



Throwing her saddle blanket on her skittish roan, Charlotte squinted toward the early morning sun. He jumped just the way she'd figured. There were some advantages to spending so much time with horses that she smelled like one.

"Whoa, fella." She stroked his neck before saddling him.

"Why you bring that one?" Eduardo looked skeptical as he pitched the last skillet into the wagon.

"The wrangler gets what's left. Despite his orneriness, he's strong and smart. With his spirit, it'll be hard for any cow to get the best of him." Charlotte grinned at the cook as she mounted the mustang. She'd worked with this one enough to anticipate his jumps and hops and kept her seat.

Eduardo shook his head as he climbed onto the wagon seat. "*Vaya con Dios.*"

"*Gracias.*" Charlotte rode off to start another long day. Eduardo's blessing for God to be with her reminded her Who was still in charge. God and the loyal cook wouldn't desert her.

"You got all the warning you'll get about pulling your own load." Toby tossed a frown her way as he rode toward the front of the herd.

His disdainful look and harsh tone shot pain through her.

How she hoped and prayed they could someday be friends the way they had been as kids. That Toby would be at peace again with God. She missed the closeness they'd enjoyed until Toby came home from the war.

But that was in God's hands too. She had no idea what to do to make things right with her brother. Or how to help him return to the good, kind man he'd once been.

The *remuda* gave her fewer problems than the last few days. Riding the troublemaker who wanted to bolt had been a good idea. Jumper might become her regular morning horse.

With the mustangs adjusting to the trail, Charlotte had time to think and pray over her troubles with Toby. She understood him resenting her for coming along to keep an eye on him. And she realized why he didn't want Mr. Shepherd to get too close to her and figure out who she actually was. But her brother had no good reason to keep being so cruel. She wanted to save the ranch the same as he did. He should be working with her instead of against her.

Shortly before noon, Charlotte guided her horse into camp, dragging the large tree branch she'd lassoed. The herd kicked up dust less than a mile behind her. Maybe she'd have another half hour of peace and quiet before Toby showed up to eat.

Thoughts of her problems disappeared quicker than a lightning-fast mustang when Mr. Shepherd rode up next to her with his usual bright smile. She looked away before she got caught up in his sparkling eyes. If only she dared pull her hat a little lower and discreetly study him.

"Judging from the way you rope, your father must be proud to have two good hands on a drive."

Charlotte's grip tightened on the lariat as bittersweet memories ran through her mind. "Yes, sir. Pa was proud of me and Toby."

"Was?"

"Pa died last month." She almost choked on her words.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you." She blinked away the moisture in her eyes.

The foreman nodded. "I'll tend to the wood so you can get the corral ready."

"No need for that." She glanced over her shoulder toward the approaching cattle.

"Your brother has to pay more attention to the beeves than you, in case you're wondering if he'll see me helping you."

"I guess so." His reassurance didn't help her feel any better about Toby, but telling a man she hardly knew about family troubles wouldn't be right or good.

Mr. Shepherd reached over and took the rope from her. Thank God her gloves kept him from feeling her sweaty palms.

"Uh, I appreciate your help, Mr. Shepherd."

"You're welcome." He turned his horse and dragged the limb toward Eduardo.

As soon as she dismounted, she got the corral ropes from behind the wagon. She couldn't see the cook or the foreman from this spot. Anything to keep from watching the trail boss more than she already had. More than she should.

Eduardo greeted Mr. Shepherd in Spanish.

"Sorry, *señor*, but I just spoke one of the few Spanish words I know."

Charlotte grinned to herself as she tied a knot. What a clever way to find out if Mr. Shepherd spoke Spanish. She wouldn't mind if she were the only one who understood the cook. Except talking with the foreman in a language Toby wouldn't bother to learn would be nice. She shook her head. She didn't dare think such things.

The trail boss felt sorry for a mistreated kid, and she couldn't let him think anything else about her. She waited until the man walked over to watch for the herd coming in before heading toward the fire to help Eduardo.

"*El jefe es un hombre muy bueno.*" The cook placed his hand on her arm.

While he complimented the trail boss, she couldn't miss

Eduardo's emphasis on the words 'very good.' But admitting how much she agreed would be dangerous in more ways than she cared to think about.

Giving any of the men reasons to think she wasn't actually Charlie wouldn't be good. The other cowboys wouldn't want a woman along any more than Toby did. After listening to their lewd comments around the campfire, she wondered if she'd be safe with some of them.

Toby detested the whole idea of her wearing men's clothes. A gentleman like Mr. Shepherd might loathe her even more.

