

# WIDOW WOMAN

**Patricia McLinn**

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*“In WIDOW WOMAN,  
Patricia McLinn . . . creates a  
gritty, richly textured Western  
about a strong woman,  
a dark, tormented man, and  
a love as fierce and irresistible  
as the Wyoming wind.”*

**-- Mary Jo Putney**  
New York Times bestseller

**In Memory of Anita Diamant**

# Prologue

*Wyoming Territory, July 1882*

The bartender set down the glass with a flourish that slid golden liquid high up one finger-marked shore, and then the opposite. The customer took a long, burning swallow.

"So, stranger, you looking to ride for an outfit?"

Without waiting for an answer, the bartender hooked a thumb toward his chest, where a stain bloomed on his gray shirt. "Simon Hooper can always tell a cowhand. Take it fast, but swallow slow. Like they're dry, so they can't wait, but it might be forever to the next, so they make it last. Same way you done.

"Since you ain't been in the Texas Rose afore, you ain't with no local outfit. And it happens I know an outfit hiring."

The customer still didn't answer. He simply shifted his gaze from the dust-dimmed mirror to the bartender.

"Widow woman up Jasper Creek way is looking to hire. Now, you might be thinking July's late to hire, but the Circle T lost some hands a time back. They're not dead," Hooper said, with a laugh his customer didn't share. "Went to big outfits. Thomas Dunn—you mighta heard of him. First to run cattle in these parts. He took two of the widow's new hands right out from under her nose after roundup. Gordon Wood, he took double that."

A third swallow left a skim of liquid in the bottom of the customer's glass. He inhaled the saloon smell—a tickle of dust, a bite of fresh liquor, a sour residue as men

sweated out old liquor and the fading cleanliness of what they'd left behind.

"There's some as can't understand why Widow Terhune don't marry Wood and take on the Lazy W brand like he keeps asking." Hooper nodded. "Some say it ain't fittin', him bein' nearer the grave than cradle. But even them say it's pure mule-headedness for a gal to try running a place, even if Doyle Shagwell is foreman."

The customer had crossed the river of dirt that Chelico called a street to the Texas Rose thinking his only trail was waiting—for an answer and, once he got the answer he wanted, for a return to Texas by spring. This bartender's talk offered a way to fill the waiting.

"Where?"

"Huh? Oh, Widow Terhune's place? Ride east to Jasper Creek. Follow it north a day through Lazy W. When you reach a water hole you're onto Circle T. Keep along the creek half a day or so to the home ranch. Now, the stage road to Miles City runs near enough to spit on Natchez—that's Wood's fancy name for the Lazy W home ranch. It—"

The stranger flipped a coin on the bar and walked out.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel Phillips Terhune came instantly alert. She'd been riding since first light. Now she was near the fork between turning back or spending the night in the open. Only it was hard to quit when she hadn't sighted as much as a solitary calf.

But considering her horse's interest in something on the far side of this rise, maybe her luck was about to change.

Before they crested the rise, she halted, listening. Nothing.

Too much nothing.

The hair on the back of her arms and neck prickled. She pulled her rifle from the holder Shag had added to her saddle. Dandy eased, surefooted, through thin underbrush between cottonwood and willow. With her senses strained for a rustle that did not come, she

almost missed the sign. Remnants of a small fire, scattered. One horse. Scuff marks of boots on the hard earth.

She examined the ground from Dandy's back. Before he'd died, Pa had taught her to read sign. There was evidence of only a small fire, enough to heat coffee, maybe cook a meal. Likely someone drifting through. She had no problem with that. As long as they didn't take her cattle, her horses or any more of her men.

Rachel's precise reining guided Dandy through the brush so quietly that their progress couldn't be separated from nature's mutters. But when they cleared the trees' cover where the creek detoured into a shaded pond, she realized someone had heard her coming.

Two yards into the pond, a man crouched so the water hit him just below the armpits. His face was to her, but his body was sideways, narrowing the target. His extended arm paralleled the water, along with the revolver aimed straight at her.

That didn't concern her much, since she had a rifle aimed at him.

They stared at each other. Neither moving. Neither saying anything. She'd never seen him before. She'd have remembered.

The man had dark hair. Black even, but that might be from the water that molded it to his head and the back of his neck. His skin was tanned. Not just his face and neck and lower arms, but parts generally covered by a shirt. His face was composed of unrevealing angles—squared-off jaw, slash of unsmiling mouth, straight, bold nose. The only hint of emotion came from the V of dark brows. A frown of concentration, she decided. Deadly concentration. The gleam of cold, fierce eyes added to her conviction that if it came to shooting, he'd do his damndest to make his revolver stand up to her rifle.

