absolutely not," JT refused. "You should have told me you aren't a man."

"I repeat, Mr. Zane, you contacted me. Someone had to recommend me to you, and if they did that, then they knew for sure and certain I'm a female. Just how did you hear about me?" she asked curiously.

JT swore under his breath, and then stated honestly, "Judge Homer Gaston is a longtime family friend. He said you could help me find Julie."

Sam smiled. "I know Judge Gaston. I rescued his grandson, Petey, from kidnappers."

"How?" JT frowned. "You're the size of a ten year old."

"I assure you, Mr. Zane, my size does not deter me from getting the job done," she said coldly, and JT could see he'd managed to offend her. She looked him in the eye, then said, "Make up your mind. If you don't need my services, there are others who do."

"Homer says you are the best for the job," JT mused aloud, clearly undecided.

"I am good at finding people," she acknowledged, nodding her head in agreement.

"Julie may not want to be found," he forced himself to admit.

"Why not?"

"She's mad at me."

"Why?"

"I can't see how that is any of your business, Miss Prescott."

"Sam," she corrected, wincing at the word Miss. "We'd better get one thing straight, Mr. Zane," she informed him. "If I am to find your sister, then I need to know everything there is to know about her. The question is, do you want me to find her or not?"

JT looked into the dark eyes, and then made a decision he hoped he wouldn't regret. "I need your help, Sam."

To his surprise, Sam smiled and then said softly, "This train station isn't the best place to talk. Let's go to the hotel and get a bite to eat and you can tell me all about Julie."

JT nodded in agreement, finding it hard to believe that he was actually hiring Sam Prescott. The girl needed a bath, for one thing, and someone to put her into some decent clothing. Her posterior wiggled temptingly in those tight britches she was wearing, and he'd observed more than one male eye giving her a second look. If he were given the responsibility for the hoyden, he would swat her soundly and burn every pair of pants she owned. Where was her father? Or an older brother? He wondered what type of family would permit such a young female to do what she was doing.

"Hey, Sam. Long time no see," the desk clerk called out cheerfully. "Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Working hard as usual, Tom. You got a room for me tonight?"

"Sure thing, Sam." He nodded, and then eyed JT speculatively. "You need a room, too, mister?"

"Yes," JT said shortly, positive the younger man was sizing him up.

"You just leave me your bag and I'll take it up to your room myself, sir. Sign the register after you and Sam eat and talk business. She'll find your loved one for you," he said with a sympathetic nod as he took JT's bag. "Ma made chicken and dumplings tonight, Sam. They're the best!"

"Don't I know it," Sam agreed. "Come on, Mr. Zane, before they're all gone!" Sam led the way into the crowded dining room, and then marched to a table in the corner. "We can talk here," she said as she sat down.

"Sammy, dear, how are you?" A plump woman with gray streaks in her black hair smiled pleasantly as she approached the table.

"I'm fine, Mrs. Collins. Tom says you have chicken and dumplings tonight."

"Sure do. Be right back." She hustled away, and JT looked after her in dismay.

"Don't worry. She'll bring you some, too."

"What if I don't want chicken and dumplings?"

"Then you'll go hungry." Sam grinned at him in real humor. "Mrs. Collins fixes one meal and you either eat it or starve."

"How does she stay in business?" JT asked speculatively.

"People like her cooking. Tell me about Julie." Sam changed the subject without warning, and JT got the impression she did it deliberately, hoping to catch him off guard.

"She's sixteen, very pretty. Blonde hair and blue eyes, medium height and build."

"All right, that's a physical description. Any scars or birthmarks that would help identify her?"

"No."

"Tell me what she likes and dislikes."

JT felt his face turn red, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Sam raised one delicate eyebrow in surprise.

"Julie is my half-sister, Miss Prescott. We shared the same father, but I was raised by my maternal grandfather in New York. Apparently Julie was upset when our father died and she learned about me. She didn't seem to feel she needed a guardian, least of all a brother she'd never met."

"She ran away before or after you arrived in Wyoming?" Sam was all business.

