

The background of the cover features a woman from the waist down, wearing a dark blue long-sleeved top with a red trim at the cuffs and a bright yellow skirt. Her right hand is extended, reaching towards a monarch butterfly that is hovering just above it. The scene is set in a lush field of purple flowers, likely lupines, under a clear blue sky with a few white clouds. In the distance, a white two-story house with a porch and a windmill are visible on the horizon.

TEXAS EVER AFTER

FAIREST
of HEART

KAREN
WITEMEYER

FAIREST
of HEART

Books by Karen Witemeyer

A Tailor-Made Bride

Head in the Clouds

To Win Her Heart

Short-Straw Bride

Stealing the Preacher

Full Steam Ahead

A Worthy Pursuit

No Other Will Do

Heart on the Line

More Than Meets the Eye

More Than Words Can Say

HANGER'S HORSEMEN

At Love's Command

The Heart's Charge

In Honor's Defense

TEXAS EVER AFTER

Fairest of Heart

NOVELLAS

A Cowboy Unmatched from A Match Made in Texas:

A Novella Collection

Love on the Mend: A Full Steam Ahead Novella

from With All My Heart Romance Collection

The Husband Maneuver: A Worthy Pursuit Novella

from With This Ring? A Novella Collection of Proposals Gone Awry

Worth the Wait: A LADIES OF HARPER'S STATION Novella

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from Hearts Entwined: A Historical Romance Novella Collection

Gift of the Heart from Christmas Heirloom Novella Collection

More Than a Pretty Face from Serving Up Love:

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An Archer Family Christmas

from An Old-Fashioned Texas Christmas

Inn for a Surprise from The Kissing Tree: Four Novellas

Rooted in Timeless Love

A Texas Christmas Carol from Under the Texas Mistletoe

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of HEART



KAREN
WITEMEYER



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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Wyatt and McKenna.

*Your fairy-tale romance has been a joy to witness.
May the Lord bless you with a love so true that it can withstand
any obstacle and keep you smiling as you walk hand in hand
through your happily ever after.*



In the world ye shall have tribulation:
but be of good cheer;
I have overcome the world.

JOHN 16:33



Prologue

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
SPRING 1892

Kee your eyes down and head bowed,” Edith instructed. “Do nothing to draw attention. A woman like Narcissa LaBelle lives for the spotlight, so you must make yourself dim in comparison. I won’t be able to help you once her troupe leaves town.”

Penelope Snow bit her lip and nodded, doing her best to stave off the tears misting her eyes as she smoothed the brown calico apron she wore over a shapeless, mud-colored dress. She and Edith had selected her wardrobe with care—opting for functional, drab pieces that would hide the figure that had caused so much trouble in her last position.

You’re going on an adventure, Pen. A chance to see new places. Meet new people. Don’t dwell on what you’re leaving behind. The Lord has provided a fresh start. Make the most of it.

“Ah, my lamb.” Edith clutched Penelope to her breast in an unexpected embrace. “I’m going to miss you so.”

The cook from Wyndham’s School for Girls rarely showed emotion and seemed to regret her outburst a heartbeat after it happened. Stiffening, she set Penelope away from her with

a sniff and paced to the window of Madame LaBelle's sitting room, where they'd been asked to wait.

Penelope followed and placed her hand on the elderly woman's shoulder. "I'll miss you, too. Miss Wyndham might have taught me grammar, literature, and history, but the lessons I learned at your knee are the ones I carry in my heart."

Edith reached across her chest to cover Penelope's hand with gnarled fingers. Knuckles swollen and arthritic from years of hard work. Skin rough and calloused. Yet those same hands had cradled Penelope as a baby, lifting her from the basket a stranger had abandoned on the school's back stoop in the middle of a winter storm. Those hands had taught her to knead bread and sew a fine stitch. They'd folded over hers while she learned to pray to a God who loved all his children, no matter how humble their beginnings.

The sitting room door opened, and Penelope jerked her hand away from Edith's shoulder. She turned to face whoever entered, ducking her chin as she'd been coached. The maid who had shown them into the small parlor upon their arrival now held the door wide as a striking woman swept inside.

