

A cozy winter scene featuring a fire burning in a fireplace. In the foreground, a pair of feet wearing patterned socks is visible. The background is dark, with the fire providing a warm glow. A decorative trail of purple and white sparkles arches over the text.

*Wishes Do
Come True*

Celia Yeary

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Presented by *Publishing by Rebecca J. Vickery*

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Chapter 1

The light in the second story window cast a golden glow down the rickety wooden steps. Ross stood at the bottom, hands in his coat pockets, hat pulled low to keep the drizzle from his eyes, wondering if this was a good time to talk to Anna again.

She sure was a stubborn woman, but he wasn't about to give up yet. One more time, at least, he'd try to change her mind. Why did she act so independent and strong and turn him away, time after time, when he knew she needed someone? Besides, he loved the woman, and he could tell she thought well of him. Maybe, even loved him too.

With slow, deliberate steps, he climbed up, reached the door to her rooms above the bakery, and rapped lightly. The sweet aroma of baked bread lingered in the air. The door cracked, and she peeked out, gripping the edge with both hands.

"Ross. What're you doing here so late?" she asked in her soft, sweet voice he loved so much. Always made his heart beat faster.

"Can I come in, Anna? It's dang cold out here."

"Oh, why, of course." She stepped back, opening the door as she did so. "Come in. I have a nice fire going. Oh, you're dripping." She walked to the small pot-bellied stove, leaving the door open for him, and pulled another chair close. "This has been such a cold, wet day, hasn't it?"

"Sure has," he said, as he closed the door behind him.

Anna wore her long flannel gown with a thick woolen robe over it, tied snugly around her slender waist. On her feet, she only wore thick knitted socks, and at this moment, he wished he had a pair. His feet were frozen. Her long dark hair fell down her back in one thick, silky braid. Damn if she didn't look gorgeous, the prettiest, most pleasing woman he'd seen in the territory.

"Here, give me your hat." She took it, shook the drops off, and walked to hang it on a peg. As she did so, she looked over her shoulder and told him,

"Sit down there, and take off your coat too. Just hang it on the back of the chair."

She smiled sweetly at him—but then, she always did.

"I'd be obliged. Won't you sit beside me?" He shrugged out of his thick leather coat, and draped it over the back of his chair.

Laughing lightly, she told him, "Of course. That's what I was doing. Sitting in this chair with my feet propped on the bottom base of the stove. It's the only way I can warm my feet."

"Mind if I take off my boots?" He raised his eyebrows in question.

"Not at all." She crossed one arm around her waist and fiddled with the top of her robe where the edges overlapped.

He completed the task and set them beside his chair. They settled next to each other with both pairs of feet propped side by side on the base.

Silence. The fire crackled and popped, the only sound in the room.

Chapter 2

Finally, Anna asked, "Why are you out visiting this late? Are you staying in town?"

Shifting in the chair, he turned toward her to see her eyes. "Yeah, I had to stay over for a meeting at the bank in the morning."

Anna blinked a few times as she studied him. In a soft, low voice, she said, "So, now tell me what you want."

Ross cleared his throat, so afraid to begin his plea, because she'd turned him away three times already. If she did so once more, he'd have to give up. A man could take rejection just so many times. And this would be the last.

"You know what I want, Anna. I've asked you three times before."

For a few seconds, she stayed silent, biting her lip, curling loose hair around one ear. Finally, with her head bowed, she whispered, "You know I can't marry you, Ross. And you know why. I've explained it every time you ask, so you should know by now."

Taking a deep breath, he began. "Anna, listen for a minute, will you? Why would I care that you arrived years ago on an orphan train? So what, if you know nothing of your parents, nor why you were on that train? Didn't a family take you in and love you?"

Lifting her head, she said, "You know that as well as I do. The Bensons. Probably no other husband and wife in the world loved each other as they did, and they generously showered that love on me. That's why I have the bakery. They taught me everything I know, and when they died from the epidemic two years ago, I learned they had willed all this to me. I shudder to think where I'd be today if they'd turned away from me."