She squelched a shiver. Fear leaves no room for thinking, Pa used to say.

It seemed a long time, but it probably wasn't, before the stranger bent his elbow, pointing his revolver

skyward.

Rachel eased out a slow breath. She would tell this man what hospitality to expect on Circle T land and what would not be tolerated. She'd done that a dozen, two dozen times with men passing through.

No words came. She just kept looking.

The V of the stranger's brows deepened, the gleam of dark eyes glinting out at her like a reflection of sunlight on moving water.

And when he slowly stood, she still kept looking.

As the water sluiced from his broad chest, down his back, along his lean flanks and the top of his thighs . . . As he slowly turned and faced her front on . . . Naked.

His nakedness struck her like the jolt of whiskey her father had administered when she'd broken her arm. Like the whiskey, it hit hard and hot, deep in her gut, then flushed warmth and tingles through her body.

But she wasn't thirteen now. She was twice thirteen. A woman, married and widowed. A woman surrounded by men near all her life, and running this ranch herself for four years. A woman who should be well past the sight of a naked man sending tingles and warmth through her. Reaching to parts of her body she mostly ignored and never expected to tingle. Only, she realized with a sort of dazed fascination, she'd never seen a man full naked before.

Stripped of jacket and vest, sure. Down to their undergarments now and then. But even those times Edward had come to her bed to exercise a husband's rights, it had been in the dark, and with the scratch of fabric covering his stout, hairy body. So even if she'd kept her eyes open, she'd have seen nothing.

And if she had seen anything, instinct told her it would not have been this.

Water and sunlight gilded the man's tanned skin to bronze, like one of those statues in her mother's prized picture books. Rachel could see on the stranger the same long rope of muscle in shoulders and arms, the same tapering shape of chest, the same curved power of

thighs.

But there was a definite difference from those pictures.

Rachel Phillips Terhune might never have seen a man full naked before, but she had been watching animals reproduce as long as she'd lived, and she knew the function of this change. This stranger was reacting the way Warrior reacted to a mare in season.

Unlike the mares, who most often sidled and pranced in nervous response, she sat rock still, watching the man's body change.

*Get out of here! Run away! Shoot him!*

Frenetic orders from a horrified internal voice ricocheted inside her head without bestirring a single muscle.

*For God's sake, at least close your eyes!*

Her eyes stayed wide. But the reality of what she saw began to blend and mix with images from a corner of her mind she'd never encountered before. Images of the man and her. Of bodies and sensations. Of touches and kisses. Of heat and . . .

Her gaze jerked to the stranger's face, and she saw her imaginings reflected in midnight eyes.

Her trance shattered like a skin of ice under a hoof.

She wheeled Dandy and rode like hell.

## Chapter One

Rachel took Dandy to the barn corral, encountering only a mild "morning" from Joe-Max. But Shag waited on the kitchen porch. No chance she'd get past him so easily.

"Sure is nice you came back to see us now, Mrs. Terhune."

Optimistically trying to ignore the barrel-chested foreman's heavy irony, she gave him a smile and a

"morning. Shag" on her way to the tub and towel Ruth left beside the door for just such cleanups.

"Morning? Is that so? Thought maybe you didn't know the time at all and that's why you didn't come back last night."

"I was too far out to get in before I lost the light, and you know Dandy's not much of a night horse."

She bent and splashed water into her face to get the worst dust off. After breakfast and checking the horses, she'd take a real bath.

*Bath . . .*

The scene at the pond blew into her mind as fast and overpowering as a thunderstorm. She grabbed the towel and buried her face in it.

"I know it and you know it, so how in tarnation did you let yourself get caught out on him?"

"Other things on my mind," she answered from behind the towel.

"Other things on your mind? *Other things on your mind?* Alone like that? You know it's not all that long ago this was Indian territory—"

"I know, I rode it with Pa then, remember?"

He wasn't listening. "And it's not just them. It's animals, prairie dog holes, snakes and getting thrown." She glared over the towel and he had the grace to look uneasy. But he didn't halt his scold. "It's bad enough I have to listen to Ruth saying it's my doing that you don't dress or ride like a lady, but to have her at me all night long saying it's my fault if all we ever find of you's some bleached bones—"

"You're pinning this on Ruth?" That stopped him long enough for her to launch an arrow of her own. "Why are you here, anyhow? You said you'd ride out first light to check the north camp."

