

TANNER'S EMPIRE

1

Ethan had risen earlier than usual. He had to make the difficult trip into Axe Handle with Jane. She had balked but surrendered under duress to keep her prized mount, a beautiful Paint with ebony mane and tail, from destruction. Ethan had been enraged by his daughter's defiance and would have destroyed the Paint stallion if she did not comply. She had no choice. Ethan was man of his word.

Nathanial was just waking as the dawn broke to the east. The first rays of dawn were, he thought, the most beautiful sight on God's earth. A prism of early haze filtered into his room erasing the last shadows of gray, causing him to stretch and yawn. Nathanial Tanner was handsome. He stood slightly over six feet tall. Weathered by the constant change in climate and browned by the searing sun, he was lean and hard muscled, the eldest of Ethan Tanner's three sons and the most intense. He had Rebecca Tanner's blue-gray eyes and sharp nose, but the strong squared jaw and thin, taut lips were unmistakably Ethan's.

Nathanial dressed with casual intent, his mind on the day's work ahead. But no matter how hard he tried he couldn't subdue the gnawing worry for his sister Jane. Last night's shouting match had been the worst he had ever witnessed. Jane had always been headstrong and a little wild, but never had he seen her so enraged. She had utterly refused to comply with Ethan's plan of taking her into Axe Handle and fitting her out in the fashion of an acceptable young woman. It got ugly and would have continued if Ethan had not threatened her with destroying the Paint. Nathanial still shivered at the

thought that Ethan might just have made good on his threat, but it was apparent Jane believed him and that's all that counted, and so she had reluctantly agreed.

He hoped this makeover would be successful, although he found it doubtful. Jane had been allowed to run wild and free on Tanner land too many years for roping and breaking now. Just perhaps, she would stop her nightly meandering to the LowWest Grasslands that bordered too close to the treacherous Canyon Maze. No one had entered the labyrinth for years....not in his lifetime, anyway. He had heard the stories of mountain trappers entering the canyon to escape the mountains dangerous spring thaw, and was never seen again.

Jane was courageous for a female, and never stupid, but he wondered about her curiosity. She had asked Juanita many times about the legends of the Canyon Maze, when the Indians possessed the land. But Juanita, whose long silences were punctuated only with stoic speech, never satisfied Jane's thirst for adventure. He had taken his worry to Ethan, but he had dismissed the concern as being either over-protective or too imaginative.

"Don't search for trouble that doesn't exist, Nathaniel. There's enough with Jane as it is", was all Ethan had said. The subject never came up again, but Nathaniel continued to worry about Jane. He made up his mind to keep a close eye on her, just the same.

Ethan was joined for breakfast, first by Nathaniel then Jebediah and last by his youngest son, Benjamin. Jebediah looked the most like Ethan but did not share his passion for the land. Benjamin was still young and needed filling out, but he would favor Nathaniel in height and build in a few more years. Jane had not come down to breakfast,

yet. Nathaniel saw the anger growing in his father's face.

"Maybe she's over-slept, Pa", Nathaniel said. He attempted to ease the growing tension that was heavily filling the room.

"Unlikely", was Ethan's reply.

Jane entered the dining room resolute in making the trip to town an ordeal for Ethan. She sat silent and drank only coffee.

"Refusing to eat won't work with me, Jane. You can suit yourself, but we're still going into town!" Ethan's tone was determined. Jeb and Ben ate quickly, glad to excuse themselves to their chores.

"See ya' later, Pa." Jeb was up and moving just as Ben pushed back his plate.

"Me, too, Pa." Ben and Jeb met at the front door, shared a sigh of relief, and headed for the corral.

"Whattya' make of Jane, Jeb? Think Pa's goin' win this one?", Ben asked.

"I quit tryin' to figure Jane out a long time ago. Take my advice, there ain't nothin' to be gained by sticking yer nose in where it don't belong and ain't wanted."

Ben looked innocently at Jeb as they entered the corral and set about their tasks.

"Ain't ya' even curious, Jeb?"

Jeb tightened his mare's cinch, causing her to blow and snort. Jeb answered with indifference, "Nope."

"Sure makes me wonder, though. I mean, what she's goin' look like all gussied up and female-like?" Ben mounted Brownie and galloped at Jeb's side toward the SouthBound pastures.

Nathaniel swallowed the last of his coffee and rose to his feet. "Pa, I'll get the

buckboard hitched for you....be ready in twenty minutes."

Ethan waved his approval. Jane remained at the table even when Ethan gathered his jacket and hat. He removed his rifle from its rack over the fireplace and tucking it under his arm, opened the front door.

"Come on Jane, Nathaniel's bringin' the buckboard."

