

An excerpt from  
**The Wide Horizon**  
by Loula Grace Erdman

CHAPTER 1

KATIE PIERCE WAS SURE she must be the luckiest girl in the whole Panhandle of Texas.

Luckier even than her older sister Melinda who, after five years of waiting, was going to marry Dennis Kennedy in June and go with him to live in Amarillo. Dennis was a real doctor now, driving around the town and the surrounding country, looking after sick folks. Katie tried to imagine what it would be like for Melinda, living in the house Dennis had already bought for them, going to the store to buy what she needed, cooking meals, keeping things in order. Melinda would manage; she had always been the smart and capable one. She would have a wonderful time in Amarillo where exciting things were happening nearly every day.

But, fine as it all sounded, Katie would not want it for herself. Secretly she felt that hers was the much finer prospect. She was going back to East Texas to live with Grandmother and attend the Lewisville Academy for Young Ladies.

Six years ago Melinda had turned down the chance for herself, saying that Katie was the one to go when she was old enough. Now Katie was fifteen and this fall she would be going. As soon as the wedding was out of the way, Mama would start getting her ready to go. Two months, Mama said, was none too much time.

At first Papa was a little uncertain about the matter.

"How are you going to feel about giving up two girls at the same time?" he asked Mama.

"You'll have me," Carolyn reminded him.

"Of course I will," Mama said. And it wasn't until a long time afterwards that Katie remembered Mama really hadn't answered Papa's question.

Even so, it was in the back of Katie's mind most of the time. Underneath her own delight was a nagging little sadness. She would be leaving Papa and Mama and Carolyn; she would be leaving the twins, Bert and Dick, who, at seventeen, thought themselves men grown, but still acted like boys, teasing their sisters every chance they had. It was pleasant here at home, especially since Papa had built the new house in front of, but opening into, the dugout.

The old dugout was divided into two rooms now, one for the boys and one for Katie and Melinda. The girls slept in the bunks Papa had built for them at the time he first came to the Panhandle, before Mama and the children joined him. Katie still had the top one, because she was the younger. Carolyn slept in Mama and Papa's room, in a trundle bed that pushed under the big bed during the day. In this room, too, was the sewing machine. It was here that Mama and Melinda, Katie and Carolyn, sat now, one morning in early June. They were working on the dress Katie was going to wear at Melinda's wedding.

Katie was going to be the bridesmaid at her own sister's wedding. When Melinda first began to plan, Katie had thought of course that she would want Annie Foster, who was her own age and her best friend—or maybe even Dennis' grown-up cousin from Kansas City. But Melinda took care of that quickly and completely, the way she always

managed.

"I want Katie," she said.

"Oh, M'linda!" Katie gasped, overcome with surprise and pleasure. "Oh, M'linda—" It had been a long, hard struggle for her to learn to pronounce her sister's name correctly. Mostly, by this time, she would say "Melinda" very properly. But she was so pleased with the honor Melinda was bestowing upon her that she slipped back into the old childish slurring.

"Oh, thank you—" she said, the words coming out like one long happy sigh.

"Don't thank me for doing what I want to do." Melinda laughed, and that was the way they settled things.

Mama seemed pleased, too.

"We'll get Papa to take us to Amarillo," she planned. "Well buy the material for our dresses. Katie can have something that will look right for the wedding and still be nice for school."

Papa, when approached on the subject, was willing enough, although first he had to tease them a little.

"New dresses for all of you," he said. "What are you trying to do? Outshine Melinda at her own wedding?"

But he didn't mean that at all. He wanted them to look nice. He was as proud as they were over the selections—yellow for Carolyn, gray muslin for Mama, and pink flowered stuff for Katie. He even went to the store with them, insisted that Katie and Carolyn have hair ribbons to match their dresses.

As soon as Mama got home, she started making the dresses. She finished her own first, and then Carolyn's.

"I'll make Katie's last," she said. "It's the most important next to the bride's—I don't want the others on my mind while I'm doing it."

And now here was Katie's, ready for the final fitting.

"Come on, Katie," Mama said. "It's ready."

Katie went to her. She had already taken off her print dress and was wearing a white slip, her Sunday one, with a deep flounce trimmed in hairpin lace. She had made the lace herself—yards of it, enough for her own underwear and Melinda's and some extra to put on pillow cases and dresser scarves. She made it from thread, winding it around one of Mama's hairpins and then using a crochet needle to work out the pattern. She could do it as easy as anything; she loved watching the lacy lengths grow beneath her fingers. Melinda had scant luck with it—the thread always broke under her rebellious fingers, or she dropped a stitch and couldn't weave the crochet needle around to pick it up.