Penelope stole a quick glance at the woman who would be her employer and had to lock her jaw to keep from gaping like a fish. Madame LaBelle was the most beautiful woman Penelope had ever seen. So elegant and sophisticated. She moved with such grace, her skirt didn't even rustle. And what a skirt it was! Bright red silk patterned with delicate black flowers that danced like blooms in a breeze, silhouetted against a sunset. Black lace fanned out along the hem with matching lace accents hugging the actress's waist to emphasize her hourglass figure. The squared-off neckline dipped lower than the current high-necked style, setting her apart as a woman of boldness and confidence. Her presence demanded attention.

"Ah! Here you are, my dears." Madame LaBelle's face lit up

as if she'd been searching for them for hours. "Let's get down to business, shall we?"

Her arm moved in an artful flourish as she gestured for Penelope and Edith to precede her into the seating area located in front of the small hearth.

"Have a seat on the settee," she invited as she alit on the longer, pale green sofa. "You'll have to excuse my ragged appearance." She lifted a hand to her perfectly coifed chestnut locks. "I've been packing all day. It's quite fatiguing." She smiled at Penelope. "Which is why I'm so grateful to have you joining our merry band of travelers."

Madame LaBelle arched one brow as she examined Penelope from head to toe. Her smile flattened into something much more assessing and calculated. Too late to hide now. Though the idea of this glamorous woman with her rich olive skin, sculpted cheekbones, and worldly air finding anything the least bit threatening in Penelope's appearance was laughable. Like comparing a queen to a milkmaid.

Although, if the papers were correct, Madame LaBelle's last-minute decision to leave Chicago and join a troupe touring the West stemmed from a review in the *Tribune* that dared to suggest she had grown too old to play a convincing ingenue on stage. Penelope imagined such harsh criticism could make even the most beautiful woman insecure. Her heart stirred. How difficult it must be to have others constantly scrutinizing and picking apart one's appearance and talent.

"Your appearance is far from ragged, Madame." Honest admiration colored Penelope's tone. "You're the most compelling woman I've ever seen."

Madame LaBelle stopped her perusal of Penelope and blinked, a hint of vulnerability visible in her brown eyes for half a second before her polished poise slipped back into place.

"Well, aren't you a delightful girl?" A new smile blossomed

across the actress's face, one wide enough to show off her straight, white teeth, but not so wide as to draw lines around her eyes. The expression emphasized the small beauty mark at the bottom edge of her left cheekbone. "How old are you, child?"

"Nineteen, ma'am. I'll be twenty next month," Penelope answered, bowing her head in a show of submission.

A servant didn't volunteer her opinions or converse with her betters like an equal. Madame LaBelle might forgive her forwardness in offering a well-intentioned compliment, but from this point forward, Penelope intended to demonstrate that she knew her place.

Answer directly. Speak only when spoken to. Display deference and decorum at all times.

"When Miss Wyndham recommended you, she assured me you were literate and wrote with a fine hand. Is that an accurate assessment?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Edith leaned forward and pulled a folded sheet of paper from her purse. "I brought a sample of her penmanship, Madame." She held out an essay Penelope had written before she'd left Wyndham to take a position in the Carlisle household. "She graduated with top marks."

"Excellent." Madame LaBelle gave a cursory glance to the essay, then handed it back to Edith, obviously not caring about the content, only the appearance of the handwriting. "I'll need someone to oversee my correspondence in addition to tending to more mundane duties." She returned her attention to Penelope. "Sometimes I have difficulty falling asleep. I'll likely ask you to read to me on those occasions. If I were to ask you to fetch me a book of poetry to sooth my restless spirit, which would you select?"

It was a test. Penelope's pulse reacted instantly. She searched her mind for the poems she had learned in school, trying to

guess what a famous actress might prefer. But she knew nothing of Madame LaBelle's tastes. Before the silence could stretch too long, she mentally clasped the one piece of verse that had always spoken to her heart, a tale of love between ordinary people. A man's adoration and a woman's dedication. A love lasting from first blush through old age.

"Tennyson," Penelope said. "I find his rhythms soothing, and his idyllic scenes conjure peaceful images."

Madame LaBelle leaned forward, her gaze challenging, expectant. "Such as?"

Penelope gripped her hands together tightly in her lap, closed her eyes, and recited a few of her favorite lines from *The Miller's Daughter*.

"With farther lookings on. The kiss,
The woven arms, seem but to be
Weak symbols of the settled bliss,
The comfort, I have found in thee."

Madame LaBelle leaned back, a gleam of satisfaction shining in her dark eyes. "Ah, so you're a romantic."