"So, you're happy now, aren't you?"

Anna sighed and rolled her lips inward, looked at the ceiling, and finally told him, "I suppose I am. I'm probably as happy as I ever will be, and Ross? Truly, it's enough."

The wind picked up, slamming into the front of the building, causing the old boards to creak and moan. The sound made Ross think of his own home way out of town, a sturdy log house with five rooms, furnished with nice items he'd had shipped from Baltimore. He'd filled each room with all the trappings a woman needed to run a household. He only lacked someone to share it with, a woman to love, a soft sweet person to lie beside at night. Someone to bear his children and tell him, *I love you, Ross Davis.*

Ross reached for her hand. "Come here, Anna." He tugged and she stood obediently beside him. "Sit on my lap."

Without a sound, she allowed him to pull her down, and he wrapped his arms around her, hugging and holding tightly. He laid his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes, catching whiffs of talcum powder and lavender soap.

She leaned her head to touch his. Slowly, she moved her soft hand to his neck and placed it there, caressing with one finger, making circles on the skin below his hairline.

Ross lifted his hand and caught her chin, turning her face to his. Closing his eyes, he settled his lips on hers, and she seemed to melt, allowing him the kiss.

But she pulled back. "Ross...I..."

Smoothing the hair on one side of her head, he cupped his hand around her soft neck. "What, my sweet Anna? Tell me your thoughts."

Whispering into his ear, she said, "Every time I see you in town, I want to run and catch your hand, and pull you close, and..."

Ross remained very still with his eyes closed, his heart banging against his chest, waiting. To his great disappointment, she didn't continue.

He looked at her beautiful face with the small chin and nose and the bluest eyes in Texas. "And what, sweetheart? Kiss me? Say you love me?"

Slowly, she sat straight and removed her hand from his neck. Claspng her hands in her lap, she looked at him, and said, "No. Nothing has changed. Everything's the same."

"You won't marry me, then?" He held his breath.

Chapter 3

At least she didn't answer no. Ross smiled inwardly. Was she softening? Did she wish to say yes? Was she now confused, where before she was so adamant?

Silence. She studied her hands.

He circled his arm around her waist and brought her close once more, and kissed her on the cheek. "So, is this it? You want me to go? I'll not come back, you know. I know when I've lost."

Placing her hand on his chest, she took a deep breath. "No, wait a moment, so I can say this one more time. I...you know, I was very small. The Bensons took me in, and treated me so fine, so good, and loving. But Ross? It doesn't change a thing. You? You're an upstanding citizen, important in the town and in the territory. Me? I have no idea who my parents were, why I was on that train. It scares me to death, to think of my origins. I want to be good, important in the community, but all I can think of is—where did I come from? I don't feel whole with so much unknown."

Ross hugged her tightly, and then relaxed his hold. "What do you wish for? Not what you want—there's a difference. Wishes are dreams, honey, and I have some of my own. If I want a new saddle, I can buy one. But a home with a loving wife, a sweetheart, someone who looks for me at night, well, that's wishing. I can't make it happen."

Smiling, she said, "Well, if we're just talking about wishes, I do have one or two. A real home, a man like you, and babies. But it's only a dream for the reasons I've already said."

Ross chuckled.

"What's funny?" She pulled back a little to gaze at him.

"Just hearing you admit it is something, but it's not enough. You can give me one thing, though." He grinned.

She leaned back slightly. "What?"

"A pair of those warm, knitted wool socks. My feet aren't warm yet, and I can't find socks that don't get damp and cold."

She hopped off his lap, stepped over to the small armoire, and took something from a shelf. Hiding it behind her back, she stood in front of him. "Guess."

Now, he really grinned, and his heart lightened.

"Socks."

She rocked on her toes and giggled. "Open it."

