

## CHAPTER ONE



*Wyoming Territory ~ Spring 1884*

Annie Gephart pressed her lips together to keep from begging Tom Passey—the greasiest, most foul-mouthed cowpuncher she'd ever met—to stay on.

“I’ll take my wages now.” Tom held out his filthy palm. His pristine sombrero contrasted with his scraggly mustache, tobacco-stained teeth, shabby woolies, and worn boots.

She’d rather cuddle up with a rattlesnake than keep this man inside her cabin any longer, but she sorely needed him to stay.

She crossed over to the roll-top desk and opened the upper drawer. There was just enough money to satisfy his demands, but she hadn’t intended to pay him until he sold some of her beeves in Cheyenne. She turned to Tom, who couldn’t be taller than five-foot-two, and looked down at him. “I’ll give you an extra five percent if you stay until you drive the cattle to market.”

“No, I’ll take what you owe me now.” He spit on her well-scrubbed puncheon floor.

She couldn’t keep from staring at the dark spittle and clenching her fists. “But why?”

He rolled his chew from one side of his jowl to the other. “I have my business, and you have yours. Besides, you don’t make for the best boss, being a citified woman.” He tilted his head. “Do you even know how many head I ought to sell in Cheyenne? How many to hold back to strengthen your herd?”

Though they both knew the answers, Annie only raised her chin farther. “Are you certain you want your wages now?”

“Unless you can give me a sweeter deal than what I’ve been offered.”

“What percentage do you want?”

“Not a percentage. I’ve been promised better wages, with a boss man who knows what he’s doing. And when the boss man makes better money, I make better money.” He shrugged. “But if you want me to stay, the deed to the ranch would be enough.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m not selling.”

He cocked his hip. “Oh, you don’t need to sell, darlin’.” He gave her a look that made her breath clog in her chest. “I’ll take you too.”

Annie whirled around and grabbed the stack of bills from the drawer. “Seems you’ve made my decision easy, Mr. Passey.” She counted out his wages.

“Suit yourself.” Tom reached for the money, but instead, cupped her fingers and caressed her palm with his thumb.

A slimy shiver bored through her fingers, crept up her arm, and skittered down her spine.

How dare he?

She shoved the cash into his hand and stepped out of his reach.

He folded the bills and eyed her for several long seconds.

Hugging her arms across her thin chest, she returned the glare.

He shrugged and strutted out the front door, letting it slam behind him.

His sweaty stench lingered, so she reopened the door and

leaned against it, letting the cool spring breeze waft in to expel every trace of him.

Tom mounted his black mare, doffed his hat, and rode past her children busy in the nearby pasture.

Every shred of hope disappeared with him, tangled up in his knowledge and experience—the only worthy things the man possessed.

Spencer's exuberant holler sounded at the pasture's edge when his thrown lariat ringed a cow skull mounted on a barrel, and Annie's heart lightened a fraction. At least she wasn't completely alone. Mud splattered her eight-year-old son's freckled face, and his windblown hair reminded her of his father. Where else could she raise the boy but here?

Nearby, Celia worked her cow pony, circling several calves. Annie's mother would drop in a fit of apoplexy at the sight of Celia astride, wearing a worn split skirt, and her two long braids swinging without the constraint of a bonnet. Mother always said if you're not a lady, then you aren't anything. Annie hugged herself. She was definitely nothing now.

Though just fifteen, Celia knew more about cattle than both her brother and mother put together, but not enough to run the place. Thankfully the girl was willing to work with the cattle, but she wouldn't do much beyond that without a fight. Annie heaved a sigh and stared out over her ranch. The cattle boom indicated this was the year to make money, but thirteen years of her late husband's hard work here in Wyoming mattered not if all she knew how to do was clean and garden.

On the far edge of her land, a sheepherder pushed his flock over the top of the ridge and headed north. If her husband were alive, she'd have set off to tell the lonely herder to move back across the valley, but she wouldn't bother now. Her animosity for sheep had died with her husband.

She strode back into the house, cleaned up after Tom, and then paced her little parlor crammed with the furniture they'd

brought from Virginia in hopes of making this simple house feel more like home.

