

Adam
Braddocks, Book Two

By
Starla Kaye

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Starla Kaye

“Live, love, laugh... such simple words, but words I take to heart. There are never enough hours in my day to do even half of the things I would like to do. But no matter how crazy my life get, I try to incorporate my words to live by (live, love, laugh) into each day.”

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Chapter One

August 1878, Dryfork Kansas

Timing was everything and his was the worst.

Adam froze in the doorway of Henderson's Mercantile, gaped at the sight of a britches-covered bottom thrust up high as the young helper, Aaron, bent over in front of the glass-fronted counter. The bottom wiggled back and forth and he couldn't have looked away if he'd wanted to. Which worried him greatly. What the hell was he doing staring at a young man's backside?

With one final wiggle, a voice called out, "See? I can move around just fine in these pants." But it wasn't Aaron who straightened, turned, and tossed a waist-long red braid over a very feminine shoulder in a boy's white shirt.

Adam was barely aware of Annabelle Henderson and Jennie Braddock standing off to the side of the store. His entire focus centered on Faith Paddington. The mayor's spoiled, outrageous daughter was always up to some sort of mischief... if she wasn't harassing him about this or that. Lately she'd left him alone and he'd been pleased. All right, he'd missed her pestering him, but never in his life would he admit that to anyone.

"What are you doing wearing a boy's britches?" he barked and drew the attention of all the women. "What would your father think?"

That little bit of a nose of hers shot up, her slender shoulders stiffened. "I'm trying them on to see if they're what I need. Not that anything I do is any of your business."

"They aren't what you need. Put your dress back on like a respectable lady." It wasn't that he didn't like the sight of her sweet, perfectly shaped body in the britches and shirt. No, he liked it too much. But he damn well didn't want another man walking in here and seeing her. "Now."

She didn't move, simply glowered at him. In her agitation, her plump breasts heaved and pushed out the shirt's front to its limit. He swallowed hard, curled his hands into fists at his sides. Desire raged through him. He'd been far too long without a woman. It was time he made a trip into the nearby Dodge City and found someone to take the edge off his desires.

Jennie, Faith's good friend and his sister-in-law, stepped toward Faith. "She's not doing anything wrong. Leave her be."

He forced his gaze in her direction. "You best not be thinking about wearing such clothes, Jennie Braddock. Daniel would bust your butt good." As her cheeks turned pink, he shifted his gaze back to Faith. "A lady should dress as a lady."

Faith rolled her eyes. "Lots of women wear britches or riding skirts."

"Women who live on ranches and help their men folk, maybe. Not women who live in town and have no need for such clothing." He was starting to sweat and it had nothing to do with the heat of the mid-August day. He couldn't stop glancing at her breasts, wondering if they would fit his hands just right, wondering if they would be soft to his touch.

Now Annabelle moved beside the other two women. Her lightly lined face pinched tight in disgust... and did he see a hint of pain, too? She pinned him with a hard look. "Adam Braddock, you get on out of here. Go cause a problem somewhere else."

He blinked at her, puzzled. She'd never been anything but gentle and kind to anyone, as far as he knew. She'd generally gone out of her way to be patient and understanding with him. She worried about him, even when he got surly with people.

"I came in here to—" he started.

"I don't care why you came in here." She pulled in a shaky breath, putting a hand over her heart. "I'm doing business with Faith right now."

"Selling her a pair of boy's britches," he gritted out in annoyance. But he was getting concerned, as the older woman's complexion seemed to grow paler.

He stepped closer. "Are you all right, Annabelle?" Maybe he should go round up Doc Carpenter.

She tipped her chin up just like Faith had done. "I'm perfectly fine."

Faith inched next to her and looked anxiously at him. "She's had a few days lately where she's felt poorly. She needs help around here, especially since Aaron quit to work on your brother's ranch."

He'd heard – but forgotten for a second – that the sixteen-year-old boy had decided he wanted to try being a cowboy. Ben had hesitated taking him on because of his protective feelings about Annabelle. She pretty much treated all of the Braddock brothers as the sons she'd never had and they all watched after her as much as they could. So how the devil had he not noticed her feeling poorly? He worked and lived next door to her. Was he so lost in his doldrums that he didn't see what happened around him anymore?

Irritated with himself, he sounded gruffer than he meant to as he said, "Maybe you should close the store."

Every one of the women sent him sizzling looks.

"I'll do no such thing!" Annabelle snapped. She stretched to her full non-intimidating height a good foot shorter than him. "I just need to take it a bit easier for a while." She nodded at Faith. "Sweet Faith is going to help me out for now."