She turned and gave him a hard look, daring him to say he'd changed his plans because he was fretting about her. They'd gone over and over that, and the last time she'd sworn she'd fire him if he tried to coddle her.

They both knew she'd never fire him, but even saying

the words had been a measure of her determination to carry the burdens of this spread same as a man would, and he'd respected it. Till now.

Shag looked toward the south hills, down at his feet, then up at her, his mouth tight, chin pugnacious, and grizzled bushy brows stark against florid skin. She stood, watching, giving no ground.

Finally, he broke the look, glancing toward the side door. "Well, tarnation, Chell, I got three men who come about jobs and it seemed like one of us oughta be here to talk to them."

"Three?"

"Yeah, surprised me, too," he said in his usual voice. The storm had passed. "It seems Simon Hooper that tends bar over at the Texas Rose is announcing we're hiring pretty near any that know a bull from a jackrabbit."

Her initial pleasure dimmed. "These three any good?"

"Probably not. One maybe. Hard to tell. When it comes to words, he don't use up all his kindling to make a fire. The young one makes the first look like a chatterbox. And the third wore long pants before Moses grew whiskers. But we're not in any position to be saying no. We need what we can get."

She knew the truth of that. Trying to dig the Circle T out of the debt piled up from her late husband and the costs of following her father's dream to bring the outfit north from Platte River, they'd started spring with the barest minimum of hands. Then, roundup was disappointing, with the only explanation that they'd lost more head to the winter than they'd figured. After Thomas Dunn hired away their top two men, then Gordon Wood took four, they needed help, but couldn't afford top dollar to lure a man from another outfit.

"Let's eat, then see what we got."

She followed Shag into the kitchen, redolent with frying steak, coffee and Ruth's sourdough biscuits. Ruth Shagwell had ruled the kitchen—first in the Platte River house and then here—as long as her husband, Doyle "Shag" Shagwell, had been Circle T foreman, Rachel's

entire life.

"Morning, Ruth. It smells wonderful."

Without turning from the stove, Ruth pursed her mouth, which looked at odds with her softly graying hair and rosy cheeks. The look promised a lecture—but not until it could be delivered without the distraction of preparing a second breakfast hours after the first-light meal for the regular hands and, more important, without an inhibiting audience. Ruth could, and did, talk to her employer as if Rachel remained a girl with her hair down her back, but anyone else daring a critical word risked a hide-blistering.

Rachel swallowed a sigh. Maybe she could slip away before Ruth let loose.

"Boys, this here's the owner of the Circle T, Rachel Terhune." Shag nodded to a wiry man who stood across the long table where the hands ate. "This is Henry."

Rachel smiled at the leathery-faced man, though she had to prop up the smile when she saw the faint tremor in his hands and the blariness of his eyes.

The smile turned genuine and almost escaped as a chuckle as the towhead whom Shag introduced as Davis tangled his long legs with a straight-backed wooden chair in his hurry to stand, then nearly capsized the heavy table and himself in his effort to stop the chair from falling.

"Ma'am," the youngster croaked before subsiding as far away from her as he could get.

"And this is Nick."

She turned as the final candidate emerged from a shadow beyond Shag.

The air in her lungs burned and her muscles felt weighted and foreign.

As her foreman told the three men that Ruth would give them breakfast, then they'd talk one at a time with him and Mrs. Terhune, she stared at the man. His big hand cupped the front of his deep-brimmed hat, tipping it in a courtesy she'd seen a thousand times. For the first time it struck her how the gesture obscured the man's

features in a shadow of privacy. But even when this man settled the hat on his dark hair, lifting some of the shadow, his eyes showed nothing as they met hers.

The heat branding her cheeks surely meant her expression was not nearly as unreadable.

One look at her, and the stranger would know that she recognized him as the man from the pond, even with his clothes on.

\* \* \* \*

"You might as well handle these hirings," Rachel said with as much casualness as she could muster once she and Shag left the kitchen for the room they used as an office.

"What?" Shag dragged out the syllable in astonishment, looking around as if he didn't recognize the log walls, although he'd helped smooth them.

It was the first addition her father had made to a one-room outpost when he'd ranged cattle here even before the Indians were moved off after the '76 wars. The Indians had let it stand because Oren Phillips promised them a number of steers each year, and stuck to it, not trying to pass off old or sick animals.

That first log structure now served as kitchen, and the addition's use had changed with each later addition—and now was office and dining room. A big walnut desk was at one end. Her parents had brought it from St. Louis, and in the old house it had served as Rachel's schoolroom under her mother's tutelage. Now it was headquarters of the Circle T, and on it rested the ranch's account books.