"Sentimental, perhaps," Penelope conceded. "I find that men in the real world rarely live up to poetical expectations." Hence the need to clobber Gerard Carlisle over the head with a silver tea tray last week, forcing her to leave his mother's employ without a reference.

Madame LaBelle laughed, the sound throaty and jaded. "I like you, Penelope. If you're as good at removing stains and pressing dresses as you are at reciting sappy poetry, you will suit my purposes admirably."

Penelope lifted her chin to look her new employer in the eye. "I'll work hard for you, ma'am. You'll have no cause to question my dedication."

“That’s good.” Madame LaBelle rose gracefully from the sofa, an intensity firing in her eyes that dispelled all comradery from the room.

A frisson scurried down Penelope’s spine as she pushed to her feet.

“I demand unswerving loyalty from my employees, Miss Snow. Serve me well, and you will be rewarded. Betray me, and you’ll find yourself tossed out on your ear. Are you willing to accept my terms?”

Penelope swallowed. Miss Wyndham had made it clear when Penelope left the school this morning that she would not be welcomed back. Scandal tainted her after the incident with the Carlises, and scandal would destroy a school that relied on a pristine reputation to recruit students.

Edith had called this position with Narcissa LaBelle an answer to prayer, arising at just the right time to meet Penelope’s greatest need.

A sea parting to open a way for her to escape her troubles would have been preferred, but it seemed her miracle was more in line with the caravan that arrived at just the right time to spare Joseph’s life when his brothers sought to kill him. Slavery hadn’t been much of an improvement of his lot, but Joseph made a life for himself through hard work and integrity. He earned his master’s respect, and in the end, God led him to a life of blessing. She could do the same. She *would* do the same.

Fighting off a shiver of trepidation, Penelope steeled her nerves and straightened her spine.

“I accept.”

1



BOSQUE COUNTY, TEXAS

SIX MONTHS LATER

Come out with your hands up!” Titus Kingsley sighted down the barrel of his Winchester repeater from his protected position behind a dilapidated wagon.

It had taken three days to track the Buchanan brothers to this homestead outside Walnut Springs after they robbed the bank in Meridian. Captain Bill McDonald had assigned Titus the case along with two other Texas Rangers from Company B. It was his first time to ride lead, and he aimed to bring his quarry to justice. At twenty-seven, he lacked the experience of the more seasoned officers, but he’d been the one to piece together the connection between the Buchanans and the railroad machine shops in Walnut Springs, so Captain Bill had given him free rein to follow his hunch and chase the bank robbers to ground.

“You’re surrounded by Rangers, Buchanan.”

Carson was covering the rear, and Hoffman stood ready, tucked behind the side of the barn about forty yards west of the ramshackle house where the brothers were holed up.

Titus lifted his head just enough to throw his voice across

the yard. “You ain’t gonna win a shootout. Better to surrender peacefully.”

The loud clink of breaking glass drew Titus’s attention to the window left of the door. A pistol barrel poked through the opening, knocking away the jagged shards of the rectangular windowpane a second before the gun fired.

Titus ducked behind the wagon bed. He’d suspected the Buchanans weren’t terribly bright, but opening fire on a group of trained Rangers confirmed it.

Hoffman’s rifle cracked off a three-shot volley from the barn, drawing their attention and giving Titus the chance to find a better angle. Dropping to his knees, he crawled under the wagon and slithered down to the hitching end, where he’d have a clear line of sight to the window.

A second weapon broke through the glass. Higher and to the left. Revolvers. Deadly, but they lacked range. Hoffman should be fine if he held his position at the barn. Carson was the one Titus worried about. The kid was wet behind the ears. Good marksman, but he tended to rely on his gun more than his brain. Which was why Titus assigned him the rear guard. Carson would keep the Buchanans from escaping, if it came to that, but Titus intended to keep the brothers occupied and take them down before they made the attempt.

Titus flattened onto his belly and dragged his Winchester in front of him. Raising up on his elbows, he tucked the rifle stock into his right shoulder and used his left hand to support the barrel. He slowed his breathing. Sighted his target. And fired.

One of the Buchanans cried out. The second revolver disappeared from the window. The first continued firing, but the shots flew wild. Titus sighted the second man, aiming for his shoulder. If he would just stand a little taller or move slightly to the left . . .

A shot rang out. Muted. Distant. From behind the house. Was Carson trying to breach on his own? Foolish kid was gonna get himself killed.

“Hoffman! Cover me!”