Faith looked sourly at him. "I suppose you have an objection to that too. As you do to the britches I plan to wear around here while I work."

Lord yes! He already saw too much of her as she continually chased after him. At least he had. Until about a month ago. He still hadn't figured what had brought about the change in her. He'd been too busy congratulating himself on finally being rid of the little nuisance. But to have her working next door to him on an almost daily basis...

"I can't imagine that your father will allow it."

She glanced away, clearly bothered by his comment. Then she faced him again. "I'm not a child anymore. I'm twenty-one and perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

He noted how Jennie was worrying her lower lip, her pretty face pinched in concern. Even Annabelle appeared uneasy. They all knew the town's opinionated mayor had a good heart but he also believed in being the strong head of his household. Nothing had ever been said about him applying a firm hand to his wife's or to Faith's bottom. Discipline was a private business. But many in town had witnessed one of the women squirming uncomfortably now and then on the church pew on a Sunday morning. Himself included. It didn't bother him, though. Both Sarah and her daughter Faith could be trials at times.

"What you need is a husband, a household of your own to take care of. Then you wouldn't have time for..." He closed his mouth at the furious looks cast in his direction.

To his surprise, Faith said calmly, "I have decided to be a spinster. Men are more trouble than they're worth and I don't need one in my life."

“Now, Faith dear,” Annabelle quietly protested. “Just because—”

Faith shot him a withering look and then moved around the counter, heading for the back room. “No, it’s more than Adam’s determined resistance to my attentions. I’ve been courted numerous times over this last month by some of the cowboys in the area, you know that. But not a one of them truly wanted more than to get in my bloomers.”

She glanced back at Adam, and then continued on her way. “While it might be enjoyable having a man rut into me, I want more than a man’s seed. Since that appears to be all men are interested in... Well, I’ll be content to live alone.”

Adam gaped at her bold declaration, slowly fuming. “She’s been courted? By some of the yahoos around here?”

Annabelle seemed to have recovered now and shook her head sadly at him. “Did you think she would wait forever for you to come to your senses? She’s pretty. She’s sweet. Of course there are men around these parts wanting to court her.”

He didn’t want her constantly trying to whittle away at his resistance. He’d decided after his first wife died giving birth he never wanted to go through all that pain again. Loving someone was nothing but a headache, heartache, too. But, hell, he hated the notion of Faith going out with any of the men around Dry Fork. What was her father thinking allowing that?

Frustrated, he snapped, “Faith Paddington is not sweet. She’s trouble. Too outspoken for her own good. Too daring and independent.” What she needed was a good walloping to get these crazy thoughts out of her head. “A decent woman doesn’t talk about men wanting to get in her bloomers.”

He sucked in a steadying breath, horrified at the idea of any man touching her in that way. “Talking about a man’s seed. She needs her mouth washed out with soap for speaking such things. A hand applied to—”

Faith poked her head back into the room, eyes blazing. “Rutting or spanking. That’s all men seem to think about doing to their women.”

“Some women need their butt burned from time to time.” He refused to talk about the “rutting” because he was already fighting down an erection just at the thought of pounding into her.

Disgusted with all of it, he turned and stomped out of the mercantile.

* * *

Faith sat across the dinner table from her parents. She had dreaded confronting her father with her decision and, just as she’d thought, he hadn’t taken her announcement well. Her stomach knotted, knowing she would face his wrath and certain punishment, but she would not back down. She waited for his explosion.

It came swiftly. “Daughter, you are not going to work in that mercantile. I won’t have it.”

She saw his hands tightening as he held a knife and fork, and then he tossed them down. Her heart raced. You can change your mind. Save yourself from a licking for going against him. But she remained quiet, determined. This was important to her.

“Now, Sylvester,” her mother gently protested and earned a scowl from her father. “Annabelle needs some help right now. I see nothing wrong in Faith helping out.”

Her father’s face reddened and he shoved his plate away. He didn’t like anyone going against him. “Stay out of this or face the consequences.”

"I'm an adult now. I can make my own decisions." Faith didn't want her mother being punished for defending a choice she'd made.

"You live under my roof, do you not?"

"Yes, but..." They'd had this argument many times before. His roof meant under his rules. Meaning whatever he said must be obeyed.

"No buts to it, Faith Marie Paddington." He steadied his gaze, pressed, "I say you working in the mercantile isn't proper. You need to focus on finding a husband."

She thought back to Adam's carrying on about her wearing the britches, how a proper lady wore dresses. That disagreement still bothered her. "Are you saying Annabelle Henderson isn't a proper lady because she works in the mercantile?"