For the moment, those books had been set to one side, making way for the beefsteak, biscuits and gravy Ruth had brought. The few times Rachel and Shag didn't join the hands in the kitchen they ate at the desk, talking over Circle T matters. Rachel ducked her head, pretending greater interest in her biscuit than she felt. Shag might just pass off her decision without more comment if she didn't make much of it.

The foreman's next words killed that hope.

"Can't be Chell saying that, can it? The one not satisfied unless she's in the middle of everything on the Circle T. Leastwise, the woman who rode out yesterday followed that trail . . . . But when she forgets Dandy's no night horse, maybe something's happened to her. Maybe—"

"All right. I just thought it would save time. 'We need whoever we can get.' Isn't that what you said?"

"That's what I said, and it's God's truth. But there's taking what you have to and then there's not looking into what it is you've gotten."

"I said all right. So call the first one in."

With Shag continuing to look as if her brain had sprung a leak, interviewing the first two candidates provided a welcome diversion. She discovered Henry came West as a soldier, worked as a freighter and ran a road ranch. The indisputable length of his career was somewhat offset by his assurance that he mended wagons and did blacksmithing.

Twice the time was required to extract from the second candidate the bare essentials of name (Davis Andresson), age (twenty-one, to her surprise), home (an Iowa farm) and experience with cattle (none). But Andresson did have, he promised in an earnest burst, a strong back, a knack with animals and a desire to become a cowboy.

After a quarter of an hour, the Circle T had two new hands at a bargain rate of twenty-five dollars a month each.

"We'll have to start at thirty with this last one," Shag said before he opened the door for the final applicant. "But looks to me he'd be worth it, even if we push to forty."

Rachel said nothing.

The man must have recognized her. Would he make reference to their meeting yesterday? What would she say? How should she act?

"Come on in," Shag invited, "and have a seat."

Rachel had risen from behind the desk to shake

hands with Henry; she'd found that went far to show the cowhands she was boss first, a lady second. That helped ease the shyness that could strike these rough men in the face of a woman who didn't entertain in a room over a saloon. Trying to set young Davis at ease, she'd stayed on his side of the desk.

When the tall, lanky man called Nick walked in, boot heels thudding decisively on the floor and spurs jangling discreetly, she knew an urge to retreat to behind the bulk of the desk. Instead, she propped herself against the edge in a way Ruth would have scolded over. Shag stood to one side. With an easy economy of motion Nick took a chair in front of the desk.

His black hat remained on. His leather stovepipe leggings protected stout work pants. His shirt was a clean white, his black vest buttoned neatly, and his brown jacket and boots bore only a thin layer of the ever-present drab dust.

His black eyes went around the room with no indication of discomfort, with no indication he recognized her from yesterday. In fact, with no indication of anything at all.

Shag cleared his voice into the stretching silence.

She should ask a question. But the only ones that occurred to her had to do with ponds and naked men and the look in a pair of heated black eyes that planted burning coals in her stomach.

"You know cattle?"

Shag's question to Nick cut across her thoughts so abruptly she jerked. Neither man paid her any heed. "Some."

"Where you from, Nick?"

"Texas."

"Been in Wyoming before?"

He nodded, a single, economical inclination of his head. "Few years ago. Stayed a year, then up to Montana. After a while, to California. A good bit 'round San Francisco."

Nothing unusual there; some cowhands stayed put,

more roamed.

"You came here from California?"

"Texas. Came up with a drive to near Chugwater."

That explanation raised a number of questions. Shag attacked them one at a time. "When'd you get to Chugwater?"

"Couple, three weeks ago."

"Awful early drive. Or awful fast."

"Some of both," the stranger acknowledged. "The owner needed to get the herd through."

And had been willing to gamble against early-spring bad weather and the dangers of trailing cattle too hard, Rachel thought, welcoming the familiar concerns of ranching.

"What'd you do on the drive, Nick?" Shag pursued.

"Trail boss."

The laconic reply held no intonation, but Rachel saw his lips compress at the corners. He'd been reluctant to reveal that. It certainly made Shag look at him closely. Why would someone trusted as boss on such a risky drive take work midseason, and at such a small outfit?

"How many'd you lose?" Shag asked.

"None."

The answer held pride, as well it might. It also held the unspoken assurance that this man not only had brought in all the cattle, he'd brought them in in good condition. It was that kind of pride. And in that pride, Rachel recognized a fuller answer to Shag's earlier question. Did this man know cattle? Yes, indeed.

