



I gnoring the dust created by the bawling cows trailing off to her side, Charlotte reined in her horse and shifted in her saddle for one last look at home. The house was only a speck in the distance, but she could see every inch of it in her mind. Smell the sweet scent of the fresh wildflowers she'd left on her parents' and brother's graves yesterday.

Pa and Ma had given all they had for this place. She'd do the same. But would Toby? Doubting the older brother she'd always looked up to made her insides squirm. Whatever the war had done to him, he kept to himself. Pa had fought with Sam Houston and said a man needed time to get over a war, some men longer than others. But Toby had come home four years ago.

Four very long years.

No matter how much she'd rather stay home, she had to go. Sighing, she returned her attention to the herd of horses. The survival of their ranch lay on her shoulders. Every ounce of that weight pressed down hard. *Lord, I hope I'm doing the right thing.*

Shortly before the sun stood straight overhead, Charlotte halted the mustangs near where Eduardo had stopped the wagon to cook the noon meal. Toby rode in the distance, probably

waiting for the other herd they were meeting. Since she'd seen them a ways back, they should catch up soon.

Their trail cook grinned as she dismounted. "You make good wrangler."

"Only if I can convince the big roan over there to stay with the rest of the *remuda*." She grabbed ropes from the wagon to make a corral for the mustangs.

"Sí, but if anyone work magic with horse, is you." Eduardo's compliment washed over her like a balm.

"You didn't come to talk, *Charlie*." Toby's sneering emphasis on the nickname he'd intended as an insult couldn't be missed as he rode up to them.

"No, but we'll keep the real reasons I'm here between you and me unless you'd like your too-talkative kid brother to tell everyone things about our business you don't want anyone to know."

She bent to tie a rope to the wagon tongue and jerked the knot tight, glad for one way to keep him quiet. He wouldn't want a single hand to know his so-called brother came along as the wrangler only because Toby had wasted so much money he couldn't afford to hire someone for the job.

He glared at her before riding away. Noon wasn't quite here. Their war of words was getting old already. She had to stand her ground or go home before they got any farther away, and without being able to trust him, the latter wasn't something she could consider.

While she tied the last rope for the makeshift corral, Toby returned with a strange man. Must be the foreman of the other herd. Someone else to be an audience for her brother's taunts. She checked to be sure the ropes were taut while Toby and the other man dismounted.

With his ever-present grin in place, the cook set his Dutch oven on the ground as the men approached him. Charlotte swung into her saddle and started herding the horses into the corral. The hands would need fresh mounts soon.

"Eduardo, this is David Shepherd, my new partner," Toby said.

Mr. Shepherd extended his hand to Eduardo. "My cook broke his arm yesterday. Could I trouble you to fix the meals for my men too?"

Eduardo rubbed his chin. "*Señor* Toby, is all right with you?"

"They brought their own supplies, so it's fine with me."

"Then *sí, señor*."

"Thank you." The man's deep southern drawl made her wonder where he'd once called home.

"How many men you have?"

"Eight. I'm sorry about the extra work."

"Charlie help me. Charlie good help." Eduardo pointed toward Charlotte.

Sucking in air, she halted her horse to turn and take more than a side-long look at David Shepherd. No wonder Toby said this man had turned women's heads in San Antonio. His wide-brimmed brown hat couldn't hide his handsome features. High cheekbones and a perfect almost-upturned nose were accented by his kind-looking, tanned face. A winsome smile revealed a most interesting lone dimple on the right side of his mouth.

If he were half as nice as he looked ... *Oh, my*. More than the spring heat warmed her cheeks. She looked away from his direct gaze, hoping he'd mistake her awkwardness for the youngster she was pretending to be.

When she dismounted, Mr. Shepherd turned his attention to her. Charlotte busied herself ground tethering her horse. Her ridiculous thoughts and emotions needed a corral more than the mustangs did.

"I'd like to ask you a question."

"You would?" Her head jerked up. He sounded sincere, but she couldn't believe he wanted to talk to a kid wrangler about anything.

"David Shepherd." He offered his hand.

Good thing she'd worn gloves. All other thoughts, rational or

otherwise, flew away as she shook with him and stared into the deepest sky-blue eyes she'd ever seen. Since he wasn't as tall as Toby, she had a wonderful view of the fascinating man standing only inches away.

"Uh, I'm Charlie Grimes." She finally remembered to release his hand. "Toby's my brother."

As he looked her over, his eyes widened for just a moment. She hoped his momentary look of surprise came from Toby maybe not mentioning he was related to his wrangler and not from him thinking the boy in front of him looked a lot like a girl.

"Which is easier for you, combining our horses or keeping them separate?"

