

Chapter One

Gregory, Wyoming
1875

Elizabeth Jane Mason quietly let herself inside her home, walked through the darkened rooms and into her bedroom. She didn't light a lamp, just undressed, put on her warm flannel nightdress, and climbed between the sheets on her bed. Then, and only then, did she allow the tears of shame and humiliation to roll unchecked down her cheeks and onto her pillow. She was EJ Mason, and no one dared to manhandle her! Her mind replayed the day's events:

"Hey, EJ! What can I do you for?" It was Billy Murdock's standard joke, and she smiled as she always did. Billy had known her since she was a motherless little girl, and her pa went off to fight in the war. Billy had given her candy nearly every day as she passed by on her way to Mrs. Lucas' house. Mrs. Lucas boarded her, and took good care of her while her pa was away. Everyone in town looked after her, and EJ found it difficult to get away with anything. Her papa, who was the sweetest man on earth, had promised her a spanking she would never forget if she did anything bad while he was off fighting. Since he'd never done that before, she didn't know whether to believe him or not, but he'd assured her he was serious, kissed her, and rode off. EJ loved Billy Murdock because he was the closest she came to having an uncle.

"I need some supplies, Billy." She handed him the list. "No need to rush about; I'm planning to go and visit Mary Catherine and Mary Ann." They were school friends. Both ladies were married and neither was blessed with children as of yet. They were also next door neighbors, so they gathered together at one house and visited whenever EJ made the trip into town.

"EJ, honey. I got me some bad news to share. I was plannin' to ride out to see you tonight."

"What is it, Billy? Are you all right?"

"It ain't me, little girl. It's Mildred Lucas; she's gone to be with Willard after twenty years apart."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry to hear that. When is her funeral?"

"Her only nephew is supposed to be comin' in on the stage today, so I reckon tomorry," Billy reasoned. "Now, EJ, you be sure to dress proper."

"I always dress proper, Billy."

"No, missy, you don't. You are a girl, a very pretty girl, and it ain't fittin' you wear pants like a boy all the durn time. Ain't no man gonna marry up with a girl who thinks she's gonna wear the pants." He shook his head. "You wear yourself a dress tomorry, hear?"

"Yes, Billy, I hear you. I wouldn't insult Mrs. Lucas' memory by wearing pants to her funeral. She tried so hard to make me into a proper lady."

"She loved you too, honey."

"I know. She was like a granny to me, especially when Papa was off to war."

"Do you need a black dress and hat? I can put it on account for you, honey. I trust you to pay me when you can."

"You are a good man, Billy. I have clothes I can wear," she replied. "Thank you for being so kind to me."

"We're sure gonna miss her," Billy lamented.

"I know for sure that I will miss her." EJ turned on her heel. She decided to go and make sure the two cats Mrs. Lucas kept as pets and mousers were fed. She would also water all the houseplants that Mrs. Lucas' green thumb was responsible for growing.

It felt strange to walk inside. The house was too quiet, and it smelled like the pies Mrs. Lucas was always baking to serve her guests, or taking to those who needed a little cheering up or a bit of sympathy. It made EJ sad to know she would no longer be experiencing those special treats. She went into the kitchen and found the cat food in a large box that Mrs. Lucas used to store the food she made for her pets. Living on the ranch, EJ's cats didn't have such a soft life. They lived in and around the barns and lived off the rodents and other food sources they could find.

Once the two cats were taken care of, EJ dutifully watered the plants, just as Mrs. Lucas had taught her to do years ago. She couldn't help but wonder about the nephew Mrs. Lucas was always bragging about. EJ had never met the man, and she had no clue what she would say to him now. She shook her head and decided that the least she could do for Mrs. Lucas was to check the guest room and freshen it for the nephew to spend a night or two in residence while he settled his aunt's affairs.

She cleaned the room until it fairly gleamed, and she changed the sheets on the bed. Mrs. Lucas always kept the bed made up, but EJ had no idea how long ago those sheets were placed on the mattress. While she was at it, she also dusted the parlor. She wouldn't permit any snooty nephew to accuse his aunt of slovenly housekeeping.

A sudden thought occurred to EJ, and she decided to go upstairs and check her old bedroom. It was a nice room and had seemed so large when she was a child used to living in a rather small cabin on the ranch. Her father had added on bedrooms when he came home from fighting in the War Between the States. EJ suspected that he intended to marry again someday, but there weren't too many women who could bear the loneliness of Wyoming's winters.

She found the loose floorboard where she had kept all sorts of things that were important to an eight-year-old little girl, and was looking at a necklace that had belonged to her mother. It was then that her world turned upside down, quite literally, as she was picked up, and dumped face down on the bed! EJ was a fighter, and she used every trick in her book to get away from the intruder, but she simply wasn't strong enough.