"I pray for you." Eduardo stooped to check the coals heaped over the Dutch oven.

"I need all the prayers you've got time for and more."

As the cowboys rode in, he whispered in Spanish about promising her father to continue praying for Toby and how hard it got some days to keep his vow. "But since God never give up on him, I won't."

"Sí, me too." She grabbed the pot hook to lift the lid and check the salt pork.

"Since I can smell the beans and biscuits, you two must be cooking while you're jabbering."

Charlotte jumped as Toby came up behind her.

"Charlie good company and good help." Eduardo lifted the Dutch oven from the hot coals.

"Good for nothing but trouble." Toby continued muttering to himself as he took his leave.

"Thanks for taking up for me." Charlotte finished stacking tin plates and cups on a log.

"Another promise I make your *padre*."

Not that bucking Toby was easy for Eduardo, but she couldn't help wondering if he'd be able to keep his promises to Pa easier than she could keep hers. Toby couldn't find someone like Eduardo just anywhere. But he didn't want or need a sister who planned to be sure he didn't squander a single dollar they made on this drive.

Once they got to Abilene and sold the cattle, she wouldn't let him out of her sight. And *they* would sell the herd together so she'd know exactly how much money they'd make. Something else that would make him furious.

Such thoughts sent chills through her despite the heat from the cook fire. As much as she hated to think about it, Eduardo's pledge to watch out for her might be more necessary than she wished.

No matter how hard she fought them, her uneasy thoughts plagued her the rest of the afternoon. Eduardo did his best to reassure her while they cooked supper.

"I watch you. God watch you. He want you here."

After supper, Charlotte again picked a spot on the edge of the circle of men gathered around the campfire. Since Toby had started his turn on night watch, this might become her favorite part of the day. Especially if Mr. Shepherd continued his habit of saying something nice to her while her brother wasn't around.

She hoped God didn't think she was awful if she prayed Toby didn't find another hand when they got to the next town. Since the time their sister married a few months ago, her brother had become determined to save every cent he could. Until the day he wouldn't explain why he'd come home with so little money from selling horses.

Whatever the reason, she had no intention of trying to keep him from being thrifty if it meant she could spend even a few uninterrupted minutes with David Shepherd every day.

Except enjoying his company wouldn't do her one bit of good in the long run. He was only being nice to a kid he felt sorry for, and she dared not tell such a gentleman the truth about herself. He'd never accept such an unladylike woman—especially one who intended to keep working her ranch after this drive ended.

Ben Tyler, the man who'd been riding drag for Toby, reached in front of her to pick up a stick, startling her from her thoughts. Pulling his pocket knife from his vest, he started whittling.

“I noticed you Double B men switch places every day.” Tyler kept his attention focused on his knife.

“It’s only fair to take turns eating all that dust.” A man Charlotte knew only as Jessup wiped his grimy face with his bandana.

“You know Mr. Grimes better than us.” Tyler looked straight at Charlotte as he tossed wood shavings into the fire. “Would he mind us changing out?”

Staring at the red and yellow sparks created from the wood chips, Charlotte swallowed hard. Tyler might as well have tossed *her* into the flames asking her to speak for her hot-tempered brother.

“Ask me those kinds of questions. I can’t see anything wrong if y’all do the same as my hands.” Mr. Shepherd kept his eyes on her as he answered.

Such a perceptive man to sense her fear and do his best to help her out. Another thing she shouldn’t like about him.

While the hands decided who would ride where the next day, Charlotte slipped off behind the wagon and leaned against the rough boards. After several deep breaths, her heart slowed back to normal.

“Are you all right?”

Mr. Shepherd’s low voice sent her pulse racing for a different reason.

“Uh, I’m fine.”

Her quick denial had sounded too high-pitched for a boy. How she hoped he hadn’t noticed. The almost full moon gave him too good of a view. The longer he stared, the longer she wondered what he looked to be studying or thinking.

“I told the men to let me tell your brother about switching places.”

“Thanks, but Toby won’t ride drag.”

“I’ll handle that too.” He smiled straight into her eyes.

*Keep breathing.* She should say something back to him. Look away. But she couldn’t do either one.

"I had a sergeant like your brother during the war, so I know how to handle him."

"The war changed Toby. We used to be real close. He wasn't like this before." Despite how he'd treated her, she couldn't help defending him. He was still her brother. And she still loved him and prayed for him.

Mr. Shepherd exhaled slowly. "The war changed us all. You were doing a man's work long before you should have been."