He took the soft package wrapped in a large, white handkerchief, tied with red string. When he opened it, there lay a pair of thick, blue wool socks, knitted by his darling. Just for him.

"Come here, honey."

Without hesitation, she curled onto his lap, and pulled her hands to her chin, closed her eyes, and placed her head on his shoulder.

He whispered. "Thank you. I'll treasure these always."

She moved toward him first, her soft lips beckoning. As she touched his lips with hers, she sighed and moved a hand to his face. Waiting, he allowed her to lead, to voice her desires, her wishes. The kiss melted his heart even more; he fell in love harder than before.

He began to speak, but she stopped him by placing two fingers over his lips. "My turn."

Moving away a little, she cupped her hands on his cheeks. "Ross, you know, I can't keep denying you, or your marriage proposal. I've never loved anyone except you, so you know this is new to me. I knitted those socks the first time you asked for my hand. Silly, I suppose, but I couldn't bring myself to give you a gift. Now, though, I give you my heart. Forever."

He chuckled. "And a pair of socks."

Placing his lips on her mouth, he kissed her properly, teaching her to open up a little. Anna caught on quick, circling his neck with her arms, turning her head this way and that, kissing and returning the motions of his tongue.

Her soft, round breasts pressed on his chest, cushioning her against his hard muscles. How he wanted to slip his hand inside her gown, feel her warm skin, touch and caress. But not now. He'd frighten her, and the best idea would be to cherish her first, then on their wedding night...he broke into a sweat. Now, he also wished and hoped he could teach her to make love the right way and enjoy it.

Breaking the kiss, Anna smiled at him, and smoothed his hair where she'd mussed it.

Returning the smile, he kissed her on the nose. "Honey, we are officially engaged, and we'll work out wedding plans on your timetable, but I don't want to wait too long. Now I have something to show you, Anna."

Chapter 4

Ross reached back to his coat and dug in the front right pocket. Presenting the old gray-tinged photograph to her, he said nothing, allowing her to absorb the image, to understand the meaning.

Seconds ticked by, the fire burned down, the wind died away.

Sucking in her breath, she looked from the image to him. "Which one are you?"

He held her wrist and turned her hand so they both could see the photograph of the train. "There. The tallest on the back row. I was the oldest on the train, eleven, I think. And already tall for my age."

"Ross. You're a train orphan too. *My heavens*. I never knew. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I almost did a couple of times, but I decided you'd have to take me on my own merit, not the fact I was an orphan. It scared me to think you might pity me, and you might even marry me because we are two of a kind."

"I would *never* think that. You are as fine a man as I know, and the fact you were an orphan has absolutely nothing to do with my love for you. Even though an orphan, you are as good or better than any..." She paused and drew in a breath. "Oh...my."

Ross threw his head back and laughed. "Yes. *Oh my*. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

She grasped the front of his shirt and brought him to her face. "You, Ross Davis, are a rascal." She shook him a little. "You should have told me right off. No, no, you shouldn't have. I would have accepted your proposal on the spot, thinking we were so similar."

"You're not mad?" He couldn't stop grinning, wanted to laugh, wanted to dance and sing. Miss Anna Morrison had accepted his marriage proposal.

Giving him a quick kiss, she smiled that sweet smile he loved so much. He'd be ready for the grave and still not tire of it.

She said, "How could I be angry? I got what I wanted, didn't I?"

"Me too, honey. See? Wishes *do* come true."

About the Author

Celia Yeary, a native Texan, former science teacher, graduate of Texas Tech University and Texas State University, is mother of two, grandmother of three boys, and wife of a wonderful, supportive Texan.

She has published ten novels, seven novellas, short stories, and articles for a Texas Magazine – *Texas Co-op Power*. She is a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas (DRT), a local writing group called The Write Girls, and co-owns a group blog titled Sweethearts of the West.

Celia and her husband enjoy traveling, and both are involved in their church, the community, and the university. Central Texas has been her home for forty years.