"Of course he's not saying that," her mother interrupted.

"I told you to stay out of this, Sarah Anne." He focused on Faith once more. "Her situation is entirely different. She's a widow woman, owns the store."

She knew she was treading on dangerous ground, but Faith refused to be swayed from her decision. "She's a woman alone. I am a woman alone." She hesitated, feeling her face heating.

"All right, at the moment I don't live alone. But I'm planning on doing just that. Soon."

Her father's eyes bugged out. "You will do no such thing! You are not moving out of this house until you take a husband. I won't have it!"

Annoyed that he wouldn't listen to her wishes, she shoved back her chair and stood. "I am going to work with Annabelle at the mercantile. And I am going to move out on my own as soon as I have the money to do so."

She heard her mother suck in a worried breath at her clear defiance of her father's wishes. She listened to his chair being pushed back on the hardwood floor. As he stood, she knew what he was going to say even before he said it. But she wasn't going to back down. She would suffer the consequences.

"You will go to your room and wait for me, Faith Marie. Be ready for a sound thrashing." His tone was firm and she knew there would be no changing his mind at this point.

Her knees were weak as she walked away with as much dignity as possible. Behind her she heard her parents arguing and finally her mother quietly saying, "Yes, Sylvester." No doubt her mother would be disciplined this night as well. And it was all her fault.

* * *

Adam sat at one of the tables near the piano in the Tumbleweed Saloon, nursing a whiskey. How many had he had already? He'd stormed in here after closing up his barbershop and not knowing where else to go. Even though it had only been mid-day and the saloon wasn't officially open, Angelica had let him in. They occasionally tangled over something, but for the most part the saloon owner and he got along.

Business was picking up by now. A dozen cowboys from nearby ranches had wandered in as they usually did on a Saturday night. Angelica's two waitresses were making the rounds, chatting with the familiar men, bringing them requested drinks. Doc Carpenter had just sat down at the piano prepared to play the ivories for another night as he did most nights. For the most part everyone kept their distance from Adam, which pleased him greatly.

Then his younger brother Ben ambled through the front doors and into the dimly lit saloon. His twin, Caleb, was with him. Behind them came Daniel. All three brothers headed straight for him, expressions sour. Damnation. Had Jennie gone straight home to her husband

and tattled on him about his argument with Annabelle and Faith? He felt bad about causing Annabelle any grief, but not Faith. No, definitely not that little spitfire.

“What brings the three of you in here tonight?” He tossed back the rest of his whiskey.

Ben and Caleb pulled out chairs and sat down. Daniel spun his chair around and straddled it, bracing his forearms on the back. “Apparently some jackass brother of ours upset Annabelle Henderson.”

“Jennie tell you that?” Adam lifted his glass and called to the bartender, “Another whiskey.”

“That and that you had words with Faith. Unkind words.” Daniel looked him eye-to-eye. “What the devil has gotten into you lately?”

“Yeah,” Caleb added. “You’ve been so edgy that men are steering clear of your place. Afraid to take a chance with their lives to have you hold a knife to their throat for a shave, let alone get a haircut.”

It took him a few seconds before he finally grumbled, “Last week was three years.” He didn’t have to explain further. His brothers immediately understood he was referring to Meredith and the baby dying three years ago. It wasn’t that he particularly missed Meredith, who had become a true harpy as soon as her father had forced them to marry when Adam had gotten her pregnant. But he sure did miss the son he hadn’t had a chance to raise, even to hold.

Angelica strolled over into their uncomfortably quiet midst and handed him another glass of whiskey. “That’s it for the night, Adam. You can barely sit upright as it is.”

“Give it a rest, Ange,” Ben said grimly. “He’s hurting.”

She looked at Adam, sympathy in her eyes. Ben had told him that he’d shared with her some of Adam’s past. He didn’t like other people knowing. It was his private business. But she and Ben were close, very close. Too close, in his opinion. He didn’t like the idea of his brother hooking up with a saloon owner, possibly a former whore...although no one knew for sure about that.

“I’m not talking about that. Understood?” He glared at each of his brothers individually and at Angelica.

Angelica let it go, but pointedly said, “All right. Let’s talk about your pigheaded attitude of late toward Faith. Let’s talk about your idiotic comment concerning her deciding to wear britches while working at the mercantile. Something that makes perfect sense, if you really thought about all the bending over she’ll do. All the boxes she’ll haul around.”