The words meant to comfort and praise her brought back painful memories of heated arguments she'd had with Ma about working the ranch wearing Pete's old clothes. Someone had to take her younger brother's place after he died. With no money to hire a man during the war, even if one had been available, she'd done what needed to be done. Even Pa hadn't been able to get Ma to see that Charlotte couldn't work a ranch wearing a dress.

"Ma never understood about me helping Pa to the day she died."

Oh, she shouldn't have said that, giving him any reason to wonder why Ma didn't want her supposed youngest son helping with the ranch. She had to be more careful.

"So you've lost your mother too?"

She nodded as she let out the breath she'd been holding. "During the war, same as my other brother."

Not that she wanted to talk about Ma or Pete being gone, but at least the man focused on that instead of why she and Ma had disagreed.

"Be glad God gave them to you for as long as He did."

She couldn't mistake his sad tone of voice or the way his whole body stiffened. He quickly turned his head as if afraid of giving away his true feelings.

"Thanks." She focused on lowering her voice, hoping to sound more like a boy. "I'll remember what you said."

"Sure, you do that." His words sounded strained. "Uh... I'll see you in the morning."

Once again, Charlotte stared at his retreating form, wishing

he'd stayed while wondering why he'd left so suddenly. No matter the reason, he wouldn't want to be anywhere near her if he knew the boy he felt so sorry for was a lying woman telling him parts of the truth and deliberately misleading him about everything else. She'd been so sure God wanted her to make this drive and keep her promise to Pa.

But she hadn't counted on the complications caused by meeting someone like David Shepherd.

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DAVID SUCKED IN A SHAKY BREATH. He'd left as quickly as he could without being rude. Talking with Charlie about losing parents reminded him of things he'd tried not to think about for years. He did thank God for the loving grandparents who had raised him. But after almost twenty-eight years, it still hurt that his father deserted him without ever wanting know him. It wasn't his fault his mother died the day after he was born.

The men's laughter jerked him back to the present. He returned to his spot by the fire in time to catch the end of Jessup's tale about a woman who married someone else before he came back from the war. The men's coarse language bothered him as much as it did Charlie, but he couldn't try to influence his hands for the better if he never had anything to do with them.

Shortly before daylight the next morning, David squatted next to his wrangler and tapped him on the shoulder. "Schmidt, time to start another day."

He ambled toward Grimes while the man woke Charlie and the cook. The gruff words to his younger brother grated on David's ears, especially after hearing the kid last night trying to justify his brother's behavior because of the war.

Grimes wasn't the only one who had lived through the nightmares of battle and death then come home to find loved ones in their graves. He had bawled like a child to see the graves—his young wife and newborn son buried next to his



grandparents. The sight still haunted him. Leaving him precious little sympathy for using war memories as an excuse for his partner's hot temper.

"I need a word with you while your brother helps with breakfast."

"Sure." Grimes followed him to the edge of the camp.

"While you were on watch last night, your men and I talked about taking turns where they ride herd. I told them it would be fine."

"Without asking me?" Grimes folded his arms across his chest. "I'm in charge of *my* men."

"I never said you weren't." David took extra effort to keep his voice calm.

"But you spoke for me."

"True, but I assumed a man with your military experience understands about keeping up the men's morale."

Even with the breaking dawn barely lighting Grimes's face, David could see his partner's eyes narrow to slits.

"I don't remember telling you about my war experience."

"While we talked about combining our herds, you mentioned fighting in Tennessee. Since you remind me of my former sergeant, I figured you were a leader in your company."

"Yeah." Grimes dropped his arms to his side.

The man's one-word answer spoke volumes. If he'd had a position of leadership, such a haughty man would have boasted about it. At least he didn't appear to realize he'd just been insulted, since comparing anyone to David's hot-headed old sergeant was no compliment.

"Since you understand how to lead men by example, I assume you'll ride drag today." He might as well take the bull by the horns since Charlie was so sure his brother would never ride in that spot.

"What?"

Several heads turned their direction when Grimes raised his voice.

“You’re a good enough businessman to know it doesn’t hurt to be on your men’s good side, especially if we run into hostile Indians after crossing the Red River.”

Grimes looked toward the pink and yellow horizon before slowly turning to glare straight into David’s eyes. “I know when a man’s trying to butter me up. You have the better hand because you know the trail.” He paused as if he wanted his words to sink in.

David stared back at the tight-lipped man. “Then you’re smart enough to understand what’s best for both of us on this drive.”

“I’ll ride drag. But I won’t forget this.” Grimes’ right hand rested momentarily on top of his revolver before he turned on his heel and stalked off.