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Novels/Novellas by Ms. Yeary:

Texas Blue

Texas Dreamer

Texas Promise: The Cameron Sisters – Book 1

Texas True: The Cameron Sisters – Book 2

The Stars at Night

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Gallery Shorts:

Kathleen ~ Trinity Hill Brides: Book I

Rodeo Man

Truck Stop Paradise

Addie and the Gunslinger

Angel and the Cowboy

Charlotte and the Tenderfoot

Kat and the U.S. Marshal

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Anthologies/Collections:

Lone Star Dreaming (Single-Author Collection)

A Christmas Collection: Sensual

A Western Saga

2011 Summer Collection

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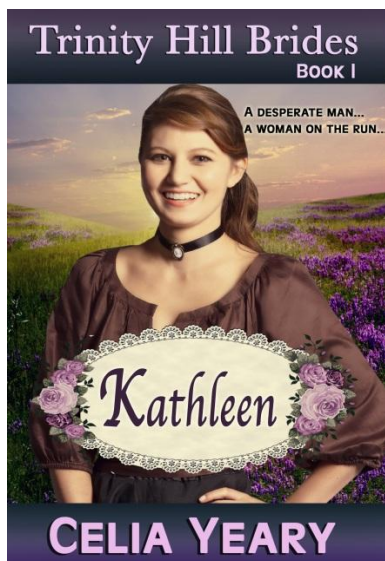
Ms. Yeary is also a contributor in these recipe books:

Christmas Dessert Decadence

Authors in the Kitchen

Available at online book stores...

Sneak Peek



A desperate man...

A woman on the run...

A surprising perfect match...

Kathleen Parker arrives in Trinity Hill, Texas, as a Mail Order Bride. But the name on the contract is not hers. She has good reason to be on the run, and taking another woman's place and name seems like the perfect foil.

Josiah Fremont is desperate for a wife, a woman who will cook, care for his three children, and generally be a helpmate on his newly purchased ranch. He learns his mail order bride waits at the hotel.

Kathleen and Josiah discover a mutual attraction but decide to hold off on marriage. Under the name on the contract – Gwendolyn – she decides to join him and his family for a few weeks while planning her next move. She fears bringing harm to the children and Josiah.

A man with revenge in his heart and a gun on his hip brings danger to everyone. When Josiah learns Kathleen's real identity, he struggles to make right choices that will benefit his family and the woman in his heart.

Chapter One

"A room upstairs, please."

The hotel clerk peered over his rimless glasses and squinted. Turning the sign-in book toward her, he pointed and said, "Sign here, please, on this line. How long will you be our guest?"

"Hmm, probably two nights."

He nodded. "Write 'two' in the square beside your name."

My name.

The agreement with the Mail Order Bride's name on it was in her small satchel. She'd studied it so she could spell both first and last names. Writing slowly as she pronounced them in her head, she managed to complete the task. It would never do if she misspelled one of them.

Gwendolyn Schoenberg.

"Very good. That will be two dollars a night which includes breakfast in our dining room."

Digging in her reticule, she pulled out the money and placed it on the counter. He gave her a key on a small chain.

"Welcome to Trinity Hill, Texas, ma'am. Room 204, right up those stairs. Do you need help with your bags?"

"No, I only have the two small ones."

Inside the room, she placed the satchels on the floor, removed her straw bonnet and gloves, and plopped down in a soft armchair. Exhausted, she

leaned her head back, stretched her legs out, and hung her arms over the sides. She closed her eyes and tried to relax.

Now, what? Who is this Josiah Fremont? What kind of man is he? She daydreamed of a tall handsome man with tender hands and an amiable manner. Surely he wouldn't be the sort to grab and pinch and squeeze until a bruise appeared, or raise his voice, berating others, even a woman he declared he loved.

And how long can I carry out this charade before I must move on?

She had no intention of marrying this man. She wondered if he would insist on marriage right away or allow them time to become acquainted. Where would she live in the meantime?