She couldn't run a ranch without a handful of gunslick men, and now she no longer had the unsettling Mr. Passey to depend upon. Annie licked her dry lips. If only she'd listened to the men talking cattle prices or animal husbandry. But no, she'd been content to keep care of hearth and home.

Could she have done anything more foolish?

She stopped at Gregory's favorite chair. The indentation in the headrest would probably still smell of him if she pressed her face into the recess. The cushions beckoned her to curl up in the seat and sob, but she thumped the headrest with her fist instead. How dare Gregory leave her to provide for their children alone?

And why had every one of her cowboys left when she needed them most?

Annie dropped onto a hard kitchen chair and stared at the desk overflowing with ledgers and receipts she'd yet to make sense of. Tom had surmised the truth—a widow who'd done nothing but cook and clean for a rancher would not magically turn into one.

But he was wrong about her being citified. Her work-roughened hands indicated she was no longer the sophisticated woman she'd been raised to be.

She belonged in neither world.

A change in the wind forced Annie to leave off staring at her hands. Though Tom's odoriferous presence still clung to her nostrils, the cool breeze cut into her oil stove's efficiency. She stepped onto her squat cabin's porch, shut the door against the cleansing air, and trudged through mud toward the corral. Each squishy patch grabbed her boot heels and slurped when she took a step. Not even halfway across the yard, the hem of her black skirt grew heavy with muck. If only her mother could see her now. She would have covered her pert nose with a lace embroidered hanky and declared that this was exactly why she hadn't

given her blessing at the wedding. Ladies didn't go west; they died there.

Annie had always thought Mother meant literally, but now she knew there was more than one way for a lady to die.

At the fence, she leaned against the top rail. "Celia!"

The girl wound up her lariat and trotted her horse over.

"Have you taken care of the chickens yet?" At her daughter's suddenly defiant posture, Annie sighed. "I shouldn't have to ask."

With a huff, Celia redirected her mount and headed to the barn.

"And see to supper," Annie called.

Her daughter didn't answer, but her empty stomach should urge her to comply.

"Mama." Spencer's shaggy brown head slipped into the crook of her arm. "I finished all my chores before I came out."

She smiled down at him as she pulled him in tighter, his bright blue eyes sparkling with his desire to please. "I wouldn't have expected anything less from you." She wiped the mud from his cheek.

A far-off whicker caused her to turn. A lone horse and rider trotted on the rut that served as a road from Armelle, and a lawman's badge glinted in the sun.

The marshal's horse—a beautiful brown and white splotched pinto—nearly blended in with the tiny bogs and melting snowdrifts covering the land. Perhaps he had information on her stolen cattle. She ruffled Spencer's unruly locks. "Why don't you go inside and work in your primer?"

"But I want to talk to the marshal."

She gave him a stern look, and he let out an exaggerated sigh. "Yes, ma'am." Heading toward the house, he couldn't keep up his pouty, trudging pace long before he started to skip. If only Celia obeyed that easily.

Pushing off the fence, Annie turned to wave at her visitor as his horse trotted toward the fence line.

If the marshal had come to tell her Celia had been trying his nerves in Sunday school as much she was trying hers today, she wasn't sure how she'd keep her temper.

She'd heard from enough people about her daughter's poor behavior. When was it her turn to gripe?

To ease the tension pulsing behind her eyes, she rubbed against her temples. She couldn't burden the marshal with her cantankerous daughter every Sunday, and make him listen to her break down today. The confirmed bachelor could probably only handle one ill-humored female a week.

Marshal Jacob Hendrix tipped his hat and slid off his saddle. "Good afternoon, ma'am."

Not much good about it really.

She crossed her arms to defend herself from the wind and hide her worn coat, which reeked of animals. She blew a tendril of straight limp hair from her face. She hadn't cared that Mr. Passey had interrupted her while mucking the barn, but looking disheveled in front of this fine-looking gentleman made her squirm.

The marshal patted his horse's neck, taking his time before turning his tall, lean frame in her direction. Though likely a few years older than her, he seemed younger. Probably because his job didn't require as much back-breaking work as she'd endured for well over a decade.

