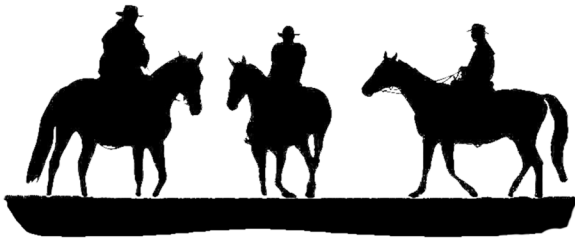


A PANHANDLE SUNRISE

KATHI MACIAS



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Against the colorful backdrop of an early Texas Panhandle ranch, the tension that develops as two cowboys vie for the love of the rancher's lovely daughter creates an engaging and exciting romantic tale. Insight into the concurrent spiritual journeys of all three as they navigate the choices they face makes this a sweetly satisfying novella in another compelling story by Kathi Macias.

— MARTHA SINGLETON, AUTHOR/EDITOR

Such a beautiful picture of how, no matter how far away we are from the Lord, He still speaks to our hearts. Loved it!

— DEJAH EDWARDS, AUTHOR/SPEAKER

A Panhandle Sunrise is a Christian romance novella which takes place on a cattle ranch in the Texas panhandle. It is a sweet, enjoyable story and a relaxing, easy read.

— CRYSTAL LINN

*To my beloved husband, Al, with whom I viewed my very first
Panhandle sunrise. And, of course, to Jesus, my Savior and eternal
Sunrise ...*

1



Summer 1892

Double-Bar J, just outside Amarillo, Texas

“Beautiful sunset, wasn’t it?”

The soft melodic voice caught Jake Matthews by surprise, but he managed not to show it. “I s’pose,” he grunted, keeping his eyes focused on the corral gate, even as he brushed away the melancholy he so often felt at the sight of a sunset.

Anabelle Floyd, the ranch owner’s daughter, had captivated Jake’s attention from the moment he first set foot on the Double-Bar J in the early spring of 1889. And yet, after three years, he and Anabelle had never had more than a brief, cursory conversation. Jake told himself it was his fault, but he simply couldn’t get past the lump that formed in his throat every time he got anywhere near the petite twenty-one-year-old with fiery red hair and green eyes.

“Looks like you’re are about done there,” Anabelle noted.

Did he hear irritation in her tone? Scolding himself for being rude, he turned to face her. Thankfully, he was once

again able to conceal his emotions as the sight of her in an ankle-length blue gingham dress with her hair done up on top of her head nearly took his breath away. He couldn't help but wonder if she could hear the pounding of his heart.

He cleared his throat, though the lump remained. "I, um ..."

He nodded. "Yep, I'm about done here." He realized he still had his wide-brimmed, once-white hat on, so he yanked it off his head and held it by his side, hoping his dark hair wasn't sticking up in all directions.

"So I see." Glancing from Jake's face to the gate and back again, Anabelle smiled, sending a lightning bolt down his spine. "Besides, it'll be dark soon. Why not quit for the day and join us out back? Daddy's goin' to light one of his campfires tonight, and, as you know, everyone's invited." She tipped her head slightly to the right, a playful glint in her eyes. "That includes you, Jake Matthews. You will come, won't you?"

If she'd asked him to walk *through* the fire instead of sit next to it, he couldn't have said no. "I, um ..." He swallowed. "It's been a long day, and I ... uh ... I still have a couple of things to do. Besides, I'm kind of tired—"

Her laugh interrupted him before he could finish his thought. "You can't be that tired," she insisted. "And you couldn't possibly have that much left to do." She took a step closer. "We won't be out there that long. The other hands have an early day tomorrow, too, but they're comin'." Another step. "Come on, Jake. Join us, please. Daddy just wants to lead us in singin' a few hymns, deliverin' a short devotional thought, havin' a word of prayer, and then we can visit with each other for a little while before callin' it a day." Her smile turned playful. "Besides, you've come to a couple of our campfires before and survived just fine."

Jake's cheeks flamed, and he was glad for the deepening darkness around them. "Yes, sure ... of course," he managed to

say. “Just give me a minute to go wash up a little. I’m ... kinda dusty.” He lifted his hat and brushed some dust from the brim as if to emphasize his point, then immediately regretted it as Anabelle coughed and backed up a couple of steps.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to ... I didn’t think ...”

Her face wasn’t as clear as it had been moments earlier, but he was still able to make out her grin in the fading light. “That’s perfectly all right,” she said. “I was born and raised in the Panhandle, remember? I’m well acquainted with dust. Besides, that’s Double-Bar J dust you’re wearin’, cowboy—my favorite kind. Now go wash it off if you must, but then come and join us. Please. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Um ...” He nodded. “Okay, sure. I’ll be right there, as soon as I—”

She nodded. “Good. I’ll be watchin’ for you.”