The trip to Axe Handle was terrible enough for Jane, but the stares and grins from the citizens bit deep into her pride. Ethan pulled up in front of Emily Thorne's dress shop. A middle-aged spinster with an incredible overbite met them at the door.

"Ethan Tanner! What a lovely surprise to see you! And who might this beauty be? Perhaps Little Jane? How she's grown!"

Miss Emily played couquettishly with Ethan. Jane remained indifferent. She considered Emily Thorne ridiculous. Ethan wasn't listening to her either.

"Good day, Miss Emily. I've brought Jane for you to transform. Your best geddup from the inside out. Don't forget the bonnet. Rebecca always said a woman wasn't quite dressed without it. I know nothing about this sort of thing so I'll leave her in your capable hands. I'll be back to fetch her up in an hour." Ethan spun in an after thought. "Shoes! She needs shoes....and hosiery."

Miss Emily smiled, what must have been her wise smile thought Jane, and raised her hand delicately in the air, quieting Ethan.

"I understand, Ethan. It will all be done so-o-o fashionably. My taste is impeccable!" She patted Ethan's arm as if they shared some secret between them. "You will take home an angel and a vision of exquisite beauty! A...."

Ethan interrupted. "I'll go then and leave you to it." He left quickly and headed

directly for the Cattleman's Association and Matthew Browne's office.

Ethan had seen to it that Browne was elected as President of Axe Handle's Cattleman's Association. Ethan convinced Browne that a man of his experience was needed to continue to serve the cattlemen of the territory. After Senator Browne's untimely death, his son Matthew had been invited to succeed his father and complete his Senate term. Matthew Browne had seen opportunity in accepting Ethan's request to stay on at the Cattleman's Association and refused the appointment in Washington.

Browne was ambitious but honest like his father, in Ethan's estimation. He was young but mature, both feet on the ground and with reasonable plans for the settlers to come. Ethan knew he would have to face the fact that the territory would be settled sooner or later. He wanted a man he felt he could trust, with vision, who would allow him to continue operating the Tanner Ranch land without concession.

Browne was most accommodating since Ethan put him in a position of power and prestige that would have taken half a lifetime to achieve on his own. He also liked the Tanner boys....big robust honorable men and a rarity in the East. He did not know Ethan's daughter. He had watched Ethan drive by and pull up in front of Emily Thorne's. His curiosity was aroused at the sight of the savage beauty seated beside him. She looked absolutely breathtaking in deerskin and high moccasin boots. Her expression had been impossible to read. He wondered her name.

Matthew Browne was seated in an over-stuffed chair behind a huge maple desk when Ethan entered. "Good Morning, Mr. Tanner. Have you brought this year's tally sheet for me, I hope?"

Browne was a relatively good looking man nearing thirty with a thin mustache

and a bad habit of smoking fat cigars that filled the small office with blue-gray smoke that always made breathing difficult for Ethan. Ethan noticed he'd put on a few pounds since taking office. He figured the job agreed with him.

"Got 'em with me, Matthew. What I came to find out though, was how many beef the cavalry'll be needing this year." Ethan settled down in the nearest high back chair and looked directly at Browne.

Browne studied Ethan's tally sheets. "You may have a problem with these figures, Mr. Tanner. A whole lot of ranchers lost too many cattle to hoof-rot and can't meet their commitment to the government. Hell, they can't even meet a quarter of what's needed to maintain the Indian reservations."

Ethan adjusted his seat. He'd heard rumor his neighboring cattle ranchers were having problems. "What're you tryin' to tell me, Matthew? I got to meet the difference for every rancher with a contract?"

Browne admired Ethan Tanner's ability to sum up a situation quickly. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. His expression grew dark.

"No, Mr. Tanner, that's not what I'm saying. What I *am* saying is that you have to meet the *entire* contract for the government and Indian reservations. Washington knows you have the only herd in the territory large enough to meet the demands of both." Ethan leaped to his feet, eyes blazing.

"What the hell do you think the Easterners are going to say? You're asking me to compromise their contract of fifty thousand head for the other! I've had this contract with the East long before the need to provide meat-on-the-hoof for Blue Bellies and savages! Find another way, Matthew, 'cause if you don't, I could be facing trouble in meeting any

contracts next spring. Besides, I'm starting the final winter round up for the spring. My boys have been working with the winter crew from the mountains. Trappin's over and they're ready to go. They move 'em to the cattle yards and the train East. They didn't sign on for an open drive on the Trail north to the Fort to fill a government quota."

Ethan leaned forcefully against Browne's desk and continued emphatically, "We'll have to hire more of the winter crew and extend the round-up to meet your quota, plus brand day and night to meet the deadline. The train east won't wait just 'cause there's been hard times for ranchers!"

