

A DIFFERENT KIND OF  
WOMAN



MARIELLA STARR



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

## CHAPTER 1



1886, WIMBERLEY, TEXAS

The Texas sky had been a cloudless, pristine blue all day. Now it was time for the skies to change to the pinks, and lavenders of sunset that would gradually evolve into a blaze of scarlet and deep purple as the sun set behind Little Twin Sisters Peaks, in what is known as Texas Hill Country. Soon the skies would darken, and fill with the spirits of the ancients.

Sunsets were special to Fianna O'Toole. They were her time of reflection and remembrance. She climbed to the top rail of the corral and watched the skies change into a gentle *sky blue pink* as the sun dropped below the horizon. She'd never forgotten the cadence of those three words, spoken to her by her grandda, in his heavy Irish brogue. Those special words brought joy to her heart.

"You're as gentle as a sky-blue pink evening and as fierce and strong as a flaming sunset," grandda would say with pride and a wink. "You are my pure Irish beauty." He would look to his aging wife with eyes that could barely see, yet still filled with love. "So like my Kyna, the fire of my soul."

Memories of Grandda led to the same of Nanna, her tiny, but fierce grandmother. “Don’t you let those monsters and devils tease you!” Nanna would scold when Fianna would run from cruel words. “They are jealous because you are *ar leith*.”

“Why can’t they see that I’m special?” Fianna had asked because she understood the old Irish words spoken so often by her grandparents.

“Most people only see the outside, my love,” Nanna had answered. “It takes someone who carries love in their heart to see real beauty inside.”

Fianna’s memories of her grandda were fewer. She was eight when he died. Nanna O’Toole had been her rock and her strength. Nanna had left this world a few days after her granddaughter’s fifteenth birthday. Fianna had known that day, as she had known of *happenings* all her life. She had inherited the gift of *an dara seal-ladh*. Did it make her special? She didn’t know. It did make her different.

Fianna took a deep breath to clear her head and to bring her back to the now. Sometimes she preferred living in her memories. She had endured the taunts and snubs for years. She needed to forget those bad memories, but it was difficult. The wounds had been cut so deeply in her.

After Nanna had been buried, Fianna had never returned to school. She had said simply, “I will take no more.”

Grandda and Nanna had left Fianna three hundred and twenty acres, a cabin and a barn. The property was a small working ranch, they had named Four Creeks and it belonged solely to her. She had taken possession the day after the banker, Mr. Putney, had informed her of the will. She was through with school. She was through with trying to fit in where she didn’t belong. She might be known as the difficult or strange daughter of Albert Yates, but she knew her mind.

No one had ever paid much attention to Fianna, and she had learned to embrace her solitude. She was left to do what she did

best. She looked after her animals, and she trained and bred her horses.

She was the other daughter. She was the one who kept to herself, and that made it easier for people to accept that she was different. She dressed as she pleased adopting the more comfortable clothing of men's shirts, hats and boots. She wore trousers and riding skirts, and rode astride like a man. Other than shaking their heads at her non-conformity, most people left her alone. Some folk said she was tetched in the head. Some whispered in scandalous tones that she had never been the same after her *ordeal*.

There were people who were frightened of her, and they had good reason to be. It was said that if you hurt a child or an animal, she could strike out like the wrath of God, with her unnatural piercing eyes and her wild red hair. In a temper, she could wield a bullwhip and strip the hide from a man.

Fianna secretly laughed at some of the stories that circulated. She had never touched a bullwhip or any type of whip in her life. There were so many whispered rumors, and some of them had validity. She had brought an assortment of wild animals into her cabin, and yes, she did sleep under the same roof with them. She fixed their broken wings and limbs and nursed them back to health. She didn't try to tame them, rarely named them, but when she sent them out to live wild again, usually they didn't go far and were never a threat to her. Animals responded to her sympathy for their plight, and she cared little about extending her empathies to the humans, who deliberately set out to hurt and kill them for fun, or profit.

The tales amused her for the most part, and if they kept people from invading her privacy, she wouldn't deny them. She'd learned not to care what people said of her. Left with her horses, her animals and her memories, she lived well and was happy enough. Occasionally she felt something was missing, but since she chose to live a solitary life, she ignored and tamped down those feelings of unrest.

