

Chapter One

East Texas, Spring, 1878

You've got thirty days to find a husband or I'll find one for you.

Her father's recent ultimatum bounced around Emma's head like a hail stone, causing her concentration to falter.

"Miss Marshall? Are you all right?"

John Ralston, the cattleman she came to Ft. Worth to see, watched with anxious eyes.

"My apologies, Mr. Ralston. I guess I am still tired from the trip."

He nodded. "I understand. It's a long trip from Bakersville." He motioned for the waitress to refill their coffee. "I wasn't aware of your father's illness until I received your telegram. I have to say, finding a woman such as yourself interested in my Herefords is unusual."

"My father told me about them after your meeting last year. I can't wait to see how they fare. How long has your herd been here? Has our finicky weather had any adverse effects on them?"

The next hour flew by, and when it ended, Emma was the proud owner of a Hereford bull and two heifers.

After Ralston left, she lingered over her coffee and savored the success of having completed not only the purchase of new breeding stock, but negotiating the sale of the herd they would bring in next month. The new purchase would be picked up then and driven back to the ranch.

He trusts me to negotiate the sale of our cattle but not to run the ranch. The smile of accomplishment faded. No matter how hard she tried, Rafe Marshall believed only a man could run Twin Oaks Ranch.

Their last conversation, still a vivid memory, played out in her mind.

“I’m dyin’, girl. Doc sez I ain’t got much longer. I gotta know Twin Oaks will be in good hands.”

“By *good*, you mean *male*.” It took tremendous effort to keep the hurt gnawing her insides from showing in her voice. “*That’s* what you really mean.”

He sighed and squinted. “We been over this time and again. Ranchin’ ain’t woman’s work. You’re almost twenty-six. You should’ve been married years ago with a passel o’ young’uns for me to spoil, not runnin’ round in britches and boots tryin’ to do a man’s job.”

“I’ve no wish to get married, Papa, I’ve told you so repeatedly.” *Because being married is like being property. No voice, no face, no freedom.*

He ignored her comment. “Tom Blakely over to the Lazy B would be good.”

She stared in disbelief. “You can’t be serious. He’s ancient. At least forty!”

“Or maybe Hank Walker.”

His mention of the local attorney made her skin crawl. Hank made no secret of his interest and was prone to show up unannounced requesting she accompany him for a ride or the occasional dance.

She never accepted. He never gave up.

“I wouldn’t marry Hank Walker if he were the last man on earth.”

Rafe blew out a noisy breath. “I mean what I say.” Pale blue eyes bored into hers. “Find a husband in thirty days or I’ll find one for you.”

“And if I don’t?”

He paused. “Then Twin Oaks goes to my brother in Ft. Worth when I die.”

That thought brought her back to the present with a jolt. Would he really give away her home, force her to marry someone she didn't love? How could a father do something like this do his only child?

The coffee she enjoyed a moment ago turned sour in her stomach. Heart filled with despair, she adjusted the bow on her bonnet, and rose from the table. The desk clerk here at The El Paso Hotel mentioned earlier a new mercantile recently opened down the block. She decided it would be a great place to find gifts for her two best friends, Sarah and Mable.

Preoccupied with her father's dictate, she collided with a cowboy walking by as she exited the hotel.

Without conscious thought, she grabbed for his arms to keep from tumbling down the steps to the muddy street below. Her fingers clutched strong muscles that tightened beneath them, sending unexpected tingles up her arms.

Large hands grabbed her waist, their warmth adding to the unfamiliar sensations coursing through her.

"Whoa, there, ma'am."

His soft drawl caused gooseflesh on her arms and her gaze jerked up to his face. Eyes, grey as a storm cloud, caused her breath to hitch.

He hesitated, then set her away from him and tipped his hat. "Excuse me, ma'am. I wasn't watching where I was going." With a quick nod, he walked away.

She stood immobile for several heartbeats, then looked down at her gloved hands, surprised at the warm tingles lingering there.

The memory of those hypnotic eyes followed her the rest of the day and into the night, disrupting her sleep and making her irritable for the long journey home.

By the time she arrived two days later, she was accustomed to their frequent invasion of her thoughts.

Since her father expected an immediate report, she didn't bother to freshen up before entering his room. She removed her bonnet and gloves as she took her usual chair beside his bed. "How are you feeling today?"

"How did it go? Any problems?"

She took a breath before replying. "No, there were no problems. Mr. Ralston agreed to the terms we discussed before I left."

"I expect so since I had Leo telegraph ahead."

Her heart sank. "I should have known. I'm a woman and therefore can't do anything without a man to help me."

He clamped his jaw and remained silent.

She stood and paced around the room. "I can do anything any man on this ranch can do, even better than some, and I've handled everything just fine these last few months you've been sick."

"The only reason the men do what you tell them is because I'm still here." He struggled to sit up, then sank back on the pillows when his strength faded. "They won't listen to you when I'm dead, and everything I spent my life building will be gone."

She turned and faced him, emerald eyes stinging with unshed tears. "I don't understand how you can think so little of me."

"Don't start that nonsense again, girl, I –"

"My name is Emma Rose. Not Girl!" She hated it when he referred to her as *girl* as though she didn't even rate being called by her name. She lowered her voice. "I'm sorry your

son died with my mother. I'm sorry I'm not a man." She paused a moment to gather her composure. "I finally realize no matter what I do, it will never be enough. You want me to find a husband...fine...I'll find a husband."

She stormed out of his room, slamming the door shut behind her, ignoring his demand they discuss the new foreman due to arrive soon.

Rafe glowered at the closed door, annoyed with himself for once again making a mess of things, but he lacked the time for tact and diplomacy.

He was dying.

He accepted that. What distressed him more than the disease eating away his body one bite at a time was the thought of his only child being left alone when he died. His beautiful, smart, and head-strong Emma Rose who had the misfortune to inherit the predominant traits of both her parents. Tall and beautiful like her mother, with tobacco colored hair and emerald eyes that flashed with life or cut you to the bone, and headstrong and independent like her father.

I should've done a better job with her, made sure she knew how to be a woman. Now, it's too late.

Devastated by the death of his wife when Emma was ten, he'd closed himself off for years. By the time he realized his mistake, the void between them appeared insurmountable.

When was the last time I told her I loved her? How proud I am of her? I just want her to be happy. His brow furrowed as he tried to remember the last time he saw her smile. It shamed him to admit he couldn't.

She loved the ranch and it belonged to her. He had no intention of leaving it to his worthless brother; he merely used the threat as incentive to get her to at least look for a husband.

He wanted her to take his concerns seriously. Despite what she thought, he suffered no reservations about her ability to run the place. The men respected her and she worked hard to earn and keep their respect.

What killed his soul was the thought she would grow old alone.

Like him.

He blew out a breath and drummed his fingers on his chest. *I should've told her about the posters and the ad in the Ft. Worth paper.*