"How dare you come in here and steal from a dead woman?" a male voice asked with contempt and anger.

"I am not stealing!" EJ quickly denied.

"The hell you say! You're a little liar too, kid! I know the cure for that!"

EJ gasped in outrage and pain as his hand fell on the seat of her worn britches, followed by two more sharp blows that were insulting as could be. "Stop it!" She couldn't believe he was daring to spank her like a naughty child.

“Stop it?” he repeated. “You have to be kidding me. I’ve barely started; by the time I’m done blistering you, little girl, you’ll wish I hauled you to the sheriff and had you arrested and thrown in jail.” The hard spansks continued, landing all over her rounded cheeks, upper thighs, and the sensitive area in between.

“Let me go, damn you!”

“Cursing too? Maybe my belt will make more of an impression than my hand!”

EJ felt a line of liquid fire spread across her sit spots as the leather landed. He gave her a total of twenty-five licks with the belt before releasing her and telling her to go home before he hauled her to the sheriff after all.

EJ didn’t need to be told twice. She ran out of the house and mounted her stallion, riding for home on a bottom that was so sore that only pride kept her mounted. It took a couple of hours to reach her ranch, and by then it was dark. Only after she was safely tucked into bed did she permit herself to cry at the injustice of the spanking. No one had dared to put a hand to her in her whole and entire life. Her papa would have killed anyone who touched her so, and after he was gone, she’d done a fair job of protecting herself from those who thought to take advantage.

She vowed to get even with the son of a bitch, once she learned who he was. She would take him captive and turn him over to Storm Eagle. The Sioux brave was a good friend to her papa. He would make the bastard pay in full for her pain, suffering, and injured pride. If Storm Eagle refused to skin him alive, then she would do it herself! The matter settled for the moment, EJ tried to go to sleep. She got up twice to make sure she’d barred the doors on the house. Her gun was always at the ready because some men didn’t take no for an answer, figuring she would give in if they used their strength against her. After she had used her gun a time or two, the men in the area let her be, figuring she wasn’t worth a maimed hand or limping for the rest of their life.

Sleep eluded her that night. EJ was up early and readied herself to go to Mrs. Lucas’ funeral. She didn’t often wear a dress, but this was one of those times that EJ decided to dress properly, do her hair up, and wear a woman’s hat, not her old wide-brimmed Stetson, to shade her eyes from the sun. EJ hitched up her mare to the buggy and headed for town.

It was soon apparent that people were gathering in the church. She found a place for her horse and buggy and joined the congregation inside the fairly new church. She sat next to Mary Ann and Mary Catherine and their husbands. Mrs. Lucas had helped everyone in their community at one time or another, and the church was packed full for the funeral. The minister’s words told of her good works and how much she would be missed. Then he smiled at EJ. “Miss Elizabeth, Mildred Lucas had a fond spot in her heart for you, and I know it was reciprocated. You visited her often, and you always made sure she had anything she needed. When we discussed her final plans, her one request was that you sing *Amazing Grace* at her funeral. Would you step forward and honor her request?”

EJ did not like being the center of attention, but she had loved Mrs. Lucas, and she could not refuse the request. The pianist gave her an introduction, and EJ sang Mrs. Lucas’ favorite hymn. By the time she finished, most people in the church were openly weeping.

They gathered in the cemetery for more prayers and to say their final goodbyes to a woman who would be missed by everyone in town. Afterwards, Reverend Cline took

her arm to keep her from leaving. “Miss Elizabeth Jane Mason, may I present Carson Graves, Mrs. Lucas’ nephew?”

“Miss Mason, the way you sang *Amazing Grace* was touching. My aunt often spoke of you in her letters, and it is an honor to finally meet you.” Carson Graves smiled at EJ, completely unaware that she recognized his voice and knew he was the one who had spanked her. Her temper snapped and before she gave the matter any thought at all, EJ drew back her fist and let fly.

Carson was shocked at the strength behind the blow. He slowly picked himself up from the ground and asked with quiet dignity, “May I ask why you did that, Miss Mason? Usually a compliment is accepted with a polite word of thanks, not a solid punch in the jaw.”

“You think on it, you son of a bitch, and you’ll come up with the answer, I reckon.”

“Miss Elizabeth!” Reverend Cline remonstrated. “Mrs. Lucas would be appalled.”

“Yes, Reverend, she would be appalled, and she would threaten to horsewhip him!” EJ turned on her heel and walked briskly back to the church. She climbed in her buggy, then went to the general store and inside. Billy Murdock wasn’t back from the funeral yet, but he’d asked Abe Tanner to watch the store for him. “Hi Abe. I have an order to pick up.”