"What brought you up this way from Chugwater?"

"Remembered the country. It's good cattle country."

"Yep, it is at that," Shag said.

The foreman sent her a look she read easily. First, he wanted to hire on this man. Shag might wonder about some things, but unless this Nick proved unreliable, he'd be accepted; a man's past was private as long as he caused no trouble in the present. Second, Shag couldn't understand why she hadn't jumped in with questions. And, finally, he wanted to know why she didn't have the

sense to sign this man up fast? They couldn't hardly pass hiring a cowhand like this one looked to be.

"Why did—" Her voice came out tight. She swallowed quickly and started again. "Why did you come here looking for a job?"

Without moving, he shifted his gaze to her. "I heard a widow woman running the Circle T needed hands."

With a clarity that amazed her at the same time she accepted it absolutely, Rachel knew he had expected an older woman. And he was not pleased to be mistaken.

She straightened her spine. If he didn't like working for a woman not yet thirty, let him say it. "I am a woman." Something slid into his eyes; she hurried past it. "I am a widow—my husband died four years ago. I run the Circle T. And we do need hands."

He met her challenging look with his dark eyes giving nothing back. "Okay, I'll take the job."

Her lips parted as she realized he'd maneuvered her as slickly as a good cow horse would a recalcitrant calf. She could swear a glimmer of humor sparked in his eyes.

Before she could say anything in response, the stranger added, "What's the pay?"

"Twenty-five a month," she got in before Shag could answer.

"Little low."

*Little low?* Thirty was a little low. Twenty-five was near insulting for a top hand. A lot of men's pride wouldn't let them take that little unless desperate. He surely had the pride and he didn't look desperate.

"Plus your keep. And there's no finer cooks in this country than my Ruth and Fred, who's camp cook." Shag offered the enticements to Nick at the same time he glared at her. "Same for the horses. Nobody can say they don't get a good string at the Circle T."

"I mostly use my black."

"Since you're using your own horse," Shag said, "we could go thirty a month, right, Chell?"

If she said no, they'd lose him, and they needed the

help. But the idea of having him around every day made her squirm against the hard edge of the desk.

"Twenty-seven-fifty." Ignoring Shag's frown, she surreptitiously shifted her fanny.

"And feed for my horse," he bargained.

"Sounds fair," Shag said quickly.

Both men stared at her. She couldn't run the Circle T without hands. That was what it came down to. She had no choice.

She gave a short, reluctant nod.

"Okay," Shag said on a long exhalation. "Pay's by the month. Mrs. Terhune will get you signed up official, then come on out and I'll show you where to stow your gear and get you started."

Shag hurried from the room as if afraid she'd change her mind. Rachel circled the desk, took her chair, adjusted the account book precisely, dipped the nib in ink and raised it expectantly.

When nothing happened, she looked up at the Circle T's newest hand to find him sitting as he had all along. She raised her eyebrows.

He gave no response.

"I need your name to put in the book," she said with exaggerated patience.

"Nick."

"I need your full name for the records."

"They call me Nick."

She blew out an exasperated breath. "Is that what your mama and daddy baptized you?"

In his otherwise impassive face, a flicker crossed his eyes that left her oddly chilled.

"Close enough," he said.

She wanted to know the story behind that, but she wasn't about to ask. Nor would she give in—not entirely.

"I need a last name."

After a long pause, he answered absolutely flat, "Dusaq."

"Ends with a k?"

"Q."

"Okay, Mr. Dusaq. Pay's by the month like Shag said. You'll work running through fall roundup." Any experienced hand knew all that, but she needed words to cover the silence that seemed to accompany this man. "Shag'll tell you the rest. He should be out by the barn."

She thought the dismissal obvious. He didn't move.

"I saw horses in the barn when I came in."

"Horses are often kept in a barn in this part of the country, Mr. Dusaq. Stables are a luxury."

"Look to be special horses." He showed no reaction to her sarcasm. Still, she immediately felt shamed. Not having a proper stable for her horses always lightened her trigger, but her response had more to do with the asker than the question. The man made her uncomfortable. But that gave her no excuse for bad manners. No excuse, either, to risk having him quit before he'd started.

Besides, he'd called her horses special.

"We've been working to breed top horses for working with cattle."

"Good cow pony can do two men's work."

"That's it exactly. That's . . ." Embarrassment swamped her. She'd automatically leaned forward, toward the agreement. She eased back. "Up to now, good cow ponies have been found instead of made, Mr. Dusaq. We're trying to breed them, to improve the bloodlines by crossbreeding. It works with racehorses back East and in England, so I hope . . ."

