

Tails of the Old West

By

Jodi Bella

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The Sheriff and the Hellcat

Chapter 1

Katie Jennings crept towards the stream leading her mare, Violet, praying he wouldn't hear them. Down the bank a ways, Tristan James had a fire going and was cooking the fish she had watched him catch earlier. Her stomach grumbled as she stood beside a thirsty Violet, fumbling around in her saddle bags for the apple and cheese sandwich she had hastily packed for herself before setting off this afternoon after Tristan.

Violet gave a happy horsey snort into the water and Katie winced. She had to keep her presence from Tristan. He was headed to Hope Town to search for Pa. Katie had an idea where her father was hiding there; she didn't know the way there, and therefore was forced to trail Sheriff James. If she could just track Pa down before the lawman, he could get away again. Her heart hurt at the possibility of her pa at the end of a rope, or rotting in jail, as he surely would be if Tristan had his way.

Katie didn't care what anyone said, she refused to believe her father had robbed that bank back in Springwater. He wouldn't do that. Maybe he hadn't been the best of fathers—he disappeared too often for days at a time, and Lord knew he drank too much. He'd been known to gamble away the money they needed for necessities on the homestead as well. But he was Katie's father, and he wasn't all bad. She knew he couldn't have robbed that bank or shot and killed that teller like they were saying.

Lord, she was exhausted, mentally, and physically. It had been an endurance to keep up with Tristan's pace today, and she had been constantly jumpy, nervous that he would somehow figure out that she was following him, even though she was keeping a more than safe distance behind him. This was the closest she had gotten to him all day, and that was only out of necessity; she had to give water to Violet and that meant getting close enough to him so as to reach the outermost corner of the stream.

Suddenly, strong, vice-like arms clamped down on her shoulders and a hard voice spoke in her ear, "You're a long way from home, little girl."

Katie's heart stopped beating and for a minute she didn't recognize Tristan James' voice. Instead she envisioned a savage Indian or a dirty outlaw, either of whom would have raped and killed her right there. Then, Tristan whirled her around to face him, and her heart started beating again.

"Don't do that!" she snarled, one hand held over her heart, her breath uneven and shallow. "You nearly scared me to death!"

"What are you doing here, Kate?" Tristan's piercing blue gaze narrowed suspiciously at her, his arms folded over his chest. She had a quivery feeling in her stomach and she wondered if maybe she wasn't going to be raped and killed after all. And why did that suddenly not seem so bad, at least the first part anyway? "You're a long way from town."

She shrugged and tried to look unconcerned with his obvious suspicions. "It's a free country," she said. "I guess I can pretty much go where ever I like. I'm an adult after all." She glared at him after these words. He had the most obnoxious habit of calling her *little girl*, and it made her want to scratch his eyes out. She was twenty years old, after all!

“You’re following me, aren’t you?” Tristan towered over her petite frame, his hands on his hips. He cursed.

“It’s not polite to use that kind of language in front of a lady.”

“Don’t push it, Kate.” Tristan shook a finger at her the way a teacher had once when she was late turning in an assignment. “Besides, I don’t see any *lady* around here, anyway.”

She glowered at him, but bit her tongue. She was nervous, and anxious to see what he was going to do now that he knew she was following him.

To her surprise, Tristan grabbed hold of her hand and gave it a tug. “Come on over to the fire. It’s damn cold over here.”

Katie pulled her hand free and stood her ground. Her eyes flashed. “I don’t think it’d be proper for me to go over there with you.” She stuck her little nose up as far as it would go.

Tristan grabbed her mare’s reins and shrugged. “Fine, but don’t come running to me later when the wolves and bears wake you up to be their midnight snack.” That said, he turned and walked away, leading her unfaithful mare.

Katie gave out a little huff. He thought he could scare her, but she’d survived worse.

Just then a coyote gave voice to the night and a thousand and one goosebumps exploded onto Katie’s back.

She stomped the entire distance to Tristan’s camp fire, glaring at him when he looked over one shoulder at her with a smirk on his face. She plopped down in front of the fire; my, it certainly did feel nice. She held her hands up to the leaping red and gold flames and scooted a fraction closer, mindful to keep her skirt away.