Fianna quietly melted into the background of everyday ranch work. She preferred working on her property. For the last six months though, she had been spending more and more time on Albert Yates' large ranch, the Two Sisters. No one could deny her competence in ranching skills. She could ride as well, if not better than most men, and she knew how to work hard.

Her best skill was training horses. She had a reputation for taming the untamable. Her methods, the whisperers said, had been taught to her by the Comanche.

Fianna slapped her hat against her leg and jumped from the fence. She landed easily on her feet. It was time for her to go home, to her beloved Four Creeks. She preferred her company to that of others, and she'd been issuing orders all day to ranch hands.

"Fianna! Fianna!"

She turned at the calling of her name, although she wanted to ignore the summons. Answering meant Fianna had to listen to endless prattle. Fianna's half-sister talked a lot, although she rarely said anything worth taking the time to listen to. Fianna wasn't being malicious or unkind. She was being honest.

Eleanor Francis Yates, her half-sister, was the chosen daughter. Three years younger, Eleanor had a pretty face along with long blonde hair and china-blue eyes. She was also pampered, spoiled, and useless. She was, as Fianna knew so well, the pride and joy of Albert Yates.

Albert Yates, the father of Fianna and Eleanor, wasn't home yet. If he hadn't made it to the ranch by sundown, it was unlikely that he would appear before the next day. His habit of staying out all night had become a normal occurrence. Without him there, Fianna had to make the decisions, and she became her sister's target for endless chatter and planning.

Eleanor was on the hunt for a husband. She didn't have a candidate in mind yet, but she did have a long list of qualifications written out and numbered by order of necessity. She had taken on husband hunting as a vocation, determined at nineteen not to be an

old maid. Wealthy was at the top of the list. Eleanor had sent Albert off on his trip to Wimberley with a dinner invitation to the son of the bank manager in town. Since he hadn't returned yet, with or without fulfilling her sister's request, Eleanor was going to be in a complaining mood.

All Fianna wanted for her evening entertainment was a bath, food, and maybe she would have the energy left to begin reading her new book, ordered and shipped from San Francisco.

"What?" Fianna asked as her sister ran across the ranch yard. Eleanor stopped fifteen feet away. She glared and stomped her foot when *Faolchú*, Fianna's half-wolf half-dog whom she named wolf in Gaelic, emitted a low growl.

"Must you bring that horrible beast with you?" Eleanor demanded.

"As long as she wishes to be my companion, yes," Fianna said.

"Tell her to go home!" Eleanor demanded. "Father isn't home yet, and you know he doesn't like me being left alone when he has to stay overnight in town."

"Stella is here," Fianna said.

"After supper, she's not. She goes off with Bert every evening. Lord knows what kind of scandal she's going to cause if they don't get married soon."

"I'm tired," Fianna said. "Tired, and in need of a bath."

"Stay here at the house overnight, please," Eleanor pleaded. "You won't have to bathe in cold water! Father has purchased a wonderful contraption that heats water. It was shipped all the way from Massachusetts. You have some spare clothes in your old room, and you don't want to make Father angry by leaving me here all alone!"

Fianna exhaled an impatient breath, but she nodded. "Let me put Blaze in the barn," she said of her chestnut-colored thoroughbred.

Later as she toweled her long, curly hair nearly dry, Fianna inspected the Ruud Water Reservoir, wondering how much had

been spent on it. It was a marvelous contraption and a luxury to have hot water at the turn of a lever. However, there were repairs that needed to be made on Two Sisters, and they weren't being addressed.

She wandered across the hall to her old bedroom rummaging through some old clothing she'd brought over for times like this when she couldn't return to Four Creeks. She looked out the window to check the rising moon. She could only hope Albert was late coming home, and she would be able to return to her cabin.

"I have good news!" Eleanor exclaimed beaming a smile and entering the room without a single concern for her sister's privacy."

"What kind of news?"

"Father has been contacted by Mr. Quinn Russell of Brownwood, Texas. He's coming to Two Sisters."

"Why?"

"Who cares why?" Eleanor exclaimed looking at herself in the mirror of the vanity. She smoothed a curl into place and twisted this way and that. "I need a new corset; I couldn't get my waistline less than twenty-four inches this morning!"

"You could start working more. Leaning over a washboard lends itself to a smaller waist," Fianna suggested.

Eleanor stuck her tongue out at her sister. "That's what Stella was hired to do! A new corset would do the trick. Did you hear what I said about Mr. Russell coming?"

"I did," Fianna answered as she looked out the window again.