Titus drew his rifle to his chest and rolled out into the open. As soon as he cleared the edge of the wagon, he sprang into a crouch, ready to fire at the fugitive behind the window, but Hoffman had a steady percussion of shots working. His repeater echoed loudly as he moved away from the barn with a slow, even stride. He'd have to reload soon. The '73 Winchester favored by the Rangers held fifteen cartridges. More than the six-shooters the Buchanan brothers sported, but Hoffman was probably down to his last few rounds.

Staying low, Titus ran for the house. When he reached the door, he brought his bootheel up and smashed it near the lock, splintering the wood and sending the door crashing into the house.

“On the floor!” His barked order bounced off the walls like cannon fire. It didn't matter that he couldn't see the brothers yet, they knew he was in the house. He'd use that to his advantage. Assert control. Demand compliance. Instill fear. “Guns down. Hands up. Now!”

At least one brother was still in the front room. Titus couldn't be sure of the second without visual confirmation. The second Buchanan could have retreated deeper into the house after taking Titus's bullet to the shoulder.

A heavy bang announced a breach from the rear. Carson. So he'd held his position as instructed. Good. But if Carson hadn't been advancing on the house, what had he been shooting at?

No time to ponder. Had to press the advantage.

Flattening his back against the wall by the open doorway that led into the front room, Titus inched toward the opening,

then snapped a quick peek into the room before dodging back to safety. The view was a blur, but he'd located two men. One hunkered at the base of the window, shoving bullets into his revolver's cylinder with shaky hands. The other huddled in a corner, whimpering.

"Gun down, Buchanan," Titus ordered as he spun into the room, rifle first, "or I give you a souvenir to match the one your brother's got in his shoulder."

The half-loaded revolver fell to the floor. The younger Buchanan raised his hands above his head.

"I got the big one." Carson's voice echoed low behind Titus.

Titus nodded, glad to have another Ranger in the room to watch his back. He focused his attention on the thief in front of him. "On the floor. Face down."

Percy Buchanan complied, his movements slow, his chin tucked toward his chest in submission. Titus moved deeper into the room and kicked the revolver out of Percy's reach. Circling a chair, he approached the prone suspect, then knelt over him, pressing one knee into Percy's back. After glancing to the far wall to ensure Carson had big brother Ted contained, Titus set his rifle down and pulled out the leather strap he used for binding prisoners. He pulled back one wrist at a time and secured Percy's hands behind his back.

"You good in there, Kingsley?" Hoffman called from outside the window.

"Yep. Got both suspects in custody. Check the perimeter, then bring the horses round."

"Will do."

Titus pulled Percy to his feet and dragged him toward his brother. "How's his shoulder, Carson?"

The other Ranger shrugged. "He'll live."

Titus bit back a sigh. Carson's callous attitude grated. Just because they hunted criminals didn't mean they couldn't ex-

tend a little common decency. Rangering made a man hard, but if that hardness calcified his soul, he'd be no better than the thieves and murderers he hunted.

"I've got bandages in my saddlebag. Take him out front and dress the wound. We'll get him back to Walnut Springs and see if there's a doctor there to patch him up."

"Walnut Springs ain't got no doctor," Ted ground out between moans as Carson jerked him to his feet.

"Maybe you shoulda thought of that before you opened fire on a company of Texas Rangers." Carson crooked the man's good arm behind his back and herded him toward the hall. The pair drew up short, however, when Hoffman braced himself in the doorway. He glared at Carson, then turned his head to meet Titus's gaze.

"Found this stuffed in the pie safe." He held up a bulging gunnysack.

Percy's muttered curse confirmed the contents. The money from the First National robbery in Meridian. But that didn't explain the scowl on Hoffman's face or Carson's agitation.

"Found somethin' else out back," Hoffman continued. "Somethin' you should see."

Titus's gut clenched. That shot he'd heard from behind the house. Someone had taken a hit. Titus released Percy and immediately strode for the doorway, trusting Hoffman to take charge of the prisoner.

"It's just a mangy dog," Carson blurted as Titus stepped around him. "Nothin' to get all worked up about."

Titus jerked to a halt. "You shot a dog?"

"He came out from behind the woodpile, growlin' at me. What was I supposed to do? Just let him attack?"

"The critter's still breathin'," Hoffman said, his tone thick with disapproval. "Wasn't sure if I should put him down. Thought you oughta take a look first."