She watched as Tristan set his horse’s feed bag onto Violet’s head and she felt a pang of guilt. She hadn’t even thought of bringing the mare a feed bag and food. How had she forgotten something like that? *Well, I’ve never done this before, after all*, she reasoned in her head. But the guilt was still there.

Tristan sat beside her when he finished and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot over the fire. Katie gave him a look fit to drop him in his tracks and was surprised when he laughed at her.

“I’m sorry, Kate, but I’ve only got the one set of dishes. I just wasn’t expecting company tonight.”

She stuck her nose back up in the air to show she couldn’t care less. Arms folded in front of her, she said, “You may address me as Miss Jennings, Mr. James. You are being too familiar calling me Kate.”

“I’ll call you what I want, Kate. After all you are the one interrupting me, not the other way around. Besides that, we’re in the middle of the wilderness, in case you haven’t noticed. No one’s around to hear my familiar manner of addressing you.”

She gave him a withering look and the sound of her stomach growling filled the silence between them. She refused to look in his direction, knowing he would have that annoying grin on his face again.

She was surprised when he stood up and grabbed a cooling frying pan from beside the fire. He placed the remains of the trout dinner in front of her and said, “Might want to eat something before you faint from hunger on me.”

There was humor in his eyes and a smile in his voice. Katie wanted to tell him to go to hell with his trout, but the smell was mouthwatering and it sounded so much better than a spotted apple and a mushy cheese sandwich. With a brief glance at him, she dug with both hands into the flaky fish before her.

Tristan watched the girl before him as she inhaled the trout. She certainly wasn't a delicate eater. He remembered how his mother and sisters ate, like little birds pecking at their food. Kate Jennings ate like a man, licking her fingers and making little appreciative sounds. He told himself he was ridiculous to be attracted to her, especially when she ate like that. Besides, she was just about the biggest thorn a man could be misfortunate enough to find under his saddle.

The first time Tristan had met *Miss* Jennings, his immediate impression was that she needed a good spanking. She was too mouthy and stuck up for her own good. And the more interactions he had with her, the more he began to worry he would be the one to finally take her over his knee. That didn't sit especially well with him, considering that he'd never laid a hand on a woman in his life, not even his sisters as they were all growing up. But damn near every time he came in Kate's proximity, his hands fairly itched to upend her and lay into her pert little derriere.

Despite that, he also felt a definite tug of attraction towards the red-haired hellcat. She had called him a liar to his face the day he said he had seen her father running from the bank with a pistol in one hand and a big bag of money in the other. And all he'd wanted was to give her bottom a good warming, then take her to his bed for a thorough session fit to wear out the feather mattress. He could imagine just what she'd think of those improper thoughts!

Now, watching her gobble the fish, he wondered just what the hell to do with her. What he should do was take her back to town, but that would cost him two days traveling time, and that could mean missing her old man.

He really didn't have a lot of options besides keeping her with him. He didn't want to chance turning her loose again. There was the possibility of her finding her daddy before he did and then she would warn him off. Besides, Tristan was not the type of man to just leave a woman to her own devices out in the open wilderness. While Kate was certainly adequate at taking care of herself in many ways, he was sure she would be better off under his supervision out here where she had little to no experience.

"What're you staring at me for?" she suddenly snapped.

Tristan bit back a chuckle. She had spirit, that was for sure. "I was just trying to figure out what to do with you."

"Do with me?" She bristled. "You don't have to figure that out, seeing as how I'm a grown woman."

"Look, Kate. I'm tired. I'm sure you are, too. Let's not even start arguing about this. You're traveling with me from here out. If I have to, I'll put you under arrest. I'll tie your hands together and tie you to your horse. I'll do whatever I have to. But you'll stay with me." He returned the glower shooting at him from her bright green eyes and added, "And you'll do what I tell you. Just because you managed to interrupt my search, and will most likely slow it down, doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. You understand?"