"After," he conceded.

"You two argued?" She looked at him, trying to understand exactly what Julie was thinking when she ran away.

"Yes." JT struggled to control his temper. "Once again, Miss Prescott, I fail to see what these questions have to do with anything."

"I'm trying to think like Julie would, Mr. Zane," she explained. "What did you fight about?"

"Everything and anything. She's been given too much freedom, and I was attempting to correct the matter. She was seeing a boy who was after her inheritance, and I sent him packing."

"She ran away because you forbade her to see this boy." Sam nodded as if it made perfect sense to her. "Any chance they ran off together?"

"No. I already checked it out," he conceded, and then felt his mouth water as Mrs. Collins sat heaping plates of steaming hot food in front of them. She also had full glasses of milk, and a pot of coffee.

"I'll be back with desert in a bit," she promised as she hurried to wait on another table.

"Did Julie threaten to run away?"

"No."

"Did she leave a note?"

"Yes." He reluctantly pulled it from his pocket and then handed it to Sam. Sam took a large bite of chicken, and then read while she chewed:

JT, by the time you find this I'll be long gone. I hate you and I refuse to stay and be treated like a child! Julie.

"Short and sweet," Sam muttered, and then looked across the table to ask, "Did you treat her like a child?"

"She is a child, Miss Prescott," he said firmly.

"That isn't what I'm asking and you know it." Sam had no patience for fools. "Did you treat Julie like a child, Mr. Zane?"

"I sent her to her room and promised to turn her over my knee if she persisted with her tantrum, Miss Prescott," he admitted with a frustrated growl and plenty of embarrassment. He wasn't used to explaining himself to anyone, least of all a sassy little girl wearing men's clothing.

"She needed a hug and some understanding." Sam simply couldn't resist commenting.

"She needed a good spanking," JT argued heatedly.

"I am not going to find her so you can mistreat her, Mr. Zane. You will have to give me your word before I proceed any further."

"I want my sister back safe and sound, Miss Prescott. I have no intention of spanking her the second I set eyes on her." He paused, and then said quietly, "I am afraid for her. In spite of all her protestations, she is an innocent little girl."

Sam nodded in satisfaction. "I will find her."

"Where will we start?"

"We?" She looked at him in surprise.

"You certainly don't expect me to sit here and do nothing while you look for Julie?" he asked, shocked at the very idea.

"You'll slow me down, Mr. Zane, and Julie's already been missing for two weeks," Sam stated matter-of-factly.

"The only reason she has been missing for two weeks is because I don't know this country well enough to go after her, Miss Prescott. I need a guide."

"I am not a guide, mister!" Her brown eyes snapped with genuine anger. "I am a detective. I find missing people and bring them home. If you are with me, Julie could very well see us riding into town and bolt before we have a chance to speak to her."

"I'll take my chances, Miss Prescott. I have to find her."

"Is there more to this that you're not telling me?" Sam questioned.

"Isn't it enough that a sixteen year old girl is alone out there somewhere, Miss Prescott?" JT whispered, his guilt evident in his striking blue eyes. "If anything happens to Julie, it will be my fault."

"I will need a list of all of Julie's friends, the ones close to your ranch, and the ones who live farther away. Did she have much money with her?" Sam questioned quietly.

"Enough to take care of herself for at least six months, if she is careful," JT admitted. "There was a lot of cash in the safe."

"Did she take the train or stage out of Clearwater?"

"As nearly as I could conclude, she rode out on horseback."

Sam shook her head in understanding, getting a better picture of the young girl. She asked matter-of-factly, "Is she experienced with firearms, Mr. Zane?"

"She had a rifle with her, and I have been told she knows how to use it," JT replied stiffly, and then added, "I had the countryside searched, Miss Prescott. There was no sign of Julie whatsoever. No one admits to seeing her."

Sam nodded, and then smiled reassuringly, "I will find Julie, and I will even let you come along, provided you don't slow me down. If you start complaining, or can't hold up your end of things, then I'll leave you in my dust. Is that clear, Mr. Zane?"