Ever since Titus had brought a mutt to headquarters and nursed him back to health after finding him half-starved during a scouting mission, the Rangers of Company B treated Titus like some kind of animal expert. Seeking his opinion on everything from horse ailments to cat conniptions. One fella even asked for advice on fowl feed after getting a letter from his mother bemoaning the fact that her favorite laying hen had stopped producing. Titus really didn't know more than the average rancher or farmer, but he'd always had an affinity for God's creatures, and they seemed to sense that about him, finding peace in his presence, just as he did in theirs. And now one of those creatures might be dying thanks to a situation he'd orchestrated.

Titus rushed through the house and out the back door. He spotted the fallen dog immediately, its black fur dark against the dusty brown earth. Not wanting to frighten him, Titus slowed his step and circled around to the front, so the animal could see him coming. Its ribcage rose and fell in ragged, shallow pants.

"Easy, boy." Titus held out his palm as he approached.

The dog tried to lift his head, but barely managed to elevate his snout. His glossy black eyes radiated pain and confusion, tearing a hole in Titus's heart.

He crouched beside the dog and gently stroked a floppy ear. Light brown fur marked the nose, chest, and belly, reminding Titus of a black-and-tan coonhound, though he was likely a mixed breed.

"It's all right, boy. I'm here to help." He ran his hand over the dog's neck and down its side. A soft whine sounded when his hand skimmed over the dog's left front leg. Moving carefully, Titus slipped his hand around to the dog's underside and felt the warm wetness of blood.

Titus didn't know much about canine anatomy, but he fig-

ured he could treat him like he would a human and at least give the dog a chance to pull through. He rolled the dog onto his back to expose his belly, then Titus pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and pressed it against the hole where Carson's bullet had entered.

Movement flashed above him, and Titus discovered a red bandanna dangling above his head, Hoffman on the other end.

"Here."

Titus accepted it with a nod, then glanced over at Percy Buchanan, who stood scowling at Hoffman's side. "What's your dog's name?"

"Ain't our dog. Just some stray Ted's been feedin' since we came here."

Titus turned back to his patient. "No one looking after you, huh, boy? Well, that's about to change. You got me now. I'll see to it you get patched up. You just gotta hang in there for a bit."

He twirled the bandanna into a rope, placed it over the handkerchief, then wrapped it up and over the dog's back and tied it off.

"Easy now," he coaxed as he scooped the dog into his arms and pushed to his feet.

The small pool of blood that remained behind didn't bode well for the dog's chances, but his chances would be zero if Titus didn't try.

"Where you gonna take him?" Hoffman slung the confiscated gunnysack over his shoulder and reached out a hand to pat the dog on the head. "Ain't no doc in Walnut Springs, and I doubt he'll make it much farther."

"I know a place. 'Bout ten miles north of here." He leveled his gaze at Hoffman. "I'll need you to take charge of the Buchanans for me, though. Get them to the sheriff in Meridian."

"Consider it done. I'll keep an eye on Carson, too. Make sure Ted gets to a doctor."

“Thanks.” Titus strode toward his horse. “Tell Captain Bill I’ll report to headquarters in a day or two. He can dock my pay for the missed time if needed.”

Hoffman ambled along at his side, dragging Percy with him. “If docking is needed, it’ll come from Carson’s pay, not yours,” the Ranger grumbled.

As they approached the horses, Carson looked up from where he’d been digging around in Titus’s saddlebag for bandages. He scowled at the load Titus carried.

“You oughta just put the thing out of its misery and leave it be. We’re commissioned to uphold the law and protect the citizens of this state from theft and violence. Animals ain’t our jurisdiction.”

Titus leveled a glare at him. “I think the good Lord might disagree. I seem to recall him giving man dominion over the beasts at creation. That puts them under our protection. And I aim to protect this one as best as I am able.” The last pup Titus had rescued was living out his days on the Kingsley family farm, chasing rabbits and coons to his heart’s content. This one deserved the same chance, but it was gonna take more than food and a bath to set this fella to rights. “Step aside, Carson. I got a man to see about a dog.”

Hoffman held out his arms. “I’ll hold him while you mount.”

In a matter of minutes, Titus was settled in the saddle with his patient draped across his lap.

“Hang in there, boy.” Titus wrapped an arm around the dog’s body as he nudged his mount into a slow canter. “Doc will fix you up.”

If they got to the Diamond D in time.

