

Providence



CHAPTER I

Choking on the red dust, Kate drew a deep breath as she waited for the contraction to ease before reaching in once more as the cow relaxed. This time she felt the small hoof there in her grasp.

“Take it easy, mama,” Kate whispered. She tugged, gently at first, then with ever increasing force. Icy tendrils of panic began to whirl around the edges of her mind, trying to steal her concentration. Just when she was sure it was lost, the tiny leg popped into place. With one last loud bellow the cow gave a mighty heave and the calf emerged into the light of day.

Kate gasped, sitting back on the hard Oklahoma earth. Wiping an arm across her sweaty brow, she sighed with relief. Once again the miracle of new life lay before her. The little thing was already fighting to find its legs. The big black cow lowed softly heaving herself up, as the calf struggled, gaining strength, finally finding its feet. A rough tongue ran over the calf’s back and he was down again.

Kate smiled through her weariness. The freshness of new life never ceased to amaze her. “God, you are so great,” she murmured aloud. “Thank you for allowing this one to live today, thank you.” This daily dialogue with her Creator had become a wellspring of comfort for Kate over the weeks and months since Will had died. The solitude she faced tending to the cattle, the land, the horses, and the myriad other responsibilities left to her when she became a widow threatened at times to overwhelm her.

Cow and calf were moving away from her, the calf swaying unsteadily in his attempts to keep up with mama. “He’s a nice one, going to be big and stout,” Kate thought, “May make a nice bull. After all, old Casey isn’t getting any younger.” These thoughts ran through her mind as she watched the pair approach the herd a short distance away. This one made it, but what about the next? Only last week she watched in despair as a cow struggled to give birth to a calf hopelessly too large. She could still feel the sting of the bitter bile that had risen in her throat as she steadied her hand to pull the trigger, putting the poor cow out of its misery. Kate felt every death not only as a personal loss, but cattle were the lifeblood of her ranch, and each one lost was lost income as well.

Strands of damp hair clung to her temples, while beads of sweat trickled between her shoulder blades. It was already so hot, and only April. What would the summer bring? She reached down, running her hand through the new grass emerging to cover the prairie. Would the spring rains come? Would there be enough grass this year? So many of her cows had calved and still more were coming. How would she get them to market this fall?

“God, why? Why did you have to take Will?” His death was a raw wound on her soul though it

had been almost nine months since the accident. The red dirt over his grave beneath the willow was already covered by the green of springtime, but the pain in her heart was as fresh as newly turned earth. Tears of frustration and anger welled within her threatening to spill over. Turning her face to the clear sky, she took a ragged breath searching the heavens, but there were no answers forthcoming this day, only the wide expanse of infinite blue.

Sighing, she stood and headed toward the sorrel mare waiting patiently with the reins draped over the branch of a nearby tree. Kate opened the leather pack strapped behind the cante. Retrieving a rough rag, she scrubbed at the blood and dirt covering her arms from the recent calving. Livid scars appeared as the grime was scrubbed away, remnants of long ago pain. Rolling her sleeves back down to cover the unsightly burns, she picked up the reins, stepped into the stirrup and swung herself into the old leather saddle.

Kate looked down at the worn chaps covering her legs. Yet another reminder of Will's passing and having to adapt to running a cattle ranch alone. She longed for a hot bath and a fresh pretty dress to wear, but they just weren't suited to the work she was forced into. She smiled at the memory of the first time she had tried to round up a herd of old rangy cows wearing long skirts and a petticoat, riding the side saddle that Will had saved for and surprised her with on her birthday. It wasn't long before she decided Will's pants, sturdy cotton shirts and old worn saddle were far more suited to the job at hand. Besides, who was there to see her out here?

The mare was young and fresh. It wasn't hard for Kate to urge her into an easy ground-covering lope toward home. They steered away from the small herd, careful not to disturb the cows and calves who lazed in the warmth of the late morning sun. A golden glow shone all around, highlighting every blade of green prairie grass and gilding the leaves of early budding trees. The tightly curled blossoms of redbud and dogwood were beginning to unfurl in a riot of color. She relaxed into the saddle. Tightening the reins, the mare obediently slowed to a trot, and finally to a fast walk.

"How could anyone doubt your existence, Lord, with all this life abounding?" The mare snorted and tossed her head as if in agreement. Kate laughed. The morning's tension easing, she picked up the reins and they set off again at a trot.

Climbing a grassy rise, the homestead came into full view. Will had chosen the perfect spot to build their dream, nestled in a small valley protected on the north and west by small knolls rising from the prairie. They felt God had led them to the place they dreamed about from the moment they left

tragedy behind them in Missouri. A beautiful grove of trees growing along a spring in the small valley provided the backdrop for their new life in Oklahoma Territory.