Through the window's wavy glass, she saw a corner of the barn that sheltered her horses in the worst weather. It needed rethinking and the roof was as solid as a sieve. But if she couldn't turn a profit with the cattle, she'd never have the money to pursue her ideas for breeding and training. In fact, if she couldn't start turning a profit, she wouldn't have the Circle T at all.

She recognized the silence only after it had stretched too long to be ignored. Turning to the newly hired hand, she found him studying her. His face gave away nothing.

Renewed discomfort welled in her. She should send him away as far and as fast as she could.

"Sounds like a good idea," he said.

She stared for a handful of seconds until she realized he meant her horse-breeding efforts, not sending him away. Before she could muster a response, he had risen.

"Ma'am." His polite mutter of departure and the tipping of his hat tightened the reins on her impulse to order him off the Circle T right here and now. They needed him. No getting around that.

At the open door, he paused.

"Don't call me Mr. Dusaq."

It was an order.

\* \* \* \*

"If your mama was still alive, having you out all night like that would have killed her."

Rachel started at Ruth's voice, guiltily wondering how long she'd been staring at the latest name written in the account book. Instead of commenting on Ruth's twisted logic, she stood and began putting dirty breakfast dishes on the tray Ruth had brought in.

It didn't appease Ruth. Arms akimbo she studied Rachel.

"Look at you. What your mama would say to see you in such a costume . . ."

That seemed a bit unfair to Rachel, since Ruth herself had fashioned this and two other wide-legged split skirts from heavy tan canvas twill. Although Ruth had done it only after Rachel threatened to wear a pair of Pa's old trousers, since her skills with a needle didn't stretch to such a garment. She'd learned the rudiments of sewing from Mama, as she had the basics of cooking and running a house, but her education in such matters had ended abruptly with her mother's death. From then on her education had come from Pa, and had covered a much different sphere—cattle, horsemanship and the land.

"And don't you be rolling up your sleeves every minute

or you'll be brown as a berry."

Surreptitiously, Rachel eased a horn button through a hole in the front panel Ruth insisted on adding to the split skirts. With front and back panels buttoned, the skirt looked as respectable as any other. Unbuttoned, Rachel had the freedom to ride astride.

"Don't bother yourself with buttoning up for my sake," Ruth said crossly. "I suppose next you'll go galloping into town looking like this."

That struck Rachel as highly unfair. She made a real effort to keep a neat appearance when she went into town or otherwise out among society. "You know I won't do that"

"I suppose I should be grateful," said Ruth, sounding anything but. "Though with the way hands talk and with you going like this to roundups and all, I don't suppose it matters, since every soul in the territory likely has heard about wild Mrs. Terhune up Jasper Creek. How on earth you think you'll ever find a man—"

"I don't want a man." Her stock response to Ruth's laments came out without thinking and with the conviction of habit. Then an image of a bronzed, wet body rising out of a pond flashed across her mind.

"That's as may be, but you won't have any choice if you don't take heed, young lady. If only you'd use a proper saddle. I could stitch you a new costume from that melton cloak of your mama's."

"I couldn't rope sidesaddle, and I couldn't cut cattle worth anything. Not to mention I couldn't even get in the thing by myself. A lot of good I'd be on the range using one of those."

"Riding and roping, my sweet saints!" What Ruth knew about Rachel's activities on the range and what she could successfully ignore as long as she wasn't reminded, were two different matters. "I shudder to think what your mother would say about her daughter behaving so."

"Mama would be proud of me." Fearing the ground under that statement might sink like an alkali bog,

Rachel hurried on. "Pa would be proud of me for roping and riding and—" Ruth interrupted with a sniff eloquent in its low opinion of Oren Phillips's suitability for determining proper behavior for a young woman.

"I will act and dress as I must in order to run this ranch best I can. It was Pa's dream to have a ranch here, and Mama understood that. Now it's up to me to make it happen, any way I can."

\* \* \* \*

Nick squinted into the brightness beyond the kitchen porch and surveyed his temporary base.

*Widow woman.*

He hadn't worked up any particular imaginings when the bartender used the phrase. He'd been thinking mostly that working through the season at the Circle T would suit his purposes. And if serving his needs happened to help a widow woman . . . Well, that padre at the mission used to say a grain of sand could outweigh a mountain come Judgment Day, and this had seemed an easy way to pick up a grain of good.

His mouth twisted in derision that such a naive notion remained anywhere in him.

And look where it got him.