"Maybe he's coming because he's heard that I'm beautiful," Eleanor preened. "Mr. Quinn Russell is wealthy, handsome, he's unmarried and I've been told he not terribly old. Maybe he is coming here because he wants a wife."

"Maybe he is coming because he read the article in the Stockman's Journal about Albert's breeding program," Fianna said. "Whoever wrote that article was terribly misinformed, but it was still a good publication."

Eleanor wrinkled her nose. "You're missing the point, as usual.



Don't you dare think you're going to discuss horse breeding with him! It's an inappropriate subject to discuss between a man and a woman!"

"Why?" Fianna asked.

"Oh!" Eleanor exclaimed flouncing across the room her sister used to occupy. "You're impossible! Mr. Russell is a man of substance, probably a man of refinement. He's the largest landowner in Brown County, so he must be wealthy!"

"Or, in debt to the lenders, as most farmers and ranchers are these days. Mr. Russell could be after Albert's land," Fianna mused. "Some of the ranch hands are complaining about not being paid."

Eleanor rolled her eyes. "That's nonsense! Father has lots of money in the bank, and he's a good businessman. Maybe it's the opposite and father is buying that large tract of land that has belonged to the Russell family forever."

"That could be possible," Fianna mused. "He has been leasing it to Albert for years."

"Fianna!" Eleanor exclaimed, dragging out her sister's name in frustration. "Why must you call our father by his first name? It's disrespectful! I'm not interested in their business dealings. I'm interested in meeting Quinn Russell. I've heard he is quite the ladies' man, and I think he needs a wife. He would be quite a catch! I wonder if he's partial to blondes!" Her eyes brightened with the idea. "Maybe I could get some lemons from the mercantile. I've heard that if you wash your hair in lemon juice, it makes it even blonder!"

"Or stickier," Fianna said. "Nanna used to say a fickle man wasn't worth catching."

"He hasn't met me yet," Eleanor preened giving her sister a scathing look. "I'm sure Mr. Russell will appreciate a woman of refined taste and courtly manners."

"Undoubtedly," Fianna agreed looking out the window, and she smiled. "There's Albert. I'll ride home by moonlight."



“DAUGHTER!” Albert Yates shouted. “Where is breakfast?”

“It’s coming,” Fianna said, carrying a bowl of sausage gravy to the table. “I could use some help!”

“I’m not feeling well,” Eleanor whined. “I fixed supper last night.”

“You did not,” Fianna denied. “You opened two tins of peaches and dumped them into a bowl. That’s not cooking!”

“Hush, daughter,” Albert Yates said sending his oldest a stern look. “If Eleanor doesn’t feel well, she can’t be expected to help. She’s delicate.”

“She never seems delicate when she’s shoveling in food someone else has prepared,” Fianna said. “With her weak disposition, I suggest she return to her bed and eat and drink nothing but tea and toast for several days.”

“Please, girls, I have a headache,” Albert interrupted. “Fianna there is no reason for you to be so hard on your sister. She isn’t hearty like you.”

“No, she’s pampered and lazy,” Fianna, said matter-of-factly.

“Father, she’s picking on me again!” Eleanor pouted.

“That’s enough, from both of you,” Albert said pointedly at his oldest daughter.

“You have until tomorrow to hire a cook or housekeeper. I have Four Creeks to run. Your foreman and housekeeper running off and getting married shouldn’t have become my problem,” Fianna warned. She grabbed two biscuits from a basket she’d set on the table earlier and wrapped them in a cloth napkin while striding to the door. She looked over to her sister. “See if you can manage to do the dishes.”

“Father,” Eleanor wailed.

“I do think you should do more, daughter,” Albert suggested as his eldest daughter slammed out the back door. “If Fianna is taking

the place of Bert while I'm attending business in town, you should be able to help more in the house."

When her father left the table, Eleanor looked around the table, at the congealed gravy and greasy dishes. She hated doing dishes, hated doing housework of any kind. She was not going to become a drudge of a woman who had to spend all her time in the kitchen cooking and cleaning! She was meant for better things!

Eleanor stomped her foot and then looked at the mess on the table. It wasn't going to go away by itself. She carried a platter into the kitchen and looked around again. She wasn't familiar with the kitchen. Stella, their housekeeper, had criticized, and been mean to her when she tried to help. Stella claimed Eleanor was underfoot, wouldn't listen and was doing things wrong.