One thing was certain. She could not stay in Trinity Hill very long.

A run-away bride had to keep running, especially if she used her real name.

Kathleen Parker.

* * * * *

Kathleen had watched him all afternoon, the very nice looking man, tall and lanky, who wore high boots with the pants legs stuffed down into them. The thick leather belt with a big brass buckle sat low on his hips. The blue shirt rolled to his elbows clearly identified him as a working man, and the wide-brimmed felt hat suited him.

His three young children gave her pause, though, and just watching them made her stomach quiver. *Children?* She knew he had three from the Mail Order Bride letter she took from Gwendolyn, but somehow that fact hadn't registered in her desperate brain.

They trailed him everywhere he went, in and out of the mercantile, the bank, the livery, and the wagon yard, like ducklings following a mama duck. The boy, maybe ten, tried to walk beside his father but his shorter legs made him fall behind. He'd take a couple of running steps to keep up. The girls held hands and chattered much of the time. They obediently

stayed close behind, skipping or running when needed. All three wore those same high boots, even though the girls wore calico dresses.

By eavesdropping and watching, she'd learned he worked every day readying a big covered wagon and a smaller two-wheeled one for a move. In the mercantile, wearing her best dress and wide-brimmed bonnet, she hid her face as she pretended to move along a table that held dress goods. She couldn't make a dress if her life depended on it, but she could admire the fabric while she listened to him talk to the proprietor.

He said, "Are my goods all packed and ready, Jake?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Fremont. It seems you have just about everything to tide you over for a long spell. It was a lucky day for you when the Wellingtons had to sell out, even though the ranch is a little far out."

"It's not so bad. I can ride the distance in a couple of hours. 'Course driving a team pulling a wagon will take longer. That's why I'm stocking up as much as I can."

The proprietor nodded. "Wise move, my friend."

"I sure do thank you for your help. Tomorrow, I'll pull both my wagons closer to the barn in the wagon yard. My horses and mules are in the corral, ready to go."

"So, you'll be loading up tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. I will."

"Your boy can drive the small wagon?"

"Yes, he can handle that. He's strong for a ten year old, and he's always eager to help."

"All righty, then, I'll have Gilbert and Pete haul everything over to the barn. They can help you load and place it where you want. Just give 'em each a nickel and they'll be happy."

Mr. Fremont reached across the counter to shake hands. "I can't thank you enough. Just knowing I have the basics is a comfort."

The proprietor reached under the counter and brought out a package wrapped in brown paper and string. "This here is for your young-uns. A few books and some hard candy."

Mr. Fremont blew out a breath. "You know, I hadn't thought about books or anything for them. This will be a real blessing. Thanks again. Your check is waiting at the bank."

"That'll be fine. Now, you be careful on your trip out to the ranch. I hear it's a real nice place."

"It is, and thanks again."

Kathleen stopped listening, turned, and walked out of the mercantile. Yes, he might do just fine, but she'd have to play her cards right.

The last thing she wanted was for him to learn she was on the run.

And she sure didn't want him to know his real Miss Gwendolyn Schoenberg had left the train back in Missouri to run off with some big galoot who shot off his mouth about all the money he had.

Before the young woman left the train, she'd told Kathleen about Josiah Fremont in Trinity Hill, Texas.

She'd said, "He's all yours, if you want some down and out dirt farmer with three brats hanging on. Be my guest. I sure don't want him anymore."

One positive thing she'd heard was that the ranch was a good distance out of town, and he wouldn't be coming in very often.

All the better.

* * * * *

The Fielding Hotel sat right in the middle of town. The desk clerk would know if Gwendolyn Schoenberg had checked in. If she intended on being his bride, she'd better be there. He didn't have time to waste.

At the counter, he asked.

The clerk said, "Yes, sir, Mr. Fremont, a Miss Schoenberg checked in this morning when the train came in, but I cannot give you the room number of a guest unless your name is here as someone expected. I am sorry, but those're the rules."