Widows could be gentle, gray-haired ladies or steely-eyed harridans or anything in between. Anything except a slim young woman who looked hardly old enough to be married, with wheat-colored hair and direct, hazel eyes so soft they cut to a man's gut. Especially when they studied him with equal amounts of shock and heat in a look that had made him harder than any whore's practiced touch.

Anything except that.

Maybe if her outfit hadn't so sorely needed help, he'd have taken his misguided expectations about widow ladies and ridden off toward whatever turn of the compass appealed.

But riding in, he'd seen gaps between the barn's cottonwood logs big enough to put a fist through. The lodgepole pine of the main house and bunkhouse looked

in better shape. The house, with rooms attached like a crazy quilt, was clean, but the office curtains were faded and the chair worn. The bunkhouse's stove might or might not offset breezes from a pair of loose-fitted windows, trio of doors and uncountable cracks.

On the other hand, a pair of good-sized corrals and the fences around a barnyard where chickens pecked and a couple pigs rooted showed recent attention.

Priorities on the Circle T were clear, even though Doyle Shagwell said they were so shorthanded they'd trailed cattle home from spring roundup in two trips. It took fewer men to hold a herd than to trail it, so they'd divided the herd, left a few hands to hold the second half and brought the first to Circle T range. Then they turned around to do it again—while other outfits had returned to their home ranches.

The Circle T surely did need him. Him and a dozen more.

He cursed under his breath.

Hell, he should have kept riding. He didn't need the job, not really. Riding away might add to his mountain of sins, but what did it matter? No grains of good deeds could outweigh a mountain.

"Nick, come get your string," Shag shouted from the corral.

He stepped off the porch, heading that way, still chewing on whether to saddle Brujo and head out

"Just getting Davis and Henry here to saddle up, so I can show 'em round a bit," the gray-haired foreman said as Nick neared the fence. "That lot over there's yours."

Nick followed Shag's nod toward five horses watching warily from a far corner of the corral. The horses had witnessed their fellows being roped—a sure sign of work to come—and they were on the lookout to avoid the same fate. One, a wiry gray, promised to be good for spelling Brujo. A buckskin Nick rated as better than most. The other three he'd examine more closely later. No outright crow bait, but nothing to match the stock in the barn.

"Why don't you saddle up old Miner, Davis," Shag suggested to the fair-haired youngster also hired on.

Nick considered the horses allotted to the other new hands. When a foreman divvied up mounts there was no appeal. Getting a string of broomtails told a hand he wasn't much valued by the outfit. Also that his job would be a damned sight harder. From what Nick saw Shag made even selections, with Davis and Henry each getting one real likely-looking mount.

The one called Miner, though, caught Nick's eye. As did the reaction of the two hands introduced as Joe-Max and Tommy, who'd assisted in the roping and now lingered on the outside of the corral fence as if expecting a show.

A greenhorn show.

Nick swung his regard to the big, deep-chested sorrel horse named Miner.

He was fat and rested, with that edgy energy of a horse not ridden lately. Nick moved in, running a hand down his flank as if to gauge the animal. What he really wanted was to get near enough for a low-voiced question to gauge the human.

"Done much riding, Andresson?"

The youngster continued strapping the saddle on the apparently docile horse. "I've ridden."

"Farm horses?"

"So what. That don't—"

Nick cut across the defensive answer. "Ever ridden a bucking horse?"

That stilled the long-fingered hands and brought Andresson's head around. Blue eyes regarded him with surprise, abruptly replaced by understanding. And worry mixed with determination.

Nick sighed.

"Keep your feet firm in the stirrups, try to sit straight as you can and use your arm to balance. If you hold on to the horn, they'll rib you for pulling leather, but if it's a choice of grabbing hold or getting thrown, hold on like hell."

Davis Andresson stared at him a second longer. "Okay," he said gruffly. "Thanks."

He fastened the final buckle before letting down the stirrups to accommodate his long, gangly legs. He took hold of the saddle horn, preparing to mount.

Nick went to Miner's head, fiddling with the headstall to mask another low-voiced murmur. "If you get thrown, don't fight it. Roll. Get to your feet soon as you hit Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The youngster swung a long leg over Miner's back and signaled to release the horse's head. Nick stepped free, and waited.

Miner held absolutely still an instant, followed by a rolling ripple of muscles under his hide. Then the animal leaped straight into the air like a jack-in-the-box. He came to earth in a splash of dust with legs ramrod stiff, sending a shudder through the ground that Nick felt through the soles of his boots up to his knees, and a shudder through Davis Andresson that snapped his head forward then back like a whip.