She stomped her foot again. It wasn't her fault. It was the fault of the housekeeper and Fianna for not teaching her. Maybe she did get in the way sometimes, but it was because she hated cooking and cleaning so much.

She carried most of the dishes from the dining table to the kitchen worktable. Then she went outside and opened the doors leading to the underground cellar where the canned garden vegetables and root vegetables were stored. She went underground, searching for something she could use. Discovering a quart of blackberries on a shelf, Eleanor knew they would serve her purpose. She returned to her room and changed out of one of her better dresses and into an older one. Opening the jar, she stuck a cloth into the juice and smiled as it turned a deep blackish/purple. She was very careful not to stain her hands or fingers. Eleanor held the juice-soaked cloth to her cheek and jaw, and then for good measure, she dabbed a stain high on her forehead.

Looking at the results in her mirror, she smiled. She found some black stockings in her dresser and removed her good white ones. She stained her ankle and the top of her foot, let it dry, and added more juice to darken the effect. She added a little bit of rouge to her masterpiece for the look of a badly bruised skin.

She redressed, pulling on the black stockings that wouldn't show the dark staining of the juice, and buttoned her shoes. She smirked and gloated a bit to herself. She was smart, and if she didn't find the man of her dreams, she could be an actress on the stage!

"Those two grays should be ready to start training by next week," Fianna informed Albert as they headed for the house at midday.

"Fianna, I want you to cut your sister some slack," Albert said. "She's not like you. She takes to more feminine pursuits."

"Really, what would those be?" Fianna asked pointedly. "She doesn't sew, knit, cook, bake, or take to housework. What exactly does Eleanor do well?"

"She's not as fit as I'd like her to be. She's..."

Fianna stopped in her tracks. "Do not tell me she's delicate! I've heard that excuse all my life to let her off from doing anything and everything she should be doing!"

"I know, and it must seem unfair, but Eleanor doesn't have the stamina to work."

Fianna scoffed. "Really? Do you remember the last barn dance? She danced for five straight hours."

"She also took to her bed for three days to recover," Albert said. "You have to accept that Eleanor needs more care."

"No, she doesn't. You need to stop treating her as if she's made of fine china. She's five inches taller and has at least thirty pounds on me, yet you insist on this pretense that she is frail. She is neither frail nor delicate. She is cunning, devious, and lazy!"

Fianna stopped at the back porch to pull off her boots as Albert went inside ahead of her. She heard the shout from him, and she ran inside. Eleanor was lying on the floor, with dishes scattered and broken around her. Her face was bruised, and her head was in her father's lap.

"What happened?"

"She's fallen," Albert exclaimed. He tapped his daughter's face gently, and Eleanor opened her eyes and moaned.

"Father?"

"Yes, baby girl?"

"What happened?" Eleanor asked her voice barely audible. "Oh, I must have fainted. Oh, father, I'm so sorry!"

"Fianna, help me get your sister to her feet!" Albert ordered. "She's hurt!"

Fianna was already on her knees beside her sister, and she helped Eleanor to her feet. With the lightest touch of her foot to the floor, her sister screamed.

"Oh! I must have sprained my ankle!"

Albert heaved his daughter into his arms, and half carried, half dragged her upstairs. "Help me get your sister settled in bed!" he ordered. "I'll send for Doctor Trent."

"No!" Eleanor exclaimed a little too loudly, and then she swooned against the pillows. "There's no need, Father. I'll be fine! A few days of rest, and I will be better!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," Eleanor whispered weakly. "I don't want to inconvenience anyone!"

Fianna helped her sister change into a nightgown. When she stripped off her stockings, she discovered her sister's foot bruised, but there was no swelling.

"Thank you, sister," Eleanor said in a weak voice. "I'll be all right."

"I'll get a wet towel for your ankle," Fianna said.

"No, no. I couldn't bear it," Eleanor said. "You have too much to do. You'll have to take on the housekeeping duties and attend to nursing me. I'll be better in a few hours, or maybe a few days!"

Eleanor wasn't better in a few hours or a few days. Fianna had to leave her beloved cabin, and return to Two Sisters for round the clock nursing. She took over the cooking and the cleaning. She delayed the training of the two horses Albert had contracted her to

train. She was doing double duty, as she had to manage Two Sisters ranch and care for the animals on her place.