Kate caught her breath at the sight of her beloved home. She checked the mare, slowing her to a walk, then reined to a stop. Head tossing impatiently, the sorrel mare pawed the ground. “I know you’re anxious to get home, but just look, Gypsy, isn’t it perfect?” Kate said reaching down to stroke the mare’s silky neck.

Smoke drifted lazily from the chimney of the stone fireplace. Kate smiled at the memories. In the summer of 1889, her hands bleeding from quarrying and carrying the heavy native stone she had sat down in a fit of tears. “I can’t do this, Will, it’s just too hard!”

Blue eyes flashing as he stood above her, “I will not have you living in a soddy, Kate,” he said before taking her hands and tenderly kissing the raw blisters. “Just imagine a roaring fire on a cold winter’s night, you and me cuddled up in front of that great stone hearth.” He gazed longingly into her eyes, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth, he raised his brows suggestively, scooped her up and carried her to their makeshift tent, laughing at her feeble protests.

It wasn’t long before the snug frame home took shape around that enormous hearth, surrounded by a wide porch and real glass windows. Over the eight years that marked their short life together there, other buildings were added. The barn and corrals were built with the help of neighbors. The bunkhouse adjoined the barn to house the cowboys they hired off and on. A smokehouse, spring house, and the blacksmith shop, now sadly neglected, completed the idyllic scene.

From her vantage point, Kate ran a critical eye over the place. Fences needed mending, a new hole appeared in the smokehouse roof, probably from the hail storm a few weeks ago. She sighed and said a small prayer for the strength to face the challenges ahead.

Suddenly, the front door of the main house flew open and a small red-haired figure darted across the yard into the chicken coop. Kate’s heart filled with love for her small irrepressible daughter. Jolene was so like her father, full of life and filled with mischief. Jo was followed shortly by a small graying woman carrying a basket and brandishing a bonnet. Though Kate was too far away to hear the woman’s words, she knew Mrs. Insley was berating the little girl for being out in the hot sun without it.

Forgetting about the chores that lay ahead and the cows behind, Kate and Gypsy set off down the hill toward home.

“Mama’s coming, mama’s coming!” shrieked Jo. Nana Insley looked up. Shaking her head, she

disappeared into the house.

“What has my little Irish rose been doing this morning?” Kate called to the small spitfire running toward her. She swung a leg over the back of the saddle, stepping easily to the ground. Securing the reins over the corral fence, Kate turned just in time to avoid being tackled and swooped the girl up into her arms.

“Where have you been, Mama? We’ve got breakfast waiting for you. I found six whole eggs this morning and Nana let me knead the biscuits. Later we’re going to churn butter, and if I’m good Nana said that I could help her with the baking.” Kate placed a finger over her daughter’s mouth to stem the endless flow of words.

“It sounds like you’ve a busy day planned, then! I’ve been out checking the herd in the west pastures. Would you like to hear about it?”

“Oh, yes, Mama! Nana said that Jonathan should be home today with Papa Insley. I’ve missed them. Do you really think they’ll be home today? Maybe Jon will play with me.” As Jo paused for a breath, Kate set her down when Mrs. Insley appeared on the back porch with a basin of warm water and a clean towel.

“Thought you looked as though you be needin’ these.” She set the basin on a bench near the kitchen door, draping the towel over a rail above the bench.

“Thank you, I do, Mrs. Insley.” She gave the older woman a grateful look as she climbed the steps to the porch, followed by her constant red-haired shadow. “Jo tells me you expect the men back today.”

“Aye, that I do, two days to city, a day to load provisions, and two days back. They best be rollin’ in here by this afternoon, no less!” She stated this firmly, standing arms akimbo at the open kitchen door.

“Well, that’s one thing to look forward to. I’ve sorely missed them these last few days,” Kate said.

“Humph.”

Kate took off the soiled hat she wore, handed it to Jo, and pulled loose the ribbon that held her hair up. A mass of dusty brown curls fell over her shoulders. Dipping both hands into the warm water, she let it cascade over wrists and arms, splashed it up over her tired, dirty face. The cleansing flow was exquisite. Kate lingered briefly praying the water would wash away more than just the dust -- wash away the scars, the fear and anger, the loneliness and the frustration of the last few months. She

breathed deeply letting the relaxation seep through her entire body.

“Look at me, Mama, I’m a cowgirl!” Jo’s voice cut through her reverie, bringing her back to a full realization of time and place. Jo was wearing the old felt hat and riding the porch rail, holding on with one hand, the other flung high in the air.