She forced herself not to stare at him more than she already had. Toby scowled at her from behind Mr. Shepherd. If it bothered her brother for someone to say something nice to her or if he was worried the man might discover her true identity, she couldn't tell. Worse, she hoped Toby couldn't see how this man affected her.

"Umm ..." She looked down, lest Mr. Shepherd realize how much she'd like to continue studying everything about him. "Keeping the *remudas* separate would be faster for changing mounts since I know our horses and your man knows yours."

Plus, no one would think it odd if this wrangler didn't sleep anywhere near the other wrangler since she needed as much distance and privacy as possible between her and the men at night.

Mr. Shepherd grinned. "Good idea."

"I'd better go help Eduardo." She turned toward the wagon, glad for an excuse to walk away. If she couldn't control the crazy feelings this considerate man stirred in her heart, she'd need to protect more than her identity. The dignified way he treated what he thought was a lowly kid wrangler drew her to him even more than his swoon-inducing good looks. She stared at his back until he and Toby were quite a ways from the wagon.

"He's good one, *señorita*."

Her attention jerked back to Eduardo. "You can't call me that." She whispered even though no one was close enough to hear her. "We don't know who else might speak Spanish."

The cook ducked his head. "Sí, I know."

"We can talk to each other in Spanish the way we've always done. Just don't call me anything that has to do with a female."

The customary smile returned as he grabbed a pot hook from the wagon. "Still, that one is good *hombre* to watch."

"I was wondering about a man with such a strange last name for a rancher, not studying him."

"Sí, if you say. But I tell you now he good *hombre*."

Charlotte knelt and busied herself with checking the fire. If she weren't careful, the man would cause her problems she'd never imagined could happen on a cattle drive. And judging from the mischievous sparkle in Eduardo's brown eyes, the cook just might help him if the foreman were so inclined.

---

DAVID LEFT to tell his wrangler to keep the *remudas* separated, but Grimes came with him. Why, David had no idea. They rode in silence since he couldn't think of anything they should discuss.

Grimes cleared his throat. "Don't take anything Charlie says too seriously."

"Why not?" He wondered why the man hadn't mentioned his brother was the wrangler for his outfit, but it wasn't his business to say anything about who the man picked.

"Mostly 'cause he's ... well he's Charlie. He's only fourteen. And he's—uh—a little different."

The boy had looked and sounded intelligent, but something about the too serious expression on Grimes's face kept him from voicing his thoughts. "I'll remember that."

"I'd appreciate it."

As they rode on, Grimes stared straight ahead. "I'll see to my herd."

The man left David to stare at his retreating back. Something about their strange exchange didn't make sense. Grimes had looked as nervous as a soldier on night watch in a dense fog. If he were so uneasy about his younger brother, he should have found a different wrangler. Hiring help was no problem with so many men around here needing work.

Since he had more important things to concern himself with than possible trouble between brothers, he urged his horse into a canter toward his herd. If this drive turned out as well as the last, he'd be the new owner of the Double B Ranch he'd come to love.

Allowing Mr. Bentley, the elderly owner, to live out his remaining days in peace in San Antonio. The godly partner who'd taken him in and treated him like the son he'd lost in the war deserved no less than David's best efforts to fulfill his wishes.

The welcome smell of beans cooking over the fire greeted David and his men by the time they joined the Grimes outfit.

"You barely got enough wood. You're not camping for fun with Pa, Charlie."

While he and his men dismounted, David couldn't miss the harsh, derisive tone Grimes used with his brother. Even from thirty feet away. Surely the man realized the whole camp could hear him. His stunned men exchanged glances instead of words.

He headed to the back of the wagon where Grimes was still berating the poor kid. The brothers' problems were none of his concern, but his conscience wouldn't allow him to let Grimes keep belittling an innocent helper trying to do his best.

"Head home if you can't pull your load."

"No matter how you treat me, I'm going with you."

Charlie's retort was soft enough David wouldn't have heard him if he hadn't been so close. Hands on his hips like a girl, the boy glared up at his brother before stalking off.

"Told you Charlie's different." Grimes's frown signaled he wasn't pleased to have David for an audience.

"He'd do better if you didn't yell at him all the time."

"The kid's got to learn. Pa spoiled him too much." The man shrugged.

Something else that didn't make sense. Grimes's supposed concerns about straightening out his brother sounded insincere, judging by the way he treated him. But rather than cause unnecessary problems, he let his partner's words go unchallenged.

The noon meal passed without another outburst from Grimes, probably because Charlie sat with the cook to eat. Give the boy credit for doing his best to keep the peace.

Once he left the herd to scout for water, David wished he could shove away thoughts of the two brothers. But his mind wouldn't quit going over what he'd seen and heard. A speckled tan lizard jumped off a rock and ran into the brush as his horse approached. He'd better enjoy this peaceful solitude after the explosion he'd witnessed at noon. Good thing he was the one who knew the trail and could insist his hot-headed partner ride point at the front of the herd instead of scouting.