Jake stared as Anabelle headed toward the back of the house, disappearing into the darkness even before she turned the corner. There was nothing he wanted more than to walk toward the campfire with her right now, but he needed to take care of a couple things and wash some dust off his face first. He hoped he wouldn’t make a complete fool of himself in front of Anabelle, her father, or the other ranch hands who called the Double-Bar J their home.

The campfire was blazing by the time Jake sauntered up, trying his best to appear nonchalant, even as he scanned those already in attendance to find the redhead who had personally invited him. He spotted her almost immediately and wished he had the courage to join the half-dozen ranch hands already basking in her presence, obviously captivated by her every word. And then she laughed, the sound a joyous melody

washing over Jake like a gentle spring rain. Before he could convince himself to move a little closer in her direction, Jasper Floyd, Anabelle's father and owner of the Double-Bar J, stepped up onto a makeshift wooden platform that elevated him a couple feet above the others, commanding everyone's attention.

"Welcome," he called, his booming voice loud and clear. Jasper was a big man—tall, heavysset, and strong as a bull. Jake had seen him hoist a stray calf and carry it back to its mother without blinking an eye. The man might be in his fifties, but he could keep pace with the best of his cowhands when necessary.

A slight movement caught Jake's eye. Anabelle was motioning him to join her. He nodded and smiled but stayed where he was. It wasn't so much that he didn't want to become part of her doting entourage—though the thought did dart through his mind—but he didn't trust his legs to carry him across the hundred or so feet that separated them.

What's wrong with me? I've stood up to rustlers and coyotes, even a pack of wolves when they threatened the herd. But one little woman turns my legs to jelly, and I can't say anything intelligent to save my life. Why does she even bother with me? It's not like she's lackin' for attention.

He tore his eyes away as Jasper's voice pulled him back.

"Thank y'all so much for comin'," the big man said. "Before we get started, most of you have been around a while now and have joined us for our little informal meetin's out here, but a couple of you are here for the first time." He nodded in the direction of two new hands, who nodded in return.

As the recently appointed foreman, Jake had hired them and so far was pleased with their work. They were relatively quiet and kept to themselves, which was fine with him.

"And, in fact, we have one more new hand I'd like to

introduce.” Jasper glanced at Jake and smiled apologetically. “Sorry this is comin’ as news to you, too, Jake, since hirin’ and firin’ are your job. But Clint Jordan’s an old family friend, so when he showed up this afternoon and said he needed a job, I hired him on the spot.” He turned back to his right then and motioned for someone to join him.

A little rankled at the public announcement of being bypassed on the hiring of this new hand, family friend or not, Jake watched closely as the tall blond, spurs jangling, made his way up to the platform to stand beside Anabelle’s father. *Anabelle*. Jake glanced in her direction, but the new guy held her complete attention.

“Howdy,” Clint said, removing his perfectly creased hat. With the man standing in the firelight, Jake couldn’t help but notice his teeth shone nearly as white as his hat. “I’m glad to be here and look forward to gettin’ to know y’all.”

Jake grunted. Why did he suddenly feel threatened by this Clint guy? They hadn’t even met yet, and already he sensed trouble.

He shook his head. *Knock it off. You’re just imaginin’ things. Like Mama used to say, “Don’t go borrowin’ trouble. There’s always plenty to go ’round.”*

Jake snuck another glance at Anabelle, only to find her smiling as she gazed intently up at Clint. Just how good a family friend was this guy? It was obvious he and Anabelle were already acquainted. And though Jake couldn’t be sure, it appeared the newcomer was much closer in age to Anabelle’s twenty-one years than he was. At thirty-one, Jake suddenly felt ancient. He slunk away and headed for the bunkhouse. He wasn’t in the mood for singing or praying.

Jake retreated, looking forward to licking his unnamed wounds, but he'd forgotten that Cranky, the old-timer who'd worked on the ranch for as long as anyone could remember, would be there. Cranky knew everything there was to know about everything and everybody connected with the Double Bar-J, but he claimed he wasn't much for mingling. Hence, his absence at the campfire get-togethers and other such events.

When Jake opened the door and stepped inside, Cranky looked up from his self-imposed task of polishing his belt buckle. For the life of him, Jake couldn't imagine why a man who obviously despised baths could spend so much time cleaning and polishing his spurs and belt buckle. He was always working on one or the other. He'd once told Jake you could tell a lot about a man by the condition of his spurs and buckle. Jake had tried ever since to be a bit more careful about those two items, but he knew the shine on his didn't begin to match Cranky's.