Matthew Browne relaxed his position behind his desk. Sinking into the thick leatherback, he motioned for Ethan to sit down.

"It's not my call, Mr. Tanner. I received the wire only this morning, directly from the Secretary of the Interior and Indian Affairs. They said the same thing you did....find a way. You're it, Mr. Tanner. You're all Washington has and there will be no negotiating the point. The government calls and we answer that call making all other priorities secondary. The other ranchers are coming in looking for promissory notes against their claims just to make it till next spring. Frankly, I can't see where going deeper in the hole will help them much. By the time the herds are built up, the bank will demand most of the profit from sales, not to mention interest accrued over the season, to break even. They won't have much bargaining power on the market. This could, quite possibly, put most out of business."

Browne removed the stogie from his mouth, dropped it on the floor and ground it out vigorously under his boot heel. "They might be able to combine efforts to meet the eastern contract completely if you would be willing to turn it over to them. It *will* mean

you giving up the contract completely to help you neighbors and it will free you to meet the government's demand for beef."

Ethan thought for a moment, peering at Browne suspiciously then asked, "And what if I refuse to meet Washington's demands? What then?"

Browne shrugged and reached lazily for another cigar from the box he kept inside his middle desk drawer. He snipped the end and striking a match, inhaled deeply. A thick puff of toxic smoke wafted toward Ethan. "They confiscate the whole herd, Mr. Tanner."

He watched the lines in Ethan's face deepen. Ethan's anger was white-hot and his gaze nearly lethal. Browne added, "At gun point, if necessary. Of course, that won't be necessary....I mean, we're both reasonable businessmen and the government *is* paying top dollar." Browne drew deeply on his cigar and watched Ethan closely. He could almost hear the gears turning in his head. "You think about it, Mr. Tanner, but we really have no other alternative than to comply."

Ethan rose slowly, deliberately, his voice issuing forth in a low rasp. "Looks like the deal's been made, Browne. What's my damage?"

Matthew Browne shoved the tally ledger toward Ethan. "Two hundred thousand prime head....ready to move north mid-summer. Sorry, Mr. Tanner."

Ethan left furious. Top dollar paid by the government meant ten cents a head less than the eastern market. He remembered Jane and headed for Emily Thorne's. He'd worry about the government later.

The vision Miss Emily promised to create repulsed Jane. Her stomach flip-flopped and she had to swallow hard to keep from visibly heaving. It was quite obvious

to Jane that Miss Emily was pleased with her - as she put it - "greatest challenge".

Jane had been stripped behind a folding screen then pushed, shoved and tamped into a tight muslin bodice laced at the dipped neckline with pink satin ribbon and tied in the front in a neat bow. This was then tucked into the flouncey matching bloomers also trimmed daintily at the knee with matching pink satin ribbon. These were gathered and tied in tiny bows at the anterior of both knees.

A torturous corset had been wrapped about her tiny waist and pulled so tight Jane's breath was forced out of her in a loud "whoof". She had felt as though Miss Emily would break her ribs. Finally, the corset was cinched and secured at the small of her back. Each breath was labored and she ached all over. An oversized 'birdcage' of wires and thin slats was secured neatly over her rump and layers of petticoats covered the whole frame.

Miss Emily had then sat her on a footstool and pulled black stockings over her shapely toes to her knees. She had tucked them under the bloomers and held them fast with pink; frumpy garters that made Jane feel the blood struggle to reach her toes. Black shoes were latched by wire loops and metal rivets up to the ankle and laced tightly at the tops. Their elevated heels made Jane wobble off balance. She couldn't believe anyone could expect her to actually walk in these tiny sweatboxes!

Miss Emily fussed and danced about Jane checking this and that, making changes here and there, rearranging and tugging at her until it was all she could do to keep from bolting from the dress shop. She may have done just that if she could have managed to keep her balance long enough to make it to the door.

The crowning glory had been pulling the long bulky cream and rose print dress

over her head and tying the wide pink satin sash about her demure waist, finishing with a huge bow that rested on the 'birdcage' that made her rump stand out in an unnatural fashion. The final touch had been the ridiculously over-sized bonnet that flopped at the sides and tied under her chin with a (charming) ribbon sash that equaled the one about her waist. She could not understand why any woman would not be considered attractive without all this fuss. No one could see if she was or not hidden underneath all this cloth and ribbon.

Miss Emily protested strongly when Jane demanded she help her out of the uncomfortable geddup.

"Your father will want to see what he's buying, Miss Jane! You simply MUST let him see you first!"