He could tell there were a bunch of things she wanted to say to him, all of them probably inappropriate for a *lady* to utter. It was almost comical the way her pretty little bow of a mouth worked silently, then finally closed in a firm line.

She fairly growled when she finally spoke. "Fine. Whatever you say."

Tristan nodded. That's good, he thought. But he couldn't help but think he had won that promise from her much too easily.

Katie woke before the first rays of the sun peeked over the horizon. She lay on the cold, hard ground for a few minutes, carefully keeping her breathing even as though she were still asleep. She'd spent most of the night before awake, trying to ignore the strange sounds of nature at night by coming up with a plan to get herself away from Tristan. She hoped it would work.

After lying there a few more moments, she dared a glance towards the lawman, and saw he was still lying on his bedroll, eyes closed, hands clasped together over his chest. She wasted a few minutes admiring him. He was a handsome man, with his dark hair and those bright blue eyes. He was tall and as broad in the shoulders as a bear. Her mouth fairly watered for him before she caught herself and gave herself a mental shake. What was wrong with her, for goodness sake? He was the enemy!

Moving as silently, she hoped, as an Indian, Katie crept on all fours towards Sheriff James. His gun nestled in the holster on his hip, beckoning to her. She settled without a single sound on the ground next to him and with a maddening patience, began to draw the pistol slowly from the holster. She had just succeeded in that task, sitting back with a sigh of relief, when Tristan bolted up from the bedroll nearly scaring her to death.

She pointed the pistol at him, desperately ordering her trembling hands to still. "Don't come any closer, Mr. James," she warned. Lord, was that her voice, all wavy and unsure sounding? She bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath, trying to get control of her runaway emotions. "I'll shoot you, I swear it."

Tristan just watched her as calmly as if she were holding out a cup of tea to him. Then before she even realized what had happened, he had reached between them and grabbed back the gun. He tossed it away from where they sat on the ground and before she had a moment to stand and make a run for it, he grabbed hold of one small wrist.

"Apparently you don't understand our arrangement, Kate," he growled. "You're supposed to do what I tell you, and you are most definitely supposed to keep your hands away from my gun."

To her shock, he gave her wrist a hard yank and she went sprawling forward in a very unladylike manner, then fell abruptly over his hard, lean thighs. "What are you... *no!*" Her skirt was thrust up over her waist, nearly covering her head in the process. Katie's cheeks flushed a heated red, realizing that this man was seeing her in nothing else but her worn drawers. Her modesty was quickly forgotten, however, when the first spank landed on the seat of said drawers.

She let out a little squealing scream and began to kick and pound at him with her fists. Tristan kept at her spanking as though she were nothing more than a slightly bothersome fly buzzing around his head.

"I've wanted to do this from the first time I met you," Tristan was saying as he pounded away at her tender bottom. "Lord knows someone should have by now."

Katie had never been spanked in her life, and she decided then and there that she never wanted to repeat the experience. Tristan was a big man, and his hand was wide and strong. Her bottom felt like someone had lit a match to it. She tried in vain to free herself, but his arm was locked around her waist and it was useless. He gave her several harder swats, enough to bring tears to her eyes that she blinked purposefully away.

Then he pushed her off his lap and watched her scramble to her feet, her skirt falling back into place. He looked up at her with a proud grin on his handsome face, then laughed out loud at her when she began to rub her poor bottom through her dress.

"Ooooh! I hate you!" she spat.

"You just worry about behaving yourself, little girl," he called to her as she went to her saddlebags and drew out her hairbrush. She watched him notice the wooden hairbrush and wondered at the strange look that came into his eyes when she produced it.

She decided to ignore him. She crooned to Violet as she brushed the tangles from her hair and wondered how in the world she was going to manage to ride all day in the saddle with her sore behind.

But despite her trampled pride, and despite her well spanked bottom, all Katie kept thinking about was how strong and firm Tristan James' body had felt when she'd been positioned over it. She didn't understand her thoughts, and tried to push them away, reminding herself how much she hated him.

But those memories kept nettling her for the rest of the day.