2



After six months of traveling with Madame LaBelle, Penelope had learned to make the most of the rare occasions when she was granted an hour or two of freedom. And today she'd been given an entire afternoon. She could barely believe her good fortune, especially on such a fine day. The sun shining overhead. A gentle breeze cooling her as she walked. The only thing missing was a cozy reading tree to sit beneath as she escaped reality for a few hours. Thankfully, she'd spotted one a few moments ago that would suit her perfectly. All she had to do was surmount one tiny obstacle.

Well, *tiny* might have been a misnomer. The embankment had seemed small enough from a distance, but now that she stood at its base and craned her neck back to see the top, it proved quite imposing. Not to worry, though. She was young. Nimble. Relatively intelligent. She'd find a way to overcome.

The sling bag carrying her worn copy of *Oliver Twist* banged against Penelope's thigh as she began her ascent. Loose dirt made it difficult to gain purchase on the ravine wall, but after a handful of failed attempts, she sought out protruding tree roots and clumps of vegetation for hand- and footholds and started making progress.

The first six feet proved easy enough. Sure, her nose was

pressed into a dirt wall, and a family of ants circled her wrist in search of a way inside her sleeve, but all in all, she'd made admirable progress. She would be reading beneath her tree in no time.

"Almost there, Oliver." She tipped her head backward to judge the remaining distance. "About three more feet. Hang in there."

Talking to books now, Pen?

She shook her head and chuckled softly. One made friends where one could, she supposed. Madame LaBelle demanded such constant attention that Penelope had little opportunity to interact with the other troupe staff. Even during performances, her mistress insisted Penelope be on hand to assist with costume changes as well as keeping her throat atomizer ready in the wings. So when Narcissa took ill with a megrim this afternoon and closed herself up in her tent demanding to be left alone until supper, Penelope grabbed freedom with both hands and didn't look back.

Until now. Yet seeing the camp in the distance only strengthened her resolve. This was her chance to be her own woman. Set her own agenda and absorb a peace only nature could supply. Returning her attention to the climb, Penelope bent her right knee and planted her toe in a crevice that looked somewhat stable. Then she took aim at a thin tree shoot near the ridgeline and lunged for it. Her right hand fisted around the slender stem at the same moment her foothold gave way. She squealed and scrambled for purchase. Thankful for scrawny saplings with deep root systems, Penelope dangled for a heart-stopping moment before catching the toe of her shoe against a sliver of rock.

No time to catch her breath, however, for the dirt around her anchor shifted, dusting her face. Gritting her teeth, she pushed off the rock, lunged upward, and grabbed wildly at the

grass atop the embankment. A tuft in each hand, she steadied herself and clambered the rest of the way over the rim. Penelope rested on her hands and knees, catching her breath and enjoying the feel of solid, *flat* earth beneath her. She whispered a quick but heartfelt thank you to the One who'd kept her from falling, then, with victory surging through her veins, she jumped to her feet and celebrated her triumph with an arms-spread pirouette.

A horse's high-pitched cry pierced her whirling haze. A pair of black hooves pawed the air not four feet from her face. She gasped and squeezed her eyes tightly closed but fought the instinct to dart away. More flailing on her part would only agitate the horse further. Besides, she didn't want to risk tumbling down the ravine she'd fought so hard to scale.

"Steady, Rex. Steady." The deep voice echoed with such calm authority that Penelope's pounding heart slowed in response.

The thud of hooves hitting the earth told her the voice had worked its magic on the horse as well, encouraging Penelope to open her eyes.

"Are you all right, miss?"

She had to look up quite far to find the face attached to the voice. Shaded by a hat as black as his horse, the rider's features were obscured, but she could make out a chiseled jaw, a straight nose, and a thick mustache that framed a mouth pulled tight in concern. Or perhaps disapproval. He couldn't be too pleased to have his ride interrupted by a woman popping out of the ground and twirling about like some kind of deranged prairie dog.

"I'm sorry for startling your horse." Keeping her movements slow and measured so as not to repeat her offense, she approached the cowboy. "I should have paid closer attention to my surroundings. I didn't realize I was so near a . . . road."

The word dissolved on her tongue as she noted the field of untamed prairie grass spreading in all directions. Not even a game trail in evidence. She shrugged, and her lips curved in a self-deprecating smile. “Well, road or not, I was clearly in the wrong, and I apologize.”

Embarrassment at her mistake tugged her gaze downward, where it snagged on the dark form draped across the cowboy’s lap. Her breath caught, and her eyes grew moist. “Oh no.”