“Yes, Miss EJ. I got it right here.”

She quickly paid the man, threw her parcel into the back of the buggy, and then she headed home. Carson Graves! Why did it have to be someone her dear Mrs. Lucas loved? She was still going to get even with him. He deserved to feel humiliated and know what it was like to be helpless against someone bigger and stronger, especially in a place where she was accustomed to feeling safe.

“Hey, Miss EJ! Stop!” It was Lawyer Yancy, and EJ was tempted to ignore him. He didn’t give her a chance, grabbing her horse’s bridle. “Miss EJ, I’m glad I caught you. Mrs. Lucas has named you in her will. You need to be in my office on Tuesday afternoon at one o’clock.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“You have to come and hear the will before deciding that. Don’t let your stubborn pride do you a disservice, young lady. Mrs. Lucas sacrificed so that you could give up ranching and working so hard. You at least need to do her the courtesy of listening to her terms. Tuesday at one o’clock, be in my office.” He released Maggie’s bridle, and EJ slapped the reins on the mare’s backside to send her out of town at a brisk pace. She wasn’t going to any meeting in Lawyer Yancy’s office!

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“I want to know what you’ve done to EJ to make her punch you like she done did.” Billy Murdock was furious.

“I wish I knew.”

“Somethin’ had to happen. EJ don’t start no fights. You done somethin’ to her,” Billy accused heatedly.

“The only female I’ve talked to since getting off that stage was a kid. She was in Aunt Mildred’s house, going through her things. I set the kid’s britches on fire and sent her home. I didn’t see Miss Mason until the funeral today.”

“You durn fool,” Billy whispered, shaking his head in disgust. “You better hightail it on out of town afore EJ gets her gun and uses it.”

“What! Why? Is that little brat related to her?”

“That little brat is Miss EJ herself! She went to the house to take care of the cats, water the plants, and if the house needed a dusting, you can bet your boots that EJ done it all up proper. If she was takin’ anythin’, it was her own stuff that was still in her bedroom.”

“You’re not serious, Mr. Murdock?” The shock on Carson Graves’ face was very real.

“Ain’t I? You got problems, boy. Get yourself gone while you can. Miss EJ don’t like bein’ treated like that by no man. In fact, I ain’t so sure but what you shouldn’t marry up with her for touchin’ her improper like. Reverend Cline, what do you have to say?”

“Mr. Graves meant no disrespect, Billy.”

“He touched her on her seat. She’s a woman and that ain’t right.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I will apologize to her, but I am not going to marry the girl.”

“If your aunt was livin’, you would marry Miss EJ here and now. You know I’m right, Reverend Cline.”

“Yes, I do. Mildred set great store by Miss Elizabeth. Miss Elizabeth is a lady.”

“A lady? She just slugged me like a man! And her language is deplorable.”

“Put yourself in her place. You’d cuss too. Poor little girl!” Billy was enraged. “I am about to get my shotgun and use it, boy. Ain’t you got no shame a’tall?”

“Shame? She was in my aunt’s home. Look,” he insisted as he took a necklace from his coat pocket, “she was stealing this. It certainly doesn’t belong to someone her age. This necklace is very old.”

“It belonged to Miss EJ’s mama, and her mama before her! She hid it there for safe-keepin’.”

“I didn’t know. It would seem I’ve made a serious error in judgment. I will make this right, I promise.”

“You’re gonna marry the girl?” Billy demanded.

“I was planning to apologize to her, but that is all.”

“That won’t be enough. I’m gettin’ my shotgun.”

“Billy, you just calm down,” Sheriff Anderson said firmly. “Miss EJ got a spanking; this young man didn’t force himself on her.”

“He’d already be dead if he done that,” Billy declared, and the three other men, especially Carson, knew he was serious as could be. “You make it right by tomorry, boy. That’s all I’m gonna say to you.” Billy marched off, his temper expressed in every step.

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Riding in the buggy was just as bad as sitting her saddle, but at least she had the satisfaction of bruised knuckles from knocking Carson Graves on his butt. The expression on his face was worth a sore hand, she decided. Once she was home, EJ changed into her normal work clothes, strapping on her gun just in case Carson had any ideas of getting even.

She gave the little mare a good rub down and fed her, making sure her stallion got equal time. EJ loved her animals. Caring for them was a labor of love. The one chore on the ranch that she hated the most was chopping wood for the stove, but she attacked the

job with her normal gusto. She did all things well, even the ones she didn't especially enjoy doing. Gardening was close to the bottom of her list too, but she needed to eat through the long winter, so she raised vegetables and fruit during the summer months to preserve for when the snows came. She didn't ever want anyone to see a weed in her garden, so she spent several minutes every day to that end. It was a lot of work, but if she didn't do her chores every day, then no one else would do them either, and she would starve to death.