“Jo, stop that! Get down from there this instant!” Kate snapped at the girl.

“But, Mama, I just. . . .”

“I don’t care what you just – Get down now! Do you hear me?” Kate’s voice was sharp.

“Yes, ma’am.” Jo answered meekly. Giving her mother a wide-eyed stare, she slipped by and ran into the kitchen, seeking refuge in the arms of her Nana.

Trembling, Kate closed her eyes and took a deep breath, “Oh, dear God, forgive me, but I was so scared.” She finished washing quickly, hung the towel to dry on the rail and slipped into the kitchen. The smell of fresh biscuits and strong coffee enveloped her. In spite of the fear, her stomach growled reminding her just how hungry she was. Jo was sitting at the table watching warily, tears streaming down her rosy cheeks.

Kate knelt and opened her arms. “Honey, come here.” Jo ran into the outstretched arms and Kate hugged her. They were both crying. Tears of grief streamed down Kate’s face, mingling with the tears of pain from Jo. “I am so sorry, Jo, I didn’t mean to frighten you. But when I saw you like that. . . .”

“I know, Mama, Nana told me, I didn’t mean it, honest I didn’t. ”

“I know you didn’t. I love you. ”

“Love you, too, Mama,” Jo sniffed.

“Why don’t you hop up to the table and we’ll all eat a nice hot breakfast together. How’s that sound?” Kate stood the girl up and gave her a tap on the bottom sending her to the big plank table.

In the instant that Kate had turned to see Jo riding that rail, the little girl had looked so much like Will, wearing the same beat up felt hat with red curls peeking out, a hand thrown up in the air as Will had always done when breaking the colts. As he had done breaking the last colt. His last ride. In that one instant, Kate had relived the entire horrifying moment. She saw Will again riding the colt to the ground, the horse falling, Will crushed beneath the thousand pound animal, his neck snapped in an instant. One minute so full of life and dreams, the next no more than a shell; a limp, lifeless body lay crushed and broken on the ground. Her world had changed forever in that moment.

Kate joined her daughter at the big table set with a heaping platter of warm biscuits, a crock of

freshly churned butter and the last of the honey from the fallen bee tree they had found last autumn. Mrs. Insley carried over plates with fried eggs and slices of cured ham, while Kate poured two mugs of strong hot coffee and a cup of milk for Jo. Truly a feast for the three women of the ranch. As Mrs. Insley took her place on the far side of the table they joined hands while Kate asked a blessing on the food and the safe return of the men.

At first, the meal was enjoyed in silence. The everyday sounds of farm life drifted in through the open door. The bellowing of a bull, a shrill neigh from a mare to her errant foal, soft clucking from scratching hens, and the ever-present drone of flies and honey bees filled the morning air.

“Mama, how are the cows doing today? Are there any new calves? I want to feed one like last year. Are there any that don’t have mommies?” Jo asked between bites of biscuit, honey dripping down her small round face.

Kate reached over and caught the golden drop from Jo’s chin just as it threatened to mar her clean white collar. “I had to help one this morning, Jo, but I’m happy to report that cow and calf are both doing quite well. No orphans so far this spring, thank God.” Kate took a bite of ham, savoring the rich smokey-sweet taste. “I counted forty-two cows in the west pastures with our brand. At least twenty had healthy calves and I’m certain that a dozen more should calve in a week or two. And there were over thirty steers in the far valley on that side. If the herd on the east side does as well, we should be able to send a fair lot to market. ”

They had separated the herds some years earlier when Will was determined to improve on their native longhorn cattle by introducing a new strain he had read about. The bull he brought back from Kansas with him, Casey, was big and black and had no horns at all. He said it was called an Angus, and should serve to produce superior calves with better weaning weights and earlier maturation. Along with Casey had come ten mixed blood cows, mostly black and only a few with horns. To Kate it had all seemed Greek at the time, but she grew to like the look of the bull, and his calves certainly were larger and more prepared for market than the others.

“T’would be a welcome thing here.” Mrs. Insley added.

“Yes, that’s the truth. Since we only sent the forty steers last year, well. . .” Kate was interrupted by a commotion in the yard.

“The men are here! Jonathan’s home!” Before Kate could react, Jo was out the door and barreling toward the wagon approaching from the north.

Kate stood and walked to the open door. The men were indeed home. A deep sigh of relief escaped her before she even realized how tense she had been. Jake Insley's buckboard drawn by his two blonde draft mares approached the main yard of the ranch. Kate's mare, standing patiently at the corral gate whinnied a greeting, answered by the lead mare of the team. Jo had climbed the garden fence to gain a better view of the proceedings. Jonathan's faithful cow dog, Smokey, followed the wagon at a brisk trot with his tongue lolling to the side.