JT was tempted to grab the aggravating female and shake her, but he controlled his temper and nodded tersely. "I will keep up, Miss Prescott."

To his surprise, she took some paper and a pencil from her jacket and started writing. When she was finished, she handed him the sheet. "This is what we will need for several days on the trail, Mr. Zane. Fill this list and meet me in front of the livery stable at daybreak." Without another word, she got to her feet and marched from the room.

"Sammy decide to help you, mister?" Mrs. Collins asked sympathetically as she walked over to the table.

"Yes." He forced himself to speak politely and not tell the woman it was none of her business.

The plump woman smiled, and then patted his shoulder, before confiding, "She found my Tom and brung him home after him and his pa had a set-to. I was scared I would never see my boy again, but little Sammy fixed everything. You just trust her, and everything will work out for the best."

JT spent the rest of the afternoon filling the list of supplies, and getting a decent mount for himself. He also bought a packhorse to carry extra supplies just in case it was needed, and was waiting for Sam when she appeared at the first sign of daylight.

Sam quickly ran experienced eyes over the stallion the man had purchased, and noted the pack animal with raised eyebrows. "You know your horseflesh, Mr. Zane," she acknowledged.

JT didn't bother to tell her that he bred horses for a living. "Are you ready to leave, Miss Prescott?" he asked skeptically.

Sam nodded, and to his surprise, she walked over to the spirited black stallion that JT had been admiring as he waited for her to arrive, and then she vaulted onto its back and headed out of town.

JT quickly mounted, then hurried after the feisty female. "Would you mind telling me where we are headed, Miss Prescott?"

"First of all, the name is Sam; I don't like being called Miss," she said sharply. "And since we are going to be traveling together, I am going to call you JT. I don't much hold with formalities."

"Fine, Sam." He easily accepted her terms. He didn't care all that much for formality, either, and it was silly to call a female who dressed like a man by Miss. "Where are we headed?" JT repeated his earlier question.

"To Rock Falls."

"I've already checked there," he protested.

Sam nodded, "I know you did, but all my instincts tell me that is the place to start."

"Look, Sam—"

"No, you look, JT," Sam said as she turned to face him "You hired me to find Julie, and that puts me in charge. I am not going to explain every move I make, and if that bothers you, then say so right now and we will call this whole thing off."

JT felt the heat rise on the back of his neck. "Are you always so damned prickly?" he growled.

"I won't have you questioning my decisions, JT."

JT clamped his jaws together so tightly they ached, but he kept his mouth shut and rode alongside Sam until they finally reached Rock Falls. He was amazed when she reined in her mount in front of the hotel, and then dismounted to disappear inside. By his estimation, they still had hours of daylight left. Surely she didn't mean to call it a day?

When she emerged some two minutes later it was to announce, "Julie was here approximately two weeks ago, just for one night."

"Why didn't they tell me that two weeks ago?" JT was furious.

"Because you asked for Julie by name, and she was using an assumed name. I described her to the clerk, and he called her Miss Morrison."

"That was her mother's maiden name," JT admitted, impressed. "Did she mention where she was headed from here?"

"The clerk didn't know for sure, but he thought he saw her ride east out of town. We'll go to the telegraph office and send out a couple of wires to see what we can learn," Sam stated her decision and then headed down the street, obviously familiar with the town.

The telegraph operator greeted Sam by name, and cheerfully sent the wires, and promised to bring the replies to Sam as soon as they came in. "Let's go get something to eat while we are waiting, JT," Sam suggested. "I'm hungry."

"So am I," he confessed, willing to follow her down the street until she stopped in front of the saloon. "You can't seriously expect to eat in here?" he demanded, grabbing her arm when she went to push open the swinging doors.

"This is the best place in town to get a steak, JT," Sam told him seriously, jerking her arm free of his grasp.

"It's a saloon, Sam, and you are a female. You have no business setting foot inside a place like this," he scolded, grabbing her arm once more, determined to prevent her from entering.