"You go too fast," Katie tried to explain, feeling embarrassed at the very thought of putting Melinda straight on anything.

"I don't like doing it." Melinda laughed, not minding her failure a bit. "I hurry so I can be through with the silly stuff."

But once it was finished, she liked it well enough, was glad to have it for all her underwear.

"Raise your arms, Katie," Mama said now, holding the dress up, ready to slip over her daughter's head.

Katie raised her arms obediently, stood still while Mama slipped it on. It fell into place, and Mama began to fasten the buttons. Katie's back was to the mirror; she did not

know what the dress really looked like, could not know until Mama had fastened the last button and given her the word that it was all right to turn. The girl stood now in that delicious state of expectation, like Christmas, just before the sheet came off the tree; like birthdays, when all the gifts were still lying waiting to be opened. But this was a different experience, for it was a new one, never to be tasted again. To have one's first real look at the dress you were going to wear as the bridesmaid at your sister's wedding—ah, that was a joy almost too great for bearing.

But even as Katie waited, the complete delight of the occasion was marred by one ugly, nagging thought. What if she got scared, standing up there before all those people? What if her knees trembled so hard that everyone noticed? Just thinking of it now made her breath come quick and fast. She wondered how Melinda could be so calm about things.

"It's going to look fine on you, Katie," Mama told her, stepping back to get a full view. "Now you turn around toward the mirror and see for yourself."

"Yes, look quick," Melinda said.

Katie turned to face her image in the mirror.

Melinda was right. The dress was lovely, utterly lovely. The material—a soft silky white—had bunches of pink roses scattered carelessly over it, like flowers blooming on the surface of the prairie. Something caught at her heart when she looked at them. She wanted to paint them, to make a little poem about them. She wished she could tell Melinda how she felt, but words wouldn't come. Maybe she couldn't make her sister understand, anyway. Katie had rarely been able to tell Melinda exactly how she felt about things. Maybe it was because Katie was six years younger. Maybe it was because the twins laughed at her and teased her so much. Sometimes it seemed to Katie that people were always laughing at her, even when she didn't mean to be funny. She loved Melinda better than anyone in the world, after Mama and Papa, of course, but still she couldn't tell her how she felt about things—like when she saw a sunset or a field dotted with flowers, or heard a lark singing in the spring, or looked at the snow all white and cold and silent.

"Katie," Melinda broke in on her thoughts, "you look lovely. Like a doll on the Christmas tree."

"Oh, M'linda," Katie cried, so happy she slurred once more back into the old childish pronunciation. "Oh, thank you—"

"She looks *excruciatingly* pretty," Carolyn announced, putting her head on one side, the better to survey her sister. At eight, Carolyn was the great one for using big words, not always getting them in the right places. She didn't mind in the least when the twins laughed at her efforts.

"Thank you, Carolyn," Katie said with composure. The look in the mirror had served to steady her. She was fifteen years old; she had this beautiful dress; she was going to be a bridesmaid at Melinda's wedding and at the end of the summer she was going away to school. Maybe Papa was right when he said she was just about grown up.

"You do look pretty," Melinda assured her.

"Thank you, Melinda." Katie brought out the name correctly and distinctly.

"Mama," Melinda mused, looking at Katie thoughtfully, "I have an idea. Would it be all right for Katie to sing at my wedding, as well as be the bridesmaid? That way she would have two chances to show off her pretty dress."

Mama was silent, thinking the matter through. Katie was also quiet, torn between the

great wish to sing and the fear that maybe she might have to choose between that and being the bridesmaid. Singing made her forget, for the moment, how scared she was of people and of things. The minute she heard music she could feel the sound of it creeping into her heart and then suddenly she could begin giving it back so that she ceased to be little Katie Pierce, timid and fearful, but an avenue through which song flowed. At such times, she wished she could go on singing forever.

"Well," Mama spoke at last, crisp and sure, now that she had made up her mind, "there's no real reason she shouldn't. She can sing before we start, and then I'll play the wedding march and you can come in on Papa's arm, just like we planned. When you are in your place, she can step over to your side."

"That's what I thought," Melinda agreed, sounding exactly like Mama.

"Oh, Mama—" Katie let out her breath sharply. Now she knew she would get along fine. If she sang first, she wouldn't mind standing up there before everyone while the preacher married Melinda and Dennis.