Fianna noticed that her sister's bruised face healed remarkably fast, yet the bruises didn't follow a normal pattern of changing colors and gradually fading. Eleanor's ankle remained dark purple, but there had never been any swelling.

One morning, Fianna was leaving her room a little late because she'd had to return for something she'd forgotten. She saw Eleanor skipping across the hall from the water closet without a limp. Now, she was suspicious and angry.

Later, when Eleanor was helped to the dining room for breakfast, Fianna excused herself. She went into her sister's room and looked around. She smelled something rancid, and she found a canning jar hidden behind the drapes. She took it into the water closet and poured some of it into the water basin. Blackberries, Fianna concluded, and she stood for a moment with her eyes closed and her fists clenched. She'd been tricked and used by her sister again.

Fianna wet a washing cloth and soaped it. She carried the jar of blackberries to the dining room, and she slammed it on the table so hard some of the blackish liquid splashed onto the tablecloth.

"What are you doing?" Albert demanded.

Fianna yanked her sister's chair away from the table and wrestled her foot and leg to the top of the table. She pulled off her stocking while Eleanor was struggling and Albert was shouting at her. She rubbed Eleanor's ankle hard with the soapy cloth, and showed Albert the purple stain on it. Then she tossed the cloth on the table. "I'm curing Eleanor's sprained ankle!"

"Daughter, what have you done?" Albert demanded of his youngest daughter.

"It's her fault, Father," Eleanor whined. "She wouldn't help me. She expected me to do everything!"

"Instead you do nothing but lie and cheat," Fianna said. "I'm done playing your fool." She walked over to the side table and

settled her hat on her head. "I'll be back to train those last two grays, but I won't step a foot in this house to do anything else! That's on you!"



QUINN RUSSELL CLIMBED out of his bedroll, and walked over to the top of a rise and stood looking over the town of Wimberley. He could see where Cypress Creek joined the Blanco River. There were three mills on the river, and one on the creek. This part of Hays County was as rich as his land near Brownwood, Texas.

"There's not much to the town," James Marston, his best friend, cousin and sometimes business partner said joining him.

"The ranch will have good water," Quinn said as he searched his pocket for a thin cigar, he favored, and he lit it. "Mr. Putney, the bank manager, said the Yates property borders our land, and it would double the overall acreage. Mr. Yates' invitation was simply a reminder that we need to decide on what to do with the property. It's been leased to him for years, although he hasn't paid for the renewal this year."

"There is no *we*, cousin," James said lazily. "You are the cattle and land baron, not me. I'm here for the decoration. I heard Yates has two daughters. One of them is supposed to be as pretty as a spring flower."

Quinn grinned. "Yeah, and I heard the other one is strange, but she handles horses better than most professional handlers. She's supposed to be smart too!"

"Hell, who cares about smart," James said derisively. "When I want a woman, I want pretty, soft, and pliable."

Quinn gave his cousin a warning look. He stubbed out the cigar on a rock, licked his thumb and touched it to the tip of the cigar before putting it in his shirt pocket. "Make sure you don't get caught, and play your part."

James laughed. "I've been pretending to be you for so long my

own momma is confused. Not that she hasn't been confused for years."

"It works," Quinn responded. "I don't get bothered by fathers trying to marry off their daughters when they think you are me."

"Most men in these parts would give their eye teeth for one woman. Don't ask me to pity you, and your parade of potential brides!" James laughed.

He slapped James on the shoulder and grinned. He laughed and fooled around with his male friends, about not being married quite a bit. The truth was the idea of having a woman permanently in his life was growing on him. He was almost thirty years old, still single and still sleeping alone. It was a fact his mother reminded him of far too often. Nora Russell wanted grandbabies, and over the years, he'd been introduced to every girl a hair over the age of sixteen in Hays County.

Quinn didn't think he would mind having a wife in his bed and a houseful of ankle-bitters. His excuse had been that he was too busy rebuilding his ranching empire to find a woman. Part of his claim was true. The other part was Quinn hadn't come across the right woman, yet. He wanted that soft and willing woman. Still, if that was all, there was to her; it wouldn't be enough. Quinn had never been able to define what would be enough, even to himself.

James reined his horse and pointed.

Quinn took a long look at the ranch layout. Two large barns, a large house and the necessary buildings needed for an operation this size. Adding the Two Sisters ranch to the rest of the Russell land holdings in Wimberley would complete a dream of his father.

"Okay, cousin, the game begins."