Right about now the boy had to feel as if his spine had come unjointed. But he held on.

Miner jumped crow-legged in a line giving Andresson a chance to straighten in the saddle and tighten his legs' grip. Nose in the dirt, the horse tucked his head between his front legs and kicked out with the rear. Andresson adjusted his balance. For a rocky moment Miner abruptly returned to his first strategy of leaps followed by ground-shuddering landings, complicated by spinning. Nick could see how Miner had earned his name—he seemed set on boring to the center of the earth.

While the leather straps of the saddle groaned dismay, Andresson gamely clung to the animal amid rising spurts of dust. And damned if he wasn't murmuring soft words to the horse, even if they did come through clenched teeth.

The jolts subsided, and in another minute, the whole thing was over. Miner standing still, a sheen of

perspiration gilding his coat and his muscles twitching, but his ears flicking attentively to the words spoken by the boy on his back.

"Nice riding!" shouted Shag. Henry and the two spectator hands added praise, though they didn't linger with the entertainment ending so tamely.

Andresson guided Miner to where Nick stood by the fence.

"Thanks." A shy smile lifted Davis's mouth.

"You're the one who held on."

"I might not have without the warning, so I say thanks." His stubbornness was at odds with his mild manner.

Nick shrugged, turned away—and came face-to-face with the Widow Terhune, who stood outside the fence.

Their eyes locked. Hers were warm and shrewd. He didn't know how long she'd watched, but he'd swear she had the situation figured.

And there was more in her eyes. A kind of speculation, and a faintly begrudging approval.

He tried to build irritation at that. He didn't need her approval, and he sure didn't need some widow woman ranch owner assessing him the way he had the stock. He could ride off right now.

But when she gave him a nod of acknowledgment that carried some more of that approval, he simply looked at her as she walked away.

\* \* \* \*

Rachel escaped the supper table quickly, holing up behind the desk and the ever-present task of keeping the books. Supper lay heavy in the pit of her stomach. A result of eating in the presence of a sphinx, she supposed.

Nick Dusaq hadn't said a word to her since he'd walked out of this room this morning. He hadn't gotten in her way. He hadn't sent his eyes her way at meals. And she couldn't stop wondering about him.

What was he thinking? What did he remember? What

if he said something? What would he say?

"Well, what do you think, Chell?"

Shag's question cut across her own. She hadn't even heard the door open.

"About what?" she asked warily.

"About the new hands, 'specially that Nick Dusaq."

Did Shag know something? Had Dusaq talked about the encounter at the pond?

She felt her cheeks heating and she barely had the breath to ask, "What do you mean?"

He pinned her with a look from under bushy brows, but said mildly enough, "It's only been a day, but I'm sorta looking forward to all the days that'll follow and how we can pat ourselves on the back. Looks to me like we made ourselves a good hire. A real good hire. And you struck one sharp bargain on his wages."

"Oh . . ." Movement beyond the window caught her eye—a figure crossed the yard from the bunkhouse to the outer corral. She recognized Dusaq in the waning light by the lean outline and loose-jointed assurance of his walk. "As you said, it's one day."

"Yeah. But so far it sure looks like a good day's work." Shag stretched. "Think I'll turn in. I'll leave first light to check that north camp. I'll take a couple boys with me now that we've got 'em. I thought Nick and Davis. Okay with you?"

"Sure. Good night. Shag."

"Night, Chell."

Alone, she stared out the window.

*It's only been a day . . . and all the days to follow.*

Shag might look forward to them; she didn't. Wondering if, when, what Nick Dusaq might say. Those questions had driven her to the corral this morning. She'd seen him tell Andresson something before the cowhand got up on that old reprobate Miner. And after Andresson handled the rough ride creditably, she'd heard his thanks.

So, he'd helped out a greenhorn. That didn't make him any saint. And it sure didn't guarantee he wouldn't enjoy

regaling the bunkhouse with how he'd had the owner of the Circle T gawking at him like a silly schoolgirl.

Even with the good men they had now, it was hard to keep their respect for a woman owner. Nick Dusaq could make it impossible.

That had fretted her all day. Even as she'd helped Henry set up a makeshift blacksmithing shed. Even as she organized a crew to get the wood Henry said he'd use for charcoal since they had no blacksmithing coal. Even as she showed Henry what needed mending. Even as she tended Warrior and the other horses in the barn. Even as she answered the questions and gave the orders that peppered her every day at the Circle T.

Would Nick Dusaq say something, sometime, somewhere?

She had to do something. And she had to do it now. Before any more days followed like this one.

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