"Katie has a beautiful voice," Carolyn said, as if she were settling the matter, once and for all. "She sings 'stremely lovely."

"Of course she does," Melinda agreed absently. And then she added more firmly as if she had come to the real reason at last, "I want my wedding to be our family, doing things our way."

Mama looked at Melinda, her face bright with happiness. "That's a lovely thing for you to say, Melinda," she told her daughter softly.

Something—a fear, quick and piercing—caught at Katie's heart.

The family, doing things their way! This was the last thing they would ever do as a complete family. After the wedding, Melinda would leave. True, she would come back, but it would be for visits—like Annie Foster, or even Mrs. Kennedy, Dennis' aunt.

Melinda was leaving the family, to be in a home of her own. Katie wondered that she had ever thought herself lucky, being a part of the ceremony that would bring about the parting.

As Mama had said, there was much to be done in the three weeks before the wedding. In a way, this was fortunate, for it kept Katie from thinking too much about the fact that it meant Melinda's leaving. Sometimes she fancied that even Mama, for all she seemed so composed and sure about things, was also glad to be busy. She would miss Melinda, too, for she depended a great deal on her oldest daughter.

"All of us do," Katie thought. And even as she did so, she wondered how it would seem to have that knowledge—the realization that you were very necessary and capable about things.

Fortunately, there was no need to worry about making Melinda's wedding dress. When Grandmother Gaines, back in East Texas, had been told about the approaching wedding she had sent a big box to Melinda. In it was a dress, yellow with age and very old fashioned, but lovely anyway. There was a letter, explaining the gift.

"You are to wear this to be married in, if you want to," Grandmother had written. "It was your Great-grandmother Tillery's wedding dress, and I've always said you were more like her than you were like either your mother or me. So I want you to have it. I wish you much happiness. Thank you for wanting me to come. I would do so, but I haven't been feeling too well these last few months."

"Great-grandmother's wedding dress," Melinda said softly, feeling its delicate

folds. "Grandmother's sending it to me—"

"I'm not surprised," Mama said. "She always mentioned the resemblance, in looks as well as ways. My—just see those little tucks, and every one put in by hand!"

Mama washed and ironed the dress herself, handling it as carefully as if it had been tissue paper. When she had finished, Melinda tried it on. In it she looked like someone in grandmother's picture album, out of another time—finer than she would have looked in something white and frilly like people were wearing now. Melinda was dark and slender—maybe not pretty, Katie had to admit, but having a quality better than prettiness. People stopped to look at her, disregarding far more beautiful girls who might be with her.

"She's interesting looking," Dennis once said. "She's regal. That's my Melinda. Regal, like a princess. Like an *Indian* princess."

"Don't you dare say that word to me," Melinda warned him.

Once she had given Dennis a good tongue lashing because he had laughed at her for being scared at what she thought was Indians. He could get her temper up any time just by saying the word. And yet, he admitted, it was this very tongue lashing which had started him thinking about making something out of himself. The desire had finally been realized by his becoming a doctor. Maybe Melinda didn't mind his teasing as much as she pretended. She and Dennis were always laughing together. Katie, watching them, thought it was wonderful to see two people enjoying each other the way Dennis and Melinda did.

When Dennis saw Melinda in this dress he would really be pleased, for she did look regal, as he had said. Tall and dark and proud, but kind and sweet and gracious, too.

"Take it off, Melinda," Mama said now. "I declare—it gives me a real start to see you in it. As if I were standing back in Mother's parlor, looking at Grandmother Tillery's picture."

Melinda slipped out of the dress. Mama folded it, placing layers of tissue paper between the folds. This done, she put it into a pasteboard box with little rose-scented sachets. She tied the lid on carefully, handed the box to Katie.

"Put this in the chest under Melinda's bed," she said.

Katie took the box back to the bedroom, pulled the chest from beneath the bed. She opened the lid, remembering as she did so how Papa and the boys had made it for Melinda's birthday, the year she was fifteen. They had made nearly all the furniture in the room, and Mama had made the cretonne curtains at the window, the skirt for the dressing table. The Pierces were that sort of a family. Always they had done things for each other, making out with what they had. No wonder Melinda had wanted this to be a family wedding.

Katie placed the box in the chest, let the lid down quickly. She pushed it back under the bed. But even with it out of sight, she couldn't make herself forget that, after the wedding, when the family carried out some enterprise one of them would be missing.