Adam watched Ben look curiously at Angelica, saw his eyes heat and his gaze moving over his woman. He had a pretty good idea that his brother was envisioning the seriously sexy brunette in britches...and then stripping her out of those britches. Much the same thought he’d had about Faith, admiring the way the britches had gently hugged her fine ass. And how he’d also briefly toyed with the idea of seeing her out of them. Lately, when he hadn’t been grieving over losing his son, he’d spent too much time thinking about Faith...in and out of clothes.

Forcing those thoughts aside, he growled, “A decent lady wears a dress.”

Ben took offense to the decent lady part as Adam frowned at Angelica. “Are you wanting a fight, big brother? Because I sure as hell will—”

Before either of his other brothers could dive into the conversation, Adam muttered a curse and then snagged Angelica’s gaze. “I wasn’t talking about you...I mean I wasn’t implying...”

She smiled in amusement. “No offense taken.” Then she sobered and pressed, “So, you planning on apologizing to Faith? Smoothing down Annabelle’s ruffled feathers, too?”

“There’s nothing to apologize to Faith about. She has her opinion. I have mine.” He swallowed the shot of whiskey. “But I’ll speak to Annabelle. She means a lot to me.” He glanced at his brothers. “To all of us.”

Daniel captured his attention with a scowl. “My Jennie is all upset because you’ve hurt her friend’s feelings. I don’t like my wife being upset. You need to settle things between you and Faith.”

“It’s my business what goes on between Faith and me.” Still, it bothered him that he might have hurt Faith, even if he believed he was right about the britches situation. He was certain if she went around wearing those too-snug-fitting pants and caught the attention of even one cowboy, soon there would be a line of them through the mercantile and on out the door. Every one of the no-goods lusting after her.

“I might call a truce, but I am not changing my mind about those damn britches.” With that said, he shoved back his chair and stood. He walked away and his brothers had the good sense to let him leave in peace.

* * *

Faith paced uneasily around her bedroom. She hated waiting for her father when he intended to punish her, but he always took his time until he was good and ready. Her thoughts drifted back to Adam, as they did all too often. The stubborn man was breaking her heart by being so impossible about giving in to feelings she was certain he had for her. She didn’t really want to live her life alone as a spinster woman, but she would if she couldn’t have Adam. He was the only man she would ever love. Big, stupid, stubborn man.

She stopped at the lace curtain-covered window and looked down Main Street. It would still be another hour or so before the sun went down, but already ranch hands were drifting into town and heading for the saloon. She could see most of the town’s businesses from here. The barbershop was closed, just as it had been from not long after Adam had rushed out of the mercantile. The mercantile, too, was closed for the day. Was Annabelle feeling poorly again? Was she upstairs in her apartment even now? She should be going to check on the kindly older woman instead of being up here waiting for her father.

The batwing doors to the Tumbleweed Saloon burst open and she watched Adam come striding out. For a second he glanced toward her house and then he strode briskly toward the barbershop, which he lived above. ‘She needs her mouth washed out with soap... a hand applied to...’ His words made her bristle with indignation. She’d said nothing wrong, maybe she’d spoken a little coarsely, but it had been the truth. Although not one of the men who’d come courting her had actually said they wanted in her bloomers, she’d seen it in their eyes. She’d noticed the erections pushing at the front of their trousers. Her father would be horrified to learn she knew about such things, but she wasn’t as naïve as everyone seemed to believe.

She heard her father’s heavy footsteps heading in her direction. Well, she was going to get part of what Adam thought she needed: a hand applied to her bottom. Actually, she was almost certain she would get worse than that. Her father had been quite upset with her daring to go against him. She moved away from the window, resigned.

Her father walked into the room and closed the door behind him. He carried the much-dreaded razor strop. Her stomach tightened. For a second her thoughts went to the open window. Fortunately their house was at the end the street and no others were close by. Her cries would not be heard, except by her mother, who had heard them before.

“Take the position, daughter.” He nodded toward the end of her bed. “Unless you will be changing your mind. Will you?”

Grimly, she shook her head and moved to stand facing the bed. Knowing what was expected, she tugged up her long skirt and bent forward, resting her forearms on the feather mattress, holding her skirt out of the way as well. Her long braid fell over her shoulder and brushed her face.

Her father stepped beside her and parted the back of her drawers to bare her bottom and her face flamed in humiliation.

“You live in my house, under my rules. I expect to be obeyed, which you well know, daughter.” He laid the cold leather against her still cool buttocks. “You can be willful at times, like now. I believe it is improper for you to be working in the mercantile. Two women alone like that...it’s not a good situation.”

“Nothing has happened to Annabelle,” Faith protested. She wished he would just get on with this unpleasantness. Yet she refused to demand he do it.