From his jacket's inside pocket, he pulled out a white envelope and tapped the letter in his open palm.

Annie smoothed back the loose hair tickling her face. The words *Armelle County Clerk* grabbed her attention, and she suppressed a moan. Taxes.

But why would he bother to bring her notice all the way out here? "Have you caught the rustlers?"

His features remained smooth and striking, though his brown eyes glinted, then narrowed. "No, but it can't be long before I do." Looking over at the corral, he brought up his hand and rubbed his thumb along his square jaw, shadowed

with the beginnings of a dark beard. “Any more of your cattle missing?”

She pursed her lips and shook her head. “Just the twenty I reported last week.” But since she now had zero cowboys under her employ, more would likely be missing within days.

“Make sure your hands keep a lookout.”

She pressed her lips together tighter, lest she spill her woes and end up a sodden heap on the ground.

Besides, no advice the marshal could give her would make up for her ranch’s lack of manpower.

“This is for you.” Marshal Hendrix handed her the envelope.

With trembling fingers, she plucked it from his hand. “Has the mayor made you postman as well?”

He grabbed his saddle horn and hoisted himself back upon his mount. “Don’t give McGill any ideas. He has me busy enough.” A tired smile graced his rugged face. “No, I just figured that while I was out checking if anyone had run-ins with the rustlers, I could hand out tax notices since it’s that time of year.” He tipped his hat. “Good day, Mrs. Gephart.”

The marshal turned his horse, and his pinto kicked up mud.

Annie sniffed and tore open the envelope, hoping the numbers hadn’t gone up, though they did almost every year. They’d been in danger of having their name printed in the *Daily Ricochet* last year with the other delinquent taxpayers. But Gregory’s meager reserves had saved them from prematurely selling the cattle needed to strengthen the herd.

*... This year’s taxes on the aforementioned property are \$82.17. Due 30 April 1884. Payable to the Armelle County Treasurer.*

She crumpled the paper in her hand. Could today get any worse? She stuffed the notice in her pocket and trudged over to the white picket fence.

Her heart dropped lower in her chest with each step, as it always did when she visited this section of the property. She flipped open the narrow gate and headed to the solitary cotton-

wood tree, under which dead daffodils slumped in front of a line of wooden markers.

She knelt beside Gregory's cross, dampness soaking through to her knees, and traced Spencer's poor attempt to etch his father's name into the wood. "Do you know what a predicament we're in?"

Only the wind responded.

She stared at the three smaller crosses aligned with his larger one. Only one of these babies had taken a breath—the eldest, who'd passed away before her third birthday. Annie ran her finger along Catherine's name and pressed her trembling lips together to ward off the tears. She scooted away and brushed the dirt off Gregory's marker. "This was your dream, not mine."

Unbidden, the image of his body stiff across his wild-eyed mare and the large bloody hole bursting from his chest, wrenched her insides.

At the church service after his death, she'd overheard one of the mayor's ranch hands saying he'd seen her husband sending an encroaching sheepherder to his Maker that fateful night.

But the worst part was everyone hailed Gregory as a martyr. The populace cared more for their bovine than the life of an innocent herder.

What had possessed her husband to go against his faith and abandon his family over an animosity for sheep? She leaned forward and rested her head against his marker. "God forgive you," she whispered. "I'm not sure I have."

She'd never dreamed Gregory would get mixed up in the feuding. Sure, he had enforced the local deadlines set by the ranchers to keep cattle-grazing land unspoiled by ground-ruining sheep, but to kill a shepherd and shoot a quarter of his flock?

Gregory might have been one to keep his emotions tucked inside so long he was wont to burst when things set him off, but murder?

She didn't want to believe it.



Couldn't.

She brushed the dead leaves off his grave. If she sold the ranch, would the new owner tend the cemetery and plant more flowers? Could she leave these children behind, buried in Gregory's precious land, to be attended by someone who had not loved them?

Even if she sold cattle to pay the taxes, that wouldn't change the fact she couldn't run this ranch.

No hired hand would take on the work of a ranch for a cowboy's salary, and only an owner would have the drive to force her spread to flourish.

Which gave her two options—marry or sell.