Mrs. Lucas was always after her to marry some man, claiming life would be easier for her. EJ was positive it would just be that much harder. Both Mary Catherine and Mary Ann had some stories to tell to back up her claim. They were both married to men who thought nothing of punishing them if they stepped out of line, even if they felt justified for their actions.

Why, Mary Ann had bought a lamp she wanted for the parlor and Andrew had spanked her for spending the money, telling her they didn't need "fancies" in their home. He made her take it back and told Billy he wasn't to sell her any more unnecessary items.

And, Mary Catherine went to visit with her mama and Steven was upset with her for not doing the mending first. He spanked her and she had to sit on a hard chair and do the mending until it was done, before she was allowed to rise from the chair. As if that wasn't enough, he sent her to bed early for several nights so she could think on her responsibilities.

EJ thought both of her friends were foolish for putting up with such treatment. She had no intention of marrying. She would rather be her own boss, even if it meant chopping wood and the drudgery of weeding a garden. She would do those things and be her own boss. No man was ever going to spank her again! She simply wouldn't have it.

Once the garden was finished for the day, EJ knew she had to swing an axe and chop some pieces of wood small enough to fit inside her stove. She planned her supper while she made sure there was enough wood for a few days.

"Miss Mason, would you please put the axe down so that I can apologize to you?" Carson was trying to be charming and pleasant, but the reaction he got wasn't the one he wanted or expected. "Don't you dare raise that axe to me, girl. I'll take it from you and then pull down your pants for a spanking that makes the one from yesterday look like I was playing."

"More threats?" she demanded, frowning. "Does it make you feel good?"

"No, it doesn't," he stated. "I rode all the way out here to try and apologize, not get into another fracas with you. I didn't realize you were grown yesterday, or that you were the young woman my aunt spoke so highly of. I thought you were stealing from her, from a dead woman, and I lost my temper. I should have talked to you and heard the straight of it instead of assuming you were guilty. I am sincerely sorry."

"Fine. Leave now."

"That's it? I ride all the way out here and you aren't even going to offer me a cup of coffee or a glass of water?"

"I'm choosy who I drink with."

"You're a brat without any manners," he pointed out.

"Wrong. I have manners – when I feel someone is deserving of me using them. I don't believe you are sorry. What I do believe is that Billy found out why I slugged you and he made you ride out here, didn't he?"

Carson felt a red flush creep over his cheeks.

“You don’t need to worry; I’m not going to let Billy fight my battle for me. I’ll get even with you in my own way and in my own time. Now leave; I don’t allow men near my home when it gets dark.”

Carson took a deep breath, obviously trying to control his temper. When he reached into his pocket, she held the axe menacingly. “I want to give you this, Miss Mason. I’ve been told it does belong to you, and I thought you might want it.”

“My mama’s necklace!” she exclaimed.

“And her mother’s before her,” he added. “I am sorry for thinking you were stealing from my aunt. I couldn’t think a twelve-year-old little girl would own something like this, and I did think you were a little girl yesterday. I shouldn’t have spanked you then, and I am sorry.” He held out the necklace and allowed it to dangle from his fingers.

EJ looked at him suspiciously. “You should have given it to Billy. He would make sure I got it.”

“It wasn’t his responsibility.” He moved closer, planning to hand it to her, but once again she held the axe threateningly. “Someone needs to take you in hand before you actually injure someone and hang for it.”

“I suppose you think you’re that someone?” she asked, sneering at him.

“I am trying to treat you like the respectable young woman the reverend and Billy and my aunt’s letters all claim you to be, but part of me would like nothing more than to have the taming of you. Billy wants me to marry you.”

“Wash your mouth out with soap! I wouldn’t marry you if you were the last man on earth and I was the last woman and all of humankind would die! I don’t like you, Carson Graves, and unless you want to die a slow and painful death you will get off of my property and leave me the hell alone.” She shook the axe at him. “I mean it; I wouldn’t marry you if you were to beg me! I don’t intend to marry any man! You are all alike, bossy as hell, and think you are always right! A woman’s ideas or wishes don’t count for one damn thing. Well, this is one woman who isn’t going to fall for the trap of marriage. I am my own boss. I make my own rules and I won’t answer to any man, not now, not ever.”

“I wasn’t asking, Miss Sassy. A man would have to be crazy to take on a wildcat like you. Your husband would get nothing done besides having to cut switches to use on your backside to teach you some manners. Take this necklace so I can be on my way before I lose my temper and decide to give you a hiding for your impudence.” He tossed the necklace at her and turned to leave before learning whether or not EJ caught it.