Josiah cleared his throat. "Suppose you go up to this lady's room and inform her that her friend is downstairs. Now, could you do that for me? She's expecting me. I'll just wait over there by the window in that sitting area."

"All right, sir. I can do that."

Josiah nodded.

In a very few minutes, the clerk returned with a woman trailing him. Josiah removed his hat and met her at the stairs.

"Miss Gwendolyn Schoenberg? Name's Josiah Fremont."

Miss Schoenberg was pretty and dressed nice, too. The light blue cotton dress went real well with her dark brown eyes and hair. She didn't say anything for a couple of minutes as she studied him from his head down to his boots.

"Pleased to meet you, sir. Let's sit over here."

Her soft voice floated over him, making him want to smile.

She led the way to a lounging area with several soft chairs and small tables with lamps. When she sat, he pulled a chair closer to sit in front of her.

With a slight smile, she asked, "Do you have a proposal for me, sir?"

He tugged on his collar at the throat. Being this close to such a pretty woman who smelled good, too, was something he'd almost forgotten.

"Proposal? I hadn't thought we'd be that close to marriage right at this moment. Maybe we should become acquainted first."

She sat very still and very straight, with one eyebrow raised. "Well, then, what do you suggest? You did send for a bride, didn't you? Would you prefer a getting acquainted period first? That would suit me just fine. I always like to be sure of what I'm doing, especially if I'm contemplating marriage."

Josiah cleared his throat. "I'll just spell it out, ma'am. I'm moving out to a ranch I bought west of here about eight miles, but I need a female to cope with all the domestic work and watch my children."

She cocked her head to one side. "How old are they?"

"Lucas is ten, Marianne is eight, and Cynthia is six. All are school age now."

She shook her head. "I know very little about children, Mr. Fremont, and even less about living on a ranch."

He frowned a bit. "But your agency page stated you'd worked as a nanny and loved children."

Her eyes widened. "It did?"

"Yes, it did."

Miss Schoenberg flapped her hand and attempted a little laugh. "Oh, why, of course. It's just been so long ago I'd almost forgotten."

"And if you hadn't contemplated living on a ranch, what did you expect?"

"To...to live here, in Trinity Hill. I suppose I hadn't thought about where we'd live."

Since she didn't sound too sure of herself, he leaned forward a bit. "I think you might make a real good ranch wife...uh, woman."

She laughed lightly. "You have no idea if I would make a good ranch wife or woman, as you put it. You know nothing about me."

"Well, in five minutes, could you give me some information to go on?"

"Five minutes? Oh, well, why not. I'm twenty-four years old, not exactly a young woman. I've never been married, but I came close twice. Neither of the men loved me, they only wanted a companion. My goal is to have a nice house and a loving family. However, I have supported myself for several years, and I can continue doing that if I must."

"Doing what?"

"Bookkeeping, which isn't usually what a female does, but I like the work and I'm good."

Hesitating a moment, he said, "Your agency page didn't mention anything about being a bookkeeper."

She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "It didn't? How in the world can you depend on anyone these days to do a job right?"

"So, you were a business woman?"

She paused before she spoke. "Mmm, not exactly. Just an employee."

"All right. Can you cook? Do you think you could get used to children? Mine are real good, obedient...well, most of the time. Lucas is a strong little guy and often acts like a man. He sees after his sisters real well."

"Cook? I'm not used to cooking large amounts, but that's something I could learn, I suppose. But Mr. Fremont, do you think I'm suitable for you as a person to care for your children and home? I might make a mess of things."

He swallowed hard. "No, I don't think you'd mess up much. You see, I'm learning as I go along, too."

His breath caught a little when she slightly leaned forward. Her lips were just that much closer, and he saw a tiny bead of perspiration on her temple.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've never ranched on my own before, even though I did live on one for a spell after I left home."

"What sort of work have you been doing here in town?"