"Whoa, easy there Rosey; hold up there now, Ginny." The wagon rolled to a stop between the house and the barn under the competent hands and gentle voice of Jake Insley. Jonathan jumped down from the high seat, as his grandfather set the hand brake. He held his jacket close to his side and a bit awkwardly as Jo regaled him with a monologue of happenings on the ranch. Kate was busy going over the stores and provisions visible in the wagon with a quick and calculating eye. Jake tended to the team, as he watched her meticulous inventory.

"What did you see, Jon? What did you do? Was it fun? What's Guthrie like? Did you bring me any candy this time?" Jo was relentless as she approached her only playmate. Though ten years her senior, he was patient and caring, and always had time for the little girl he thought of as his baby sister.

"Well, I s'pose you could call her Candy if you like," he said slowly. "Hadn't rightly thought of a name for her yet." Jon held out his faded gray coat to the little girl who looked at him with curiosity. Just then the coat wiggled, nearly jumping from the boy's hands.

With a delighted squeal, Jo grabbed for the now squirming bundle and discovered a small fawn colored pup with four white feet. "Oh, Jonathan!" Jo gasped. Then she and the pup were sprawled together on the new spring grass, a jumble of flying paws and petticoats.

"Jolene Rose Shaughnessey!" Rang out a stern warning from the back porch.

Jo froze instinctively. Turning toward the voice, Jo's face broke into a dazzling smile as she held up her new-found treasure. "Oh, Nana, look! Isn't she wonderful? Jon brought her for me." The sheer delight shining from the girl's eyes was enough to melt a heart of ice.

"Well, I s'pose it can stay then. But on the porch, not in the house. "

"Oh, Nana, you're going to love her. She's the most wonderful gift ever." Jo scooped up the pup and headed directly to her room in the loft followed closely by Jonathan and Smokey, leaving Mrs. Insley shaking her head and muttering quietly about dogs in the house.

"It's most all here, Kate. What with prices risin' like they are in Guthrie, and such, I had to do

some sure bargaining and all to get what we did.” Jake spoke without apology.

“I know you did right, Jake. You know I trust you.” Kate sighed as she looked over the meager supply of stores that would have to see them through the seasons ahead until they could send the steers to market properly this year. “Did you get the seed you’ll need for planting this spring?”

“Yes’m. Me and Jon, we figured we could do that same forty in wheat again, produced pretty well last time. And I was going to do ten acres in corn, and at least ten in oats again this year. You think we did all right on the oats this last time?”

“I do. There’s still a few bushels left in the granary. ”

“Um-hmm, I thought so as well. ”

Kate hesitated, then asked the question that had been on her mind since they left, “Did Mr. Johnson give you the rest of the money from last fall’s steers?”

The older man looked at the ground, standing silent for a moment in the warm Oklahoma sunshine. The light breeze stirred his silver hair; a bird chirruped in the stillness. Kate stared at him waiting for his answer, trepidation building within. Finally looking up, Jake reached into his inner breast pocket and withdrew a yellowed envelope. He handed it to her without comment, his flinty eyes saying far more than words ever could.

She took the envelope and opened it, withdrawing eight twenty-dollar bills and a receipt. She looked at the collection of papers in disbelief. “A hundred and sixty dollars? But there should have been at least six hundred dollars here!” Her heart sinking, she leaned against the buckboard for support.

“The fine gentleman says that prices are down for beef, and what with losses along the way, and his ‘expenses,’ and all, why, what he has given you is more than fair. Oh, and he’ll be very happy to oblige you with this fall’s steers as well.” Jake’s mocking tone left no doubt as to his feelings toward the offer.

“I’ll bet he would!” Kate seethed.

Matthew Johnson was one of the largest ranchers in the territory. He had helped Will improve the herd by introducing him to selective breeding practices, and Will had sold him one of the Angus bull calves born that first spring. Matt made no secret of his desire to buy their claim when she and Will were struggling through the early years, but Will was determined to make their dreams come true, and the Lord had provided for them during those hard times.

“Providence,” Will always said. “The Lord will provide our needs. ”

He truly did provide for their needs, and so much more. Through careful management, they

were able to buy and acquire land, until the ranch was expanded from their initial homestead claim of a hundred and sixty acres to six hundred and forty. The cattle prospered, and they began to raise quality working horses as well. And so they began to call the place Providence. It was a secret name between Will and Kate, until one day she had the sign maker in Guthrie carve a beautiful wooden sign with the word *Providence* intertwined with vines, leaves and small clusters of grapes.

