

Chapter 1

Montana Territory, 1878

“Explain the situation to me again, darlin’,” Tom McCallister said patiently to his bride-to-be, Jenny, all the while rubbing his whiskered jaw and staring at the dusty, dirty, scowling figure that stood beside her. Why, she didn’t look nothin’ like a woman, although Jenny claimed that she surely was – her twin sister, Annie, in fact. Annie glared back at him with open hostility from beneath a dust-covered Stetson.

“Of course,” replied Jenny calmly. At her voice, Tom turned his eyes on her and was glad for it. She was a beauty this one, and a welcome contrast to her sister. Although Jenny had sent him a picture of herself in one of her letters, that picture didn’t even do her justice. If Tom thought she was fetching in that photograph, it was nothing compared to her in the flesh. And that was a problem. Right now, she could probably say that this here “woman” standing next to her was the spawn of Satan himself and Tom would just say “Sure, I’ve got plenty a room at the ranch for an extra guest; any relative of yours and the devil’s is a relative of mine.” Jenny had the kind of beauty that could do that to a man, make him lose all sense.

“Annie and I both arranged to meet husbands out west,” Jenny explained, in a soft, husky and altogether pleasing voice Tom imagined he could stand to hear for the rest of his days. “We both wrote and exchanged letters. We were hoping to find two men in the same town, but when that didn’t work out, we settled for as close as possible. Annie’s future husband was at the stop before this one.” Jenny stopped at this point and cast a sidelong glance at her sister. She wasn’t sure she wanted to continue.

“And?” Tom prodded.

“And he took one look at me and turned tail and ran!” Annie spit out, saving Jenny the trouble of having to say it. “Which suits me just fine anyway,” she continued, “seein’ as I didn’t really want no husband anyway. Plus I got to come along here and make sure you’ll do right by my sister. She’s the one who’s wantin’ a husband and home and babies.”

“Annie, please!” Jenny seemed more embarrassed than angry as she attempted to silence her sister. She turned to Tom. “I know that you weren’t expecting her, but would it be all right if she stayed at your ranch until we can figure out what to do?”

Damned if she wasn’t the sweetest and prettiest thing he’d seen in a long time. How could he refuse her? “Of course, darlin’, of course, seeing as she’s family and all. And it’s your home now too.” Tom smiled at her. Jenny melted. He was even better looking than his picture. Tall and strong, with sandy hair and an easy smile.

“Thank you, Tom. You’re being so understanding.” Jenny was comforted by her future husband’s kindness and acceptance of this unexpected situation that had been thrust in his lap.

The way he was dealing with it showed her what kind of man he was. Not easily ruffled and not easily riled, either. Although, Jenny thought to herself, time would tell better, since Annie had a way of riling even the calmest of men and starting trouble wherever she went. She knew her sister would try hard to control herself for Jenny's sake – Annie knew how important this was to her – but sometimes she couldn't get out of her own way. Jenny decided she would worry over it anyway.

“Let's get your things loaded in the wagon, then we'll go find the preacher – if that's all right with you.” Tom looked to Jenny. “I'd liked to get things squared away with us all proper and legal before we head out. It's a long trip to town and I don't make it very often.” Jenny smiled and nodded her agreement. She was already aware that was how these things usually went. And why not? She didn't come here for afternoon tea. She came here to wed this man, be his wife and, God willing, have his babies.

“Well, all right then.” Tom grinned, then set to loading Jenny and Annie's things in his wagon.

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That night, Tom and Jenny sat side by side on the front porch swing, watching the sunset. The exchange of vows at the preacher's house had gone off without a problem, with Annie and Pastor White's wife serving as witnesses. They had arrived back at Tom's ranch at close to suppertime and were greeted in the kitchen by a simple but delicious meal of stew and biscuits, prepared and left for them by Ruth, the wife of Tom's foreman, Zeke. There had been a cake, too, and a brief note of congratulations and welcome, with Ruth promising to stop by the next day.

“It's truly beautiful here, Tom. You've built a remarkable spread.” Jenny was taken with the size of Tom's ranch and how prosperous it seemed. He employed eight ranch hands plus a foreman. She knew a lot of hard work had gone into making the ranch successful, which made her even more impressed with Tom. Jenny felt lucky that he was everything he had made himself out to be in his letters. More, it seemed.

“If you like,” Tom suggested, “we could go riding tomorrow and I could show you more of the spread than what you can just see here from the house.” Jenny nodded enthusiastically. “Good, it's settled then. We'll bring a picnic lunch with us too. How comfortable are you on a horse?”

“I learned to ride a few years ago. I'm a bit rusty, though, I'm afraid. Annie's a much better rider than I am.”

Tom reached over and took Jenny's hand in his own. “You didn't really tell me too much about growing up in your letters. Do you mind me asking?”