"Like I wrote in my letter, I worked in the brick yard on the edge of town. I guess you forgot. Anyway, Trinity Hill hopes to have more brick buildings than wooden ones in the near future. They're a lot safer."

She raised her eyebrows in an appealing way. "So, you could forgive me if I need time to learn a few basic chores?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. My biggest responsibility in the long run, are my kids. If you could like them and do your best, maybe we'd all get along just fine."

She looked away and blinked a few times.

"Sir, I assume you want your children safe. Correct?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's the main thing."

She stood and shook her head. "I would do my best, but I'm not sure that would be good enough. Maybe this is all wrong."

He stood, as well. *What does she mean by that?*

His heart pounded, knowing she was perfect. She had a likable and calm manner, the kind of woman he preferred, the kind he needed for this move. Yes, it would be difficult, but he honestly could envision success that would make him proud.

He had to trust her.

She couldn't say no.

What could he do to persuade her?

Miss Schoenberg kept searching his face and blinking.

He stood as immobile as she.

"Miss Schoenberg..."

"Mr. Fremont..."

Both laughed. "You go first, Miss Gwendolyn. What were you about to say?"

"No, you go first, Mr. Fremont."

"You seem real nice, and smart too. I sure wish you wouldn't say no right off. I'm pretty sure I can find another woman if I have to. I have two other names, women I know personally, but truth be told, I don't think I could live with either one. You see, my Louise was a real good wife, a real lady who worked beside me. We were a team, and that's what I'm looking for. A partner."

She smiled a bit. "A partner. Now, I rather like that. So based on these five minutes, you have concluded you could live with me."

A tiny quirk at one corner of her mouth told him she wanted to laugh. Ah, she had a sense of humor. Now *that* was something he liked.

Returning the smile, he said, "I apologize. That sounded selfish, didn't it, seeing things only from my side. I wonder, though, do I look like a man you could live with?"

Returning to her chair lifted his spirits. *She's not running away yet.*

He sat on the edge of his chair, propped his arms on his thighs, and held his hat by the brim. He leaned closer to her. Fearful of ruining the moment, he only looked at her, hoping she made the next move.

"I'm not sure how much time you have to talk, for you do seem to be in a hurry. But let's discuss the journey out to your ranch and the plan when you get there."

"That'd be good."

She said, "All right, then, you go first."

What could he say to persuade her? How should he begin explaining what he needed from her? She was educated for a job a man usually held, but probably she could cook and keep house and watch the children.

He had to start somewhere.

"Maybe I should clear the air, here, and lay it all out."

She frowned, but he had no choice except to explain.

"Yes," she said, "please do tell me everything. If there's anything I abhor, it's secrets and lies."

Oh, that's a good one, Kathleen.

"Me, too, ma'am. It's just that I didn't expect to get this far."

Surprisingly, she laughed out loud.

"Oh, Mr. Fremont, you are something. Just say what you need to. I'll listen."

Josiah stood again and walked in a tight circle in front of her. Since he was ruining his hat by twisting it, he threw it on a table. Running his fingers through his unkempt hair, he sat once more in front of her.

"Would you please consider leaving the day after tomorrow on the trip out to my ranch? You don't have to marry me, just go as a paid hand...uh, employee, until we figure out if we suit."

To his great surprise, she held out her hand. "Done, Mr. Fremont. It's a deal."

* * * * *

Josiah Fremont left to tend to his children, leaving Kathleen breathless.

Yes, her goal was to leave town, hoping to make herself invisible somewhere so she could make better plans on her complete escape. At first glance, the deal she made with Mr. Fremont seemed good, but now she began worrying about the children.

Suppose *he* showed up and learned she worked out on a ranch? Suppose *he* followed her out there to "persuade" her to go back. No. She would never go back, nor give him the money.

The children were too precious to put in harm's way. Would she do that by working for their father on the pretense of possible marriage?

On the other hand, what choice did she have?

None, at the moment. None whatsoever.

At least she had a gun and knew how to use it. If she had to, she could kill.

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