The sun moved west sooner than David wished. He pulled his watch from his vest pocket. Four o'clock. Time to circle back and let the cook know he'd found a good spot for the night.

While the men settled the cattle, David turned his attention to the wranglers coming in with the horses. Catching the boy's eye, he grinned at him. The kid tried harder than he would have under the same circumstances.

He returned his attention to the hands and spotted Grimes heading his direction, still wearing a frown.

"If you're checking on Charlie, I can do that."

"Doesn't look like your brother needs checking. There's already enough wood stacked for cooking supper and breakfast tomorrow."

"I brought him along. He's my worry." Grimes's scowl didn't soften.

Swallowing his words of contradiction, David settled for shaking his head. He was a coward for not defending Charlie any

better than he had. How many Bible verses did he know about protecting the young and weak?

But he hadn't had any idea about the boy coming along when he'd partnered with Grimes. The two of them needed each other. Neither of them had enough men of their own to feel safe crossing through Indian Territory. He had too much at stake to jeopardize this drive.

David sucked in a deep breath. Might as well get another unpleasant chore out of the way. "Now's a good time to assign everyone their watches. I assume you'd like the first one with the man of your choice since you know your hands."

"No one expects the boss to do that." Grimes jerked his gaze from Charlie, glowering at David instead.

"True, but your outfit's shorthanded. So until we get to the next town where you can hire someone, you'll have to take your turn."

When Grimes did nothing but draw his mouth tighter, David headed toward the hands unsaddling their afternoon horses. He'd told his partner how many cowboys he needed when they'd talked in San Antonio. It wasn't his fault the man hadn't listened.

Grimes didn't budge from his spot behind the wagon until Charlie finished tying every knot in every rope of the makeshift corral. Strange how he thought he needed to keep such a close eye on his own brother.

"Before we eat, we'll tell you when you're on watch." David didn't speak until his partner stood at his side. "Mr. Grimes will take the first one with whichever man he chooses."

"Miller, since you rode point all day with me, we should be able to handle a watch together." Grimes's stiff posture didn't match the half-smile on his face.

"Sure, boss."

David grinned only on the inside as they finished assigning the night guards. With Grimes out of the way for a while, Charlie should enjoy a short time of peace. Doing one small thing to help the boy eased his nagging conscience a little bit.



AFTER SETTING the horses to graze for the night, Charlotte sat with the cowboys by the campfire only as long as she could stand it. The men's rough language and crude references to women made her want to cover her ears with her hands. Now she understood why the cowboys often stopped talking when she walked up to them while working the ranch. Too bad she couldn't tell them a lady was present now.

She made a show of yawning before making her way to Eduardo's wagon. Better to let the men think she was tired than have them guess she didn't like their company. A wrangler who acted as if he were better than them might be teased or worse, and she didn't need to do anything to draw unnecessary attention to herself.

The stars sparkled in the black sky like heavy dew on a sunny spring morning. She gazed up and concentrated on the beauty God had created instead of the low voices best ignored. Focusing on God's beauty instead of all the ugliness she'd experienced today might help soothe her tattered spirit. Abilene and mid-June would be a long time coming.

"I've watched the stars since I was a kid."

Charlotte jumped at the sound of David Shepherd's voice beside her. "I'd rather look at the sky and listen to the coyotes than the men." She kept her voice low.

"At least half of what they say isn't true." He chuckled.

She shook her head. "Ma would've washed my mouth out with soap if I talked like that."

"Grandmother would have done the same to me. Using coarse language doesn't make you more of a man, especially in God's eyes. Remember that."

"I will." His warm, soothing voice made her feel as if she were wrapped up in her favorite quilt on a cold day in front of their fire at home.

“I’m guessing this is your first drive. I followed you over here to tell you how well you’re doing.”

“Thanks, Mr. Shepherd.” She used his last name not just to keep up her ruse. Remaining formal and distant with this man was a must. His kind tone and words of praise stirred her heart even more than the sky-blue eyes she couldn’t see but well remembered.

“You’re welcome. I’ll leave you to turn in or just watch the stars.”

Charlotte stared at his retreating back, wishing he’d stayed. Except it wouldn’t have been much of a conversation only talking about horses and cows while guarding her secret. She sighed.

If only she hadn’t met such a wonderful man under such unwonderful conditions. But entertaining ideas about any man—even one as nice as Mr. Shepherd—wasn’t her reason for being here. She’d come to keep her promise to Pa. To do whatever she had to do to get the money to save their ranch. Her heart’s desires, her personal wishes would have to come after the ranch was taken care. Only God knew how these unforeseen, crazy twists could work for her heart’s good and to save the ranch at the same time.