“Because she isn’t a beautiful young woman. Once word gets out that you are working there basically alone...” He drew in a deep breath. “It isn’t safe, I say. But you’re determined to do this anyway, aren’t you?”

“We’ll be fine. I’ll be fine. Adam works right next door and he...” She let the thought fade away. It wasn’t his place to watch after her. “I can take care of myself.”

Her father snorted in disagreement. “You need a good man to take care of you, to give you babies.” He sounded distressed, worried about her, but determined.

“I’m not marrying anyone,” she bit out. Not if she couldn’t have Adam, which didn’t appear likely. “Just do this, since you seem to think it necessary.”

The first lash landed and she shot forward, gasping. Fire blazed along the line of where he’d struck her. She shouldn’t have pushed her father.

“So you’re determined to go against me on this matter? Even at the threat of a sound thrashing.”

She knew he was still hoping she’d change her mind, see reason, his reason. Instead she gripped the quilt tightly, forced herself to remain still. “Yes, I’m going against you, if that’s how you see it.”

“That’s exactly how I see it.”

The thrashing began in earnest then. When he decided to give a stropping, he made it memorable. The sound of leather landing on flesh echoed around the room.

Tears streamed down her face. Her fingers ached from clutching the quilt so tightly. She danced up and down on her toes, hissing as the lashes fell. She desperately wanted it to end.

“Change your mind, Faith Marie, and the thrashing stops.” He held the now hot razor strop against her burning bottom.

She could end this suffering, but it would be the wrong decision. She settled into position again and said shakily but with determination, “No. I’ve made my decision.”

“Very well. Then we’ll continue.” He thrashed her with a biting strike.

She cried out, “Ohhhhh, God!”

“Do not use the Lord’s name in vain.” He landed two more quick lashes to the under curve of her bottom, causing her to arch upward and scream out. He ignored her cries that were part of the punishment. “You will understand exactly how against this foolish idea I am by the time we’re done.”

* * *

Her father put his hands at her waist and lifted Faith out of the buggy. She felt great relief to be standing and shifted quietly to the side. She watched her mother wince as she scooted across the seat and allowed her husband to lift her down as well. Guilt threaded through her. She regretted that her father had seen fit to spank her mother after giving her a sound thrashing. But she'd heard her mother raising her voice in anger and even going so far as to throw something at him. Her mother was not always the quiet, subdued woman that many people believed she was. She had a temper. Both being redheads, both she and her mother were known to be a bit hotheaded at times. Although it usually meant they paid for their fits of temper with a very sore bottom.

Her father looked lovingly at her mother. In turn, she smiled at him, slipping her hand in the crook of his arm. Once a punishment was delivered the matter was settled. Even Faith was no longer upset with her father. She knew he loved her. They often disagreed, but she loved him, too.

She smoothed down her skirt and prepared herself to sit for the next hour on a hard pew as Caleb delivered a sermon. It wasn't going to be pleasant. She'd had to sleep on her stomach and even by morning she still felt the effects of the stropping. The short ride here in the buggy hadn't helped. But they never missed going to church unless one of them was quite ill. Having to sit on a tender bottom was not an excuse, in her father's opinion. And after suffering being disciplined, neither she nor her mother would dare to risk another session for going against him again.

"Still planning on working at the mercantile?" a deep voice questioned behind her.

She noted her father's immediate frown and then he hustled her mother toward the church steps without saying a word. Nerves fluttering in her stomach, Faith faced Adam. He looked so handsome in his Sunday best trousers, white shirt, and jacket. She wanted to throw herself into his arms, wanted him to hold her.

"Yes." She turned to follow after her parents.

Adam snagged her arm and stopped her. "Angelica tells me I need to apologize to you, but I won't. I don't like the idea of you working there." His brow pinched. "I especially don't like the crazy notion of you wearing britches there."

"My father wasn't in favor of the idea of me working there either." She jerked her arm free and felt her face heat. Why had she said that? What would he think?

He studied her for a second and then he dared to place one of his big hands against her skirt-covered bottom. She flinched, her face heating even more. The awful man grinned. "Burned your butt, did he?"

She was glad nobody else was nearby. "If he did, it is none of your business."

He chuckled and let her walk away. But he caught up to her and said so only she would hear, "I'm going to enjoy sitting behind you this morning, watching you squirm around on your sore little ass."

She gave him her fiercest glower. "That's an awful thing to say, Adam Braddock."

"Just so you know, I would have taken my belt to your sweet butt."

She stomped away, ignoring how much each stomp caused the skirt and drawers to rub her tender bottom. He was an impossible man. She should want nothing more to do with him. Yet...

He walked past her, whistling. Grinning, too. Fool man!