She moved nearer, drawn by a dog’s limp form. “Is he . . . ?” She couldn’t finish the sentence, aching for the poor creature.

A small whine echoed in answer, and a weight lifted from Penelope’s heart. Thank heaven! She stroked the dog’s head, trying to impart some small measure of comfort. That’s when she noticed the bandage tied beneath his front leg.

“What happened to him?” Slowly, she raised her attention from the injured dog to the man who cared enough to carry him upon his horse.

The cowboy’s expression proved hard to read. His mouth and jaw were set in hard lines, but his eyes . . . She glanced down.

Don’t be foolish, Pen. This man doesn’t need you. He’s a complete stranger. One you’ll never see again.

Yet that truth didn’t stop the twinge of recognition from vibrating across her chest. God had blessed her with a compassionate nature. Too compassionate sometimes, leaving her open to the machinations of people like Gerard Carlisle, who had no qualms about taking advantage of a young woman’s naïveté and tender heart. Nevertheless, she couldn’t ignore people or animals who were alone or in pain. Perhaps because she herself had been unwanted and discarded, she recognized loneliness and heartbreak in others. And this man, with all his strength and capability, had been hurt. Deeply.

By the time she found the courage to study his face again,

he had turned his eyes away from her, lifting his head to gaze upon the land before him. A muscle in his jaw ticked, and his horse sidestepped as if sensing his rider's impatience.

"Dog took a bullet in a shootout with a pair of bank robbers. I'm trying to get him to a retired doctor I know who lives out this way. So if you're not hurt, I need to be on my way."

A shootout? Bank robbers? Good heavens. Who was this man?

It didn't matter. Such a wild tale was bound to be fiction. Nevertheless, the dog's injury was genuine and needed to be tended.

"Of course." Penelope withdrew her hand and stepped back. "I'm perfectly fit. Please go. Get him the help he needs."

The man nodded and nudged his horse forward.

"I'll say a prayer for him," Penelope called as the horse's gait expanded into a canter. Beneath her breath, she murmured a second promise. "I'll say one for you, too."

Don't look back. Your concern is the dog, not the girl.

Yet it required physical effort to keep from twisting in the saddle and staring over his shoulder. Would she still be there? Or would she have disappeared back into whatever fairyland she had come from?

Where *had* she come from? Titus frowned. There were no towns nearby. Very few ranches or farms this far out from Glen Rose. She'd had no horse or mule. Her apron had been streaked with dirt, and bits of grass and debris had clung to her dress and hair as if she'd rolled down a hill or been tossed from a moving wagon. Could she be the victim of foul play, left alone in the middle of nowhere to make her way to the nearest homestead or town? Should he turn back? Ask her if she needed help?

Titus clenched his jaw. Should've thought of that before he rode off. The dog's situation might be critical, but a person's well-being—especially a female person's—outweighed that of an animal.

There'd been no indication she was in any distress, though. In fact, she'd seemed almost celebratory. Spinning in circles. Smiling with a purity so rare it had momentarily stolen his wits. If Rex had reared a second time, Titus likely would have slid straight off the horse's rump and landed on his backside in the dust.

Which made no sense. He was immune to pretty faces. After what happened to his brother, Tate, he despised beautiful women. And, no doubt about it, the mystery girl had been beautiful. Shiny black hair gathered loosely atop her head and tied with a red ribbon. A few loose strands curled around her oval face. Her complexion had been too pale for a woman used to working outdoors, yet the pink blooming in her cheeks radiated vitality. This wasn't an indolent, pampered woman afraid to let the sun mar her porcelain complexion with freckles. She was a fair-skinned pixie alive in her element. A kindhearted pixie moved to tears by a dying dog's plight.

Who was she?

He'd likely never know, despite the fact that the detective in him was already cataloging clues. Serviceable boots and a plain, shapeless dress. Not a woman of means. A servant in a wealthy household, perhaps? One who didn't work outdoors overmuch? She spoke well. As if she'd been educated. So maybe not a servant. A poor relation? Or maybe she only dressed that way when she decided to ramble across the countryside and spook unsuspecting horses.

She obviously possessed an adventurous spirit, judging by the dirt and debris on her person. The small cloth bag she

carried didn't bulge, so she couldn't be on a long journey. Her people must be nearby. Whoever her people were.

Forget her, he ordered himself as he spotted the road that would take him to the Diamond D Ranch.