"I do as I please, JT! Now let go of my arm before I slug you one." The threat was not an idle one, and JT felt his temper rise in response.

"You slug me and I'll turn you over my knee," he promised, and the look in his eyes was full of promise.

"You got a problem, Sammy?" The door opened from the inside and the bearded bartender stepped outside to offer the tiny female his aid.

"JT doesn't think your place suitable for me to eat because it is a saloon and I am a female." Sam summed up her problem in a few words.

The bartender topped JT's height by at least three inches, and clearly outweighed the younger man. JT was positive the man was considering pounding him, but then the other man smiled. " 'Bout time someone took to protecting you, Sammy," he said softly, and held open the door for them to enter. "It's safe this time of day, son," he told JT. "And believe me, it's safe anytime for little Sammy, here. I see to it."

JT had no trouble believing the man, and quietly followed Sam to a table in the corner of the room. "I'll have you something to eat in a few minutes, honey," the bartender promised Sam before disappearing into the kitchen.

"I cannot believe you acted like that," Sam hissed angrily at JT.

"This is a saloon, Sam," JT announced.

"So?"

"You don't have any business in a saloon," he stated matter-of-factly. "Where the hell is your father?" he demanded in exasperation.

"He could not care less what I do." The stubborn chin went up a degree or two.

"Does he even know?" JT asked, and watched her dark eyes narrow in temper.

"Butt out of my personal life, JT. You hired me to find your sister, but that doesn't give you the right to tell me what to do."

"How does the bartender know you so well?" he asked curiously.

"Mike hired me a long time ago."

"A long time ago? Come on, Sam, you aren't that old," he scoffed.

"You can start in on this," Mike plunked two bowls of steaming hot vegetable soup down in front of them, along with a plate of freshly baked bread. "You eat every bite, Sammy. You look like you've lost weight again," he scolded.

"This soup smells absolutely delicious." She smiled at the bearded man, and then sampled the soup. "Mmmm, good." She nodded happily.

"You eat it all," Mike sternly ordered before heading back to the kitchen.

"He does the cooking in here?" JT whispered, noting that another man was tending the bar now.

Sam nodded, "Mike is a great cook."

JT ate his soup, and spread a generous amount of butter on a thick slice of bread before tasting it and deciding he'd never had better, even in the most expensive restaurants in New York. "This makes up for no breakfast," he mumbled.

"You didn't eat this morning?" she asked. "Why didn't you say something?"

"You ate?" he asked in surprise.

"This one never eats when she's on a case." Mike appeared at their table with more food. "I expect you to take care of her," he told JT with a frown.

"I am not a child who needs to be taken care of, Mike," Sam immediately protested, and JT couldn't help but think of Julie.

"You need a good man and a home of your own, little one. Now eat your food before it gets cold," he bossed.

JT noticed that Sam didn't waste any more time arguing with Mike. She went to work on the huge steak in front of her, and finished before he did. "Where did you put all that?" he asked tongue-in-cheek, then chuckled when her cheeks turned pink in embarrassment.

"Mike's right. I get busy and forget to eat." She shrugged, and then turned her attention to the doorway. "Here are our replies." After thanking the telegraph agent for delivering the wires, Sam read each of them, and then nodded in satisfaction. "We head for Grayson next."

"Is Julie there?" JT asked hopefully.

"No, not now, but someone answering her description and using the name Morrison spent a night in the hotel a couple of weeks ago." She looked at JT, and then said, "We'll pick up her trail in Grayson."

Mike wouldn't accept payment for their meals, and boomed in his deep voice for JT to take care of "little Sammy" much to her chagrin.

"I doubt we'll make Grayson by nightfall," Sam announced as they left town. "I hope you don't mind sleeping out in the open?"

"I think I can manage," JT said dryly.

Sam traveled until it was too dark to see, and then said, "We'll make camp here."

JT decided she'd picked a good spot. They were close to a stream, and the horses would have good grazing. He unsaddled the tired animals, and made sure they were well cared for before he turned his attention to a fire and something to eat. To his shock, Sam was already rolled up in her blankets and sound asleep.