Jane glowered at Emily Thorne, immediately silencing her. She gingerly aided in the undressing ritual. She then neatly folded each garment and carefully placed them in boxes, tying them with pink and lavender ribbons. Jane quickly dressed. She was relieved to be back in her comfortable deerskin and moccasins.

Jane refused to carry any of the boxes to the buggy; forcing Miss Emily to cart and load the awkward wares herself. She was clearly frazzled by Jane's stubborn attitude. Jane did not watch her work, but climbed onto the seat of the buckboard. She sat at attention, eyes forward, and did not recognize Ethan's glare as he leaped up beside her and gathered the reins in his massive hands.

Striking the team forward, Ethan trotted off toward the end of town, leaving Miss Emily standing alone in front of her shop. Waving furiously, she called after Ethan, "Don't worry about a thing, Ethan! You can settle the bill later or I can send someone to

the ranch for payment! Will that be satisfactory, Ethan? Ethan!....Ethan?"

It was obvious that Emily Thorne had been disappointed by Ethan Tanner's lack of interest in her diligent effort....not to mention failure to offer payment. No telltale emotion registered on Jane's face, but at the sight of Emily Thorne's rattled composure, uproarious laughter filled her head. Jane struggled to keep a straight face. She clenched her teeth and thought about riding the Paint far into open country.

The stone hard look on Ethan's face caused Jane to wonder, briefly, if he had heard Emily Thorne at all.

2

Les Brewster had been leaning against a post across the street from Matthew Browne's office and watched Ethan Tanner ride into town. He was relieved. Tanner's visit had been, as far as he could tell, uneventful. He wondered about the young woman with Ethan, but not as Browne.

Brewster's idea of a good woman was one at Madame Devereaux's....purposeful but not expectant of more than pay for services rendered. Brewster felt women had their place in a man's life....flat on their backs and compliant.

He was an obnoxious, wiry man of short stature, thirtyish, and badly in need of regular bathing, as well as a haircut and shave. Brewster was rarely seen in Axe handle. No one seemed to notice him much when he was in town. He kept mostly to himself. Browne knew, though, for it was he who had sent for Brewster.

He wondered what Browne had in mind for him to do this time. Browne was always calling him whenever there was dirty work to be done. There was no friendship between them, but Brewster liked the feel of cold cash in his pocket and Browne would

keep it flowing as long as he proved himself useful.

He distrusted Browne. Browne kept himself squeaky clean, leaving all his evil doing to someone else. But wary as much as he was of Browne, he feared Ethan Tanner more. A man as powerful and steeped in scruples as Tanner could prove to be a real liability to a man such as himself.

He'd wait until after dark and pay a visit to Browne, as he always did when summoned. He spat in the street and after wiping his mouth on his sleeve, headed for the bordello. He wanted to forget Browne....and Tanner, for the time being.

Brewster made his way to Browne's office at dusk. He skittered along the shadowed wooden sidewalk, beady brown eyes flitting suspiciously, watching for anyone else who might be out for an evening stroll. When he was quite sure he was alone, he walked briskly to Browne's office door.

He would have tapped lightly, but the door opened and Browne silently motioned him in. He liked the feel of this less and less. Browne had been watching for him.

"How long you been standing at that window, Browne?", Brewster asked. "Keep your voice down!", Browne hissed. He was obviously in no mood for questioning. "This better be worth my coming back here, Browne. I had a nice little game of my own going across the Border." Brewster kept his voice low but his breath was offensive, smelling of the bordello's cheapest whiskey. Browne took a step back, frowning. "Brewster, you couldn't get a bad poker game going without backing and someone to do the thinking for you, so quit the bull. I got something big and I'll need your....er....services. And there's no margin for error, so you do exactly as I say and we'll both walk away from this one a quarter a million richer and no one the wiser. Foul up and we could both hang.

Understand?"

Brewster understood the word 'hang'. It was a word he never liked hearing. He figured he knew how it would end for him, if he continued to work for Browne, and he didn't like the picture. He knew he should walk away from this one, but a quarter of a million was making it tough. He'd stay.

What was really chaffing him was that Browne could always play him like a royal flush. He knew just how to manipulate him and he hated that most about Matthew Browne. Browne was a smart bastard. Others may know he was smart, but what Brewster knew and they didn't was just how dangerous Browne could be when operating a scam.

Brewster answered, "Okay. Okay and don't make no foul-ups. Whattya' got for me to do this time, Browne? And I hope it doesn't have anything to do with the Tanners. I seen him this morning." "It does." Browne grinned wryly.

Brewster fell mute. "That's better. Sit down. This is going to take a while."

Brewster sat in the chair Ethan had earlier that morning. He wriggled uncomfortably as Matthew Browne calmly lit one of his great smelly cigars.