Rangers hunted criminals, not mysterious pixies. So unless her name showed up in the black book headquarters handed down, he had no business giving her a second thought.

Narcissa LaBelle pried the ruby free of its setting and held it between thumb and forefinger. Extending her arm, she moved the gem into the path of a sunbeam that had found its way into her tent.

“Hello, beauty.”

Light danced through the facets, sparking an eruption of fire inside the small stone.

“That's right. Glitter for Mama.”

A purr rumbled in Narcissa's throat as she beheld her latest acquisition. She'd not expected to meet up with a man of means in the tiny, depressingly named town of Eulogy, Texas. But the moment she'd laid eyes on Mr. Hubert Hathaway, she'd recognized his worth. The ring on his hand. The pin on his lapel. The lustful gleam in his eye. He'd been perfect.

Narcissa placed the gem atop a square of black velvet spread upon her dressing table, then turned her attention to the silver stick pen now void of its focal point. She opened a slender drawer to her right, pulled out a handkerchief, and slid the pin inside the folds. Cecil would see to the silver for her. Melt it down. Transform it. Give it a new role to play—that of nugget. Gold. Silver. She had quite a collection. Gifts from admirers who knew of her fascination with the big strikes. That was the story she'd tell should anyone discover the sack in the bottom of her locked chest.

The California Gold Rush in the '40s and '50s, the Comstock Lode in Nevada in the '60s and '70s, and the silver boom in Leadville, Colorado, in the '80s. Such transformative events. A man could change his fortune in the blink of an eye. All he needed was ingenuity, intelligence, and the willingness to take risks.

Narcissa possessed all three.

Lifting her chin, she gazed at herself in the large vanity mirror propped atop her portable dressing table. She stretched her neck and twisted her face first to the left, then to the right. Was that a new line around her mouth? She relaxed her smile into a seductive pout. Better. The line disappeared. Mostly.

Narcissa continued her inspection, her gaze snagging on a gray sprig above her temple. No! Were there others? She leaned close to the mirror and examined her hairline, her fingers shaking. What if there were some in the back that she couldn't see? She couldn't afford to be marked by age. Not yet. Narcissa fumbled for her tweezers. Latching on near the hair's root, she snatched the vile offender from her scalp and tossed it onto the ground where it belonged.

Shaken by the encounter, she breathed deeply and calmed the demon inside who taunted her with visions of old crones possessing bent backs and warts on their noses. She smoothed the skin over her cheekbones with her fingertips, then added a touch of color from the rouge pot to brighten them further.

"There, you see? Nothing to worry about. You're as beautiful as ever."

Narcissa lowered her eyelids in a sultry stare and swiveled on her cushioned stool to view herself from the left, the side with the beauty mark men found so intriguing. Plumping her lips in a provocative moue, she kissed the air, then ran a hand down the length of her neck, pleased by the swanlike elegance. Tugging down the neckline of her bodice slightly,

she eyed the abundant curves swelling above the snug fabric. Still her best feature.

No one in this wilderness could rival her. There might be pretty, fresh-faced girls in the vicinity, but none of them knew how to wield their looks like a weapon. How to invest their assets and create a return that would allow them to leave this dusty place behind.

Like any good miner, Narcissa knew where to dig. How to plan. To scout out investors who would provide the funds she required. Funds that would take her to Europe, where she would play the most important role of her career. American heiress. A widow, perhaps. Wealthy. Refined. All of society would be her stage. Men would flock to her. Desire her. But her heart would beat for only one. Her true love. An elderly nobleman or a ridiculously rich merchant. A gentleman in want of a wife, a grand beauty to impress his associates and grace his home. His very large, very opulent home. A place for her to live happily ever after.

Narcissa stroked the edge of the mirror as if it were a pet.

Oh yes. She had plans. And thanks to her latest *investor*, she was one step closer to achieving them.

Picking up the spare corset that lay draped across her lap, she moved it into the light to better see the small opening she'd pulled threads from earlier. She fit her little finger into the opening, a narrow pocket designed to hold a piece of boning. But this corset used more lucrative support. Narcissa lifted the small ruby from the saucer and slid it inside the corset seam. Working it down the length of the pocket with her fingers, she smiled when it came to rest against the other stones already inside. At this rate, she'd have the boning channel filled before they left Texas.

She ran her finger over the small bumps hiding beneath the white cotton coutil fabric and licked her lips. "It's the little things that make life worth living."