“I don't mind, but there's not much to tell. After our Pa died, Annie and I landed in an orphanage. Folks would come and take a few of us home for harvest time and then send us back when the work was done. Annie ran off a lot during that time.”

“Ran off?” Tom wasn't sure what Jenny meant by that. “Where did she run off to?”

“She would stay in the woods nearby for a spell, usually, living outdoors, keeping to herself. A few times she went to the next town over. She’d always come back after awhile, said it made her feel better about things if she could get away. She’d come back when she started to miss me.” Jenny smiled to herself.

“When we were sixteen, an elderly couple adopted us, saying they needed help on their farm. It wasn’t anything like the harvesting work.” Jenny turned to look at Tom with a glimmer of tears in her eyes. “They really didn’t need us to do that much – they wanted company more’n anything else – and they were so kind.”

“Sounds like you loved them.” Tom squeezed Jenny’s hand reassuringly.

“We did, we both did.” She paused. “That’s where I learned to cook. Alma taught me. And she taught me to sew too.” Jenny grinned at the memory, “And Henry taught Annie all the things he would have liked to teach his son, if he had had one, least that’s what he used to say.”

“Henry taught us both to ride. I enjoyed it for sure, but Annie took to it like a fish to water. She’d be on that horse more often than not.”

“Where are they now?” Tom couldn’t help but wonder why Jenny would want to leave them to come out here. She so clearly loved them.

“Henry passed in his sleep. The doc said it was his heart.” She paused at the painful memory. “Their only child, their daughter Mary, came for the funeral and decided shortly after that she would sell the small farm and take her mother back to Georgia with her. That’s where she lived with her husband.”

“And you didn’t want to go with them?”

“We weren’t welcome to go with them. Mary made that perfectly clear to Annie and me when Alma was out of earshot. I answered your ad shortly after Henry’s funeral.”

“Darlin’, I’m real sorry about Henry’s passing and you and Annie losing Alma like that, but I sure am glad that you came here.”

“Me, too.” Jenny beamed up at Tom. Then she grew quiet and thoughtful. “I’m just not sure what Annie wants to do now.”

“Well, seems she needs a husband,” Tom offered. When Jenny didn’t respond, he continued, “Once we’re settled in, we’ll get into town for Sunday services – a bit more than I’ve been doin’, I’m afraid – and socialize more. I’ve been so busy with the ranch, I haven’t been into town that often just to visit with folks. I know they have a potluck meal most Sundays after the service. We could go and bring Annie. There ought to be some eligible bachelors in the area.”

“That sounds nice, Tom. I’d like to meet the folks from the area, too.” Jenny just wasn’t so sure she wanted to tell Tom that might not be the answer. Jenny thought Annie needed a husband, too, but Annie didn’t think so. And she sure didn’t want to tell Tom the real reason that Annie was here at his ranch in the first place.

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The wind blew Annie’s hair all around her face until she couldn’t even see where she was headed and she didn’t care. It felt wonderful! She felt free for the first time since she and Jenny had climbed on that stage to head out here. She dug her heels into the horse’s sides, just hard

enough to urge the mare to go even faster than it already was going. Annie just wanted to feel like she was flying.

After galloping quite a ways, Annie slowed the horse down a bit to give it a rest and also to get her bearings, if possible. She realized a bit too late that she hadn't been paying very much attention to her surroundings until just now. She should have been noting landmarks in order to more easily find her way back to Tom's ranch. Was she still on his property? She had no way of knowing, really.

Annie pulled off her hat and threw her head back. The sun beat down on her face and she felt good for the first time in a long while. She wished she could just keep on riding and then, at sunset, camp out for the night, like she used to do back home. Now, though, she would be expected back at sundown. And Tom would probably send one of his hands out looking for her if she wasn't back by then. Would she ever feel freedom like that again? The thought that she might not was almost unbearable for her.

She was more than a little relieved to be rid of her mail-order husband. Annie really hadn't wanted to get married; it had been a way, the only way really, to stay with Jenny and make sure she was all right. The thought of being married – tied to a man forever, ruled by him, being told what to do and having him take her into his bed every night and do whatever he wanted to her – well, that was not something that Annie was even remotely interested in. Why, a girl at the orphanage had once told her that some husbands even spank their wives! She knew if she married, that she could just kiss her freedom goodbye forever. She preferred her freedom over a man any day. No, she had no plans to kiss her freedom goodbye – or to kiss anyone for that matter. Annie had never even kissed a man, and she had no plans to either. She really just couldn't understand what drew Jenny to them.

Determined not to dwell on her situation of the moment, Annie gathered up her hair, shoved it all under her hat and urged the horse back into a fast gallop. Leaning down and into the wind, she decided to enjoy the freedom of the ride for as long as the sunlight lasted, and not think too much about the future.