The old-timer's slightly rheumy eyes settled on Jake. "Back already? Sounds like the singin's just gettin' started out there. What'd you do, sneak out early?" He shook his head. "Can't say I blame you. Ain't no point in those get-togethers, far as I can see."

Jake considered telling Cranky it was none of his business. After all, technically, Jake was his boss, despite the old man's seniority. Still, Jake's mama and daddy had taught him better than to be disrespectful to anyone, particularly someone of advanced age.

"Nah," he said, his conscience tweaking him over what he tried to convince himself was a harmless white lie. "Just don't care much for singin', I guess. Besides, I'm tired."

The old man nodded, the creases softening in his leathery face. For a moment, Jake considered asking him how old he

was, but thought better of it and went straight to his bunk, turning his back to his elderly roommate.

“Tired, eh?” Cranky sighed loudly. “Yeah, I s’pose that’s as good a reason as any. My old bones been wantin’ to call it a day for a while now.”

Cranky paused, obviously waiting for Jake to answer. When he didn’t, the old man said, “Well, I guess that’s about it. I’ve said all that needs sayin’, so I believe I’ll hit the hay and get some shut-eye.”

Without turning, Jake nodded, looking forward to pulling off his boots for the first time in about fifteen hours. “Me too,” he said. “See you in the mornin’, Cranky.”

The old man didn’t answer, but Jake imagined he’d be snoring up a storm any minute now.



Scarcely twenty-four hours later, Jake stood outside the bunkhouse and watched as breathtaking streaks of orange and purple painted the night sky. He had awakened that morning, after Clint’s public introduction at the campfire the night before, trying to shake off the hazy remnants of a dream that clearly included images of both Clint and Anabelle. Throwing himself into his work, he had done his best to put his dream out of his mind. Although he’d managed to get a lot of fence mending done, he wasn’t as successful at banishing the two from his thoughts.

Despite the weariness of a twelve-hour workday, he knew he wasn’t ready to sleep. He was about to head over to the barn and check on the horses when a deep voice he had heard only a couple of times interrupted.

“Jake Matthews, hold up. You got a minute?”

Jake’s jaw muscles twitched, but he forced himself to turn

and look into the perfectly chiseled, tanned face of Clint Jordan. “Clint. What can I do for you?”

His smile appeared genuine as he spoke. “Oh, nothin’ special. I just thought, since you’re the boss around here, I should formally introduce myself.”

Jake tensed. “We were introduced at the campfire last night, and I met you again later at the bunkhouse, not to mention we worked the fences together most of the day. Besides, I’m not the boss,” he said, his words measured. “That would be Mr. Floyd. But then, you already know that, since y’all are family friends, right?”

Clint chuckled. “Well, I s’pose technically that’s true, but you’re the foreman. In my book, that’s the guy who’s in charge of what really matters. Know what I mean?”

Was the guy trying to flatter him or play with him? Jake squinted to better see Clint’s expression. Although Clint was friendly enough, Jake sensed a hint of warning deep down in his stomach, the kind he’d felt just before he came up on that nest of rattlers one morning out on the back forty. Heeding that warning had enabled him to dodge the venomous strike that came seconds later. Was Clint Jordan a snake, or was Jake judging him unfairly because he resented the man’s long-term relationship with Anabelle and her father?

Jake started to explain that he hadn’t been foreman long and only got the job because the two more qualified hands turned it down, but he thought better of it. “Okay, if you say so. Well, I need to get goin’. I was just fixin’ to go check on the horses.”

“In the barn?” Clint’s smile widened, if that was possible. “Hey, don’t worry about it. Save yourself a trip. I just came from there, and they’re all fine.”

Jake’s jaw twitched again. He wasn’t sure what bothered him most at that particular moment—Clint’s condescending

attitude or his ever-present smile. Maybe Jake imagined the condescension, but the smile could not be denied.

“I believe I’ll head on over there anyway,” he said, forcing a smile of his own. “But thanks for lettin’ me know everything’s okay at the barn.”

“Sure thing,” Clint said, then shrugged his shoulders. “Tell you what. I’ll walk on over there with you. It’ll give us a good chance to get better acquainted, know what I mean?”

Jake didn’t care what Clint meant. He wanted to be alone for a bit, especially after spending the last couple of minutes with the handsome newcomer who rankled him at every turn. He sighed and set out for the barn, their spurs clanking in unison as they walked.