He went about the business of building a fire and putting on some coffee, and then opened a couple cans of beans to heat. When the food was hot, he fixed a plate for Sam and went over to kneel beside her. "Sam, wake up. You need to eat something."

"Not hungry. Go 'way," she insisted, refusing to open her eyes.

"Nope. You need to eat. Open your eyes and sit up."

"Leave me 'lone," she mumbled, and JT frowned when she pulled her hat down over her eyes.

He used one hand to grab her hat and gave it a toss, then exhaled slowly when he caught sight of her glorious red hair as it fell in waves about her shoulders. JT was shocked to learn how

beautiful Sam was, and was instantly positive she dressed the way she did and kept her hair hidden under the floppy old hat to hide her beauty.

"What do you think you're doing?" Sam screeched, scrambling to her knees to glare at him defiantly.

JT shook himself mentally, and then said, "I'm trying to get you to eat a bite of supper before you go to sleep."

"I am not hungry."

"You need to eat, so stop giving me guff and take this." He thrust the filled plate into her hands, and then pointed a finger at her warningly. "Throw that at me, Miss Prescott, and I will set fire to the seat of your tight britches," he promised, and then moved away to fill his own plate.

Sam clenched her teeth in pure temper, wondering *how* the man knew exactly what she was thinking. And how *dare* he threaten to treat her like a child? It was no small wonder that his sister had run away. "I am beginning to sympathize with Julie." She couldn't resist taunting him, even as she ate the beans. "You are a bully."

"And I have a feeling you are a brat, Miss Prescott. Do not try my patience any further tonight," JT warned, and then silently ate his supper, wondering why in hell he was attracted to her.

Sam took a good, hard look at the man and wondered if she could have been wrong about him all along. He certainly did not act like a greenhorn or a dude, and he hadn't complained once all day. He had the devil's own temper, but with hair the same shade of red as hers, that wasn't much of a surprise. And it obviously galled him to have a woman detective helping him, and she knew for a fact that the only reason he hired her at all was because he was desperate to find Julie before any harm came to her.

Still, she reasoned, she wasn't a child, and she would eat when and if she wanted to. She flashed him another dirty look, which only served to amuse the aggravating man, "Would you like some more, Sam? There's plenty left."

"I didn't want these." She tossed the empty plate on the ground, then promptly lay back down and turned her back to him.

"Definitely a brat," JT stated solemnly.

JT awoke to the smell of coffee and bacon frying, and quickly noted that it was still dark. Evidently, Sam Prescott was an early riser. He got to his feet, and then stomped off into the bushes for some privacy. When he returned to camp, freshly shaven, and definitely in a better mood, he noticed that Sam had plaited her hair into one thick braid. "I like your hair better down," he told her.

"Then I am glad I braided it!" she retorted. "Breakfast is ready. Eat up."

"Smells good." He made an effort to be polite.

"It's edible." She shrugged, and then added, "I have never laid claim to being a good cook."

"Neither am I," he said. "But I can get by in a pinch."

Sam ate her breakfast, only too aware of the blue eyes regarding her speculatively. Finally, unable to stand the scrutiny any longer, she asked, "Why are you staring at me, JT?"

"I'm trying to figure out what you're doing in this business," he replied candidly. "You are obviously well educated, and I simply cannot believe that your family would condone this line of work."

"My family is none of your business, JT, and I would thank you to remember that." She got to her feet and started breaking camp.

"I wonder if perhaps you are waiting for someone to come along and find you and take you home?" he said thoughtfully, and had the satisfaction of watching her face turn red, though he couldn't tell if it was from guilt or just plain old temper. Time would tell, he decided, and then quickly cleaned his plate so they could be on their way.

The man was too nosy for words, Sam decided, and then cautioned herself to be very careful around him. The last thing she needed or wanted was for someone to go snooping in her past. Even if it was someone as handsome and intriguing as JT Zane.