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Rafe Stanton was about ready to call it a day. He had spent the entirety of it chasing down strays that hadn't found their way back on their own. It was necessary but frustrating work and, having just gathered the last one of his missing herd, he turned and started to head back to the ranch.

Just as he did, something caught the corner of his eye. He turned toward the movement and saw a horse and rider flying across his land close to a stand of trees. The rider was leaning way down in the saddle so Rafe couldn't make out who it was. Anyone this far away from town and on his property, close to Tom's – well, he should know them; otherwise, they were trespassing.

Rafe turned toward the rider and kicked his horse into a gallop. He'd need to catch up to get a better look and find out who they were. As he did, he would've sworn that was one of

Tom's horses. He recognized the mare, as he had been with Tom when he purchased it, along with two others. Tom McCallister was Rafe's best friend, in addition to being his neighbor.

The closer he got, the more certain Rafe was that the horse was Tom's and also the more certain he was that the rider might very well be a horse thief. He didn't recognize the young man as any of Tom's hands and had never seen any of them wearing the poncho the rider had on. Well, Rafe thought as he easily closed the gap between them, this fella was gonna be real sorry he picked today to mess with Rafe Stanton.

When he was nearly right behind the other rider, Rafe deftly tossed his lasso out and over the horse's neck and very slowly and carefully began to slow not only his horse but the other as well. The boy – Rafe figured him for just a boy since he didn't look nearly big enough to be a man – quickly turned to look at Rafe, and then looked away just as fast. In seconds both horses had come to a stop and the other rider wasted no time in sliding from his mount and taking off on foot.

Annie ran as fast as her legs would manage, her heart pounding in her ears. When she had turned and seen the man who had lassoed her horse, her only thought had been to escape. He looked large and angry. Why had he stopped her? What would he do to her? In her experience, any man that size with that look on his face would only do her harm. She didn't want to go willingly to him. Annie ran.

But not fast enough. Rafe easily caught up to her on his horse and dropped to the ground in front of her. She tried to run in the opposite direction, but he tackled her and they both went down, Rafe cussing and Annie hitting and kicking him with all her might. In the struggle, her hat came off and her hair tumbled out and over her shoulders. Rafe froze.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said, mostly to himself. She was on the ground and he was straddling her, while she continued to struggle, hitting at whatever part of him she could and finally finding her voice.

"Get the hell off me!" Annie screamed at him. She felt completely helpless pinned to the ground by Rafe's large body. He easily held her arms to the ground to prevent any further assault and waited for her to settle down a bit.

"I said, get off me!" The little spitfire wasn't settling, no, not at all.

"Not before you tell me who you are and what you're doin' with one of Tom McCallister's horses. 'Cause I ain't never seen you before, I know everyone from these parts and you're on my land to boot!"

"Let me up; you're hurting me!"

"Answer my questions." She was beginning to try his patience, although, truth be told, Rafe didn't possess a whole lot of that virtue to begin with. He was used to being obeyed. He asked a question, it was answered. He gave an order, it was followed.

"Go to hell!" Annie screamed and then spat at him. She really wasn't much the obeying type.

The look on Rafe's face resembled that of the sky when a sudden and nasty thunderstorm has moved in, very dark and very scary. He slowly wiped the spit from where it had landed on his cheek and narrowed his eyes at Annie.

"You're gonna be real sorry you did that, little girl." Rafe's voice was a low growl, eerily calm for the look that was displayed on his face. With that, he quickly flipped her over, his knee pressed into her lower back, effectively keeping her in place. Annie moved her arms, but wasn't able to really help herself, since she was pressed so firmly against the ground by the cowboy's knee. She turned her head toward a quick zipping sound and watched as he pulled his belt quickly through the loops that held it in place. Before she even had time to react, he brought that thick strap of leather down across her backside with force.

"Noooo!" Annie shrieked. She got another hard lick for her objection. "No, no, no!" she cried out. "Stop it! Let me go!" Annie wriggled and struggled but her efforts got her nowhere.

Rafe brought that belt down on her hard and fast, ignoring her pleas for him to stop. She'd brought this on herself, as far as he was concerned. What type of young woman spits in a man's face? Why, Rafe himself knew a few men that wouldn't hesitate to take their fists to a woman for something like that. Granted, they weren't the type of men you'd see in church on any given Sunday, but this little hellcat was lucky that he was the one to catch her on that horse. Maybe a good, hard tanning with his thick leather belt was just what she needed to keep from ever spitting in a man's face again.

He whipped her so hard with the strap that she started crying and finding it difficult to catch her breath after the first few licks alone.

When Rafe was sure that he had her full attention, he paused. "Is that Tom McCallister's horse?" he demanded angrily.