Tears flooded Will's deep blue eyes the evening she presented it to him. He tenderly caressed her cheek. Drawing her into his arms, he kissed her sweetly, professing his undying love for her. She surrendered her heart to him completely that night, finally shuffling off the last of her scars and pain, accepting his love as unconditional, at last she was truly home and safe. He hung the sign between two rough timbers, spanning the road leading into their ranch the very next morning, the morning of the accident. Providence.

The old man and the young women stood together quietly, each wondering what the future would hold. Kate swallowed hard again, "What about the colts I sent with you?"

Jake's face brightened considerably at that and a sly twinkle came into his eyes. "Well, now I couldn't very well give those fine beasts to such a man as Johnson, could I?"

"So?"

"Oh, he saw them all right, and said what fine animals they were. Asked did they come out of your black stud there. For all his faults, that man has a fine eye for the horseflesh, he does. 'Yes,' says I, 'and some of the finest mares in Oklahoma Territory, too. But Mrs. Shaughnessey has promised these three to Mr. Van Buren up yonder.'"

"I did no such thing!"

"Well, Mr. Johnson didn't know that now, did he?" Jake's eyes twinkled all the more.

"Jake. . . ."

"He paid one hundred fifty for that bay colt, and fifty dollars apiece for the fillies," smiled Jake, holding out a second envelope. "I probably could have got a bit more had they been broke to saddle." He said raising an eyebrow at her.

Kate took the envelope shaking her head helplessly as tears of mirth and relief streamed down her cheeks. She had intended those colts to be sold at the local blacksmith shop for twenty dollars each, the going rate that most cattle punchers of the Territory would pay for unbroke stock

"It isn't all you had expected to get, but we come a might closer this way." Jake laid a comforting hand on her arm and smiled. "We will make it, Kate." She smiled up at him, and mutely

nodded her agreement.

“Now, let me round up Jon, and we’ll get these stores put up right.” Jake stepped off to call his grandson, but Kate reached out a hand to stop him.

“Jake, I just want you to know how grateful I am for. . . ”

“Hush now.”

“Well, at least go in and see your wife. You and Jon get some decent food in your stomachs. You know Nana Insley won’t let you go to work without it!” She waved him toward the porch, “Now go. ”

The oil lamp cast its golden glow across the open ledger on Kate’s desk. Shadows danced across the dark walls, as the fountain pen scratched quietly over the paper. Distant thunder boomed occasionally. The rest of the house was still and silent. The four hundred and ten dollars Jake had given her that morning was safely locked in her desk until a trip to the bank in Fallis could be planned.

“April 2nd, 1897, born one black, polled bull calf. Received \$180 as balance of payment due on sale of steers. Received \$150 in payment for one bay stud colt, aged two years. Received \$100 in payment for two sorrel fillies, aged two years each.” She dutifully recorded the sale of the colts, the birth of the calf, and the income, limited though it was. Next she enumerated the many purchases and their costs.

With a deep sigh she laid down the pen and ran a hand across her weary brow, flinching at the roughness of it. Looking at her work-hardened hands in the flickering light, tears spilled down her cheeks. The money was barely enough to keep the small family through the next few months, and if she wasn’t able to find some hired help soon, she would have to seriously consider Matt Johnson’s offer to buy the ranch.

Closing the worn green ledger she placed it in the bottom drawer of the old oak desk. Reaching beneath it, Kate pulled out a small leather bound volume and placed it before her. Opening the front cover, she read the words that were a constant source of comfort to her soul, especially in such troubled times.

“To our beautiful daughter, Kathleen Rose Dover,
from your loving parents, David and Amanda Dover,
on the day of your birth March 12th, 1870. ”

She ran a finger lightly over the words so beautifully inscribed in her mother’s flowing script, as

though in caressing the words, she could once again feel her mother's healing touch. Below, in the same loving hand, her mother had set out a biblical promise that had sustained Kate through the years. . . .

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. Isaiah 40:31

"Lord, I could sure use some of that renewing strength right now," she whispered into the still night. Reaching out a tired hand, she turned down the wick of the lamp until darkness enveloped her. Standing and stretching her weary body she walked to the window on the far wall. Lace curtains blew in the soft evening breeze drifting through the open pane. The air was laced with the faint scent of honeysuckle blossoms. Kate turned her face to a black velvet heaven in which a thousand points of light twinkled merrily. The distant rolling boom was growing fainter, there would be no life-giving rains here tonight. Perhaps tomorrow would bring the renewing strength they all longed for.