"Y-yes." Annie barely got the word out and then her breath caught on a sob.

"Did you steal it?"

"No," Annie answered with surprise. He thought she was a horse thief? "No," she repeated. "Tom said I could ride her."

It was Rafe's turn to be surprised. So surprised, in fact, that he let her get up and proceeded to put his belt back on.

Annie stood up as soon as Rafe removed his knee from her back. She quickly put just enough distance between them to make her feel safe, but not anger him into holding her down again. Annie had a little experience with this type of situation and this type of man.

She used one hand to wipe the tears from her eyes and face, while the other hand rubbed her stinging bottom. She looked at Rafe. He was a large man, about the same height as Tom but wider in the shoulders and more heavily muscled. No wonder that whipping had hurt so much. Still, Annie was mad at herself for crying. She didn't like to show weakness in front of anyone, and crying was a form of weakness. Damn him for doing that to her. She glared at him. He didn't miss it.

"You'd best stow that look, little girl, unless you want me to take my belt off again." Annie quickly looked down at the ground and did her best to rein in her anger.

“Now you just go ahead and explain to me how it is you came to be riding Tom’s horse, with his permission. You some long-lost relative of his that I never heard about?”

“I asked Tom this morning if I could take a ride and he offered up that there horse for me to do just that,” Annie explained, pointing toward the large beast grazing happily in the distance with a lasso still around its neck. She kept her eyes to the ground the entire time she was speaking, just in case her anger showed through. “And I’m his sister-in-law.”

“His what?” Rafe sounded incredulous.

“Sister. In. Law.” Annie spoke very slowly. “He’s married to my sister.” It was very hard to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. Very hard. Rafe stared at her for a minute and then grabbed her arm and started dragging her back to where the horses were waiting.

“This I have to see for myself,” Rafe muttered. Before Annie even had a chance to protest, he threw her over his shoulder, mounted his horse and then dropped her in front of him on the saddle. Annie gave out a yelp when her sore backside hit the saddle hard where he dropped her. He wrapped his arms tightly around her so he could be sure she wouldn’t try to get down. Rafe then grabbed his reins and those of the horse Annie had been riding and set off for Tom’s ranch.

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Tom looked up from the broken gate he was fixing to see his best friend and neighbor, Rafe Stanton, riding in with his horse in tow and his brand-new sister-in-law wrapped tightly in his arms. Tom couldn’t decide which one of the two looked angrier. He grinned. “Well, I’m glad to see that the two of you have met.” Tom motioned for one of his hands to take both horses into the barn for water and feed as Rafe swung down from the saddle. He put his hands out for Annie, but she dismounted on the opposite side to avoid him. He glared at her.

“I hear congratulations are in order,” Rafe said, reaching out for Tom’s hand and shaking it firmly. “So you weren’t just pulling my leg?”

“No, sir, I was not,” Tom smiled. “I got me a beautiful bride too.”

Tom seemed genuinely happy and for that Rafe was glad. And happy for him also. Tom was like a brother to Rafe and he knew just how much Tom wanted to be married and to have children. He’d been talking about it for a while now.

“C’mon inside.” Tom motioned for Rafe to follow him into the house. “I’d like for you to meet my Jenny.”

As the three of them strode toward the house, Tom turned to Annie. “How was your ride on Gypsy?”

Annie snuck a quick glance at Rafe before answering. “Fine, Tom. Thank you for letting me ride her.”

“Anytime, Annie, anytime,” Tom answered easily. Tom had caught that look and wondered what had happened between Rafe and Annie. It hadn’t slipped his notice that Annie was on Rafe’s horse when they returned. He’d be sure to get that story from Rafe later.

They stepped into the kitchen through a side door and were hit all at once with the wonderful smells of dinner cooking and some kind of pie baking. Jenny had her back to them, but turned immediately at the sound of the door opening.

“This is my Jenny,” Tom said to Rafe as he leaned toward his new wife and kissed her on the cheek. “Sweetheart, this is Rafe Stanton.”

“Ma’am.” Rafe smiled, briefly, and took off his hat. “It’s a pleasure.”

“I’ll say the same, Mr. Stanton.” Jenny returned his smile, though hers remained after the exchange. “Tom speaks very highly of you.”

“Call me Rafe,” he insisted and Jenny nodded in agreement. She glanced over at Annie and caught her glaring at Rafe’s back.

“Well, I’m going to insist you stay for supper, Rafe. I’m sure Tom will agree with me.” Jenny wondered what had happened between the two. Just as she had known, and true to form, it hadn’t taken Annie long at all to stir up trouble. Jenny sighed. She’d get the story from Annie later.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Call me Jenny,” she interjected.

“Jenny,” Rafe corrected himself. “I appreciate the invitation. I’d be happy to stay.”