

A movie poster for the film 'Tender Trust'. The background shows a Western saloon building with a balcony. In the foreground, a woman in a purple dress stands on the left, and a cowboy in a brown coat and black hat sits on a dark horse on the right. The title 'TENDER Trust' is written in a stylized purple font across the top. A dark purple banner with the name 'TANYA STOWE' in white capital letters is positioned in the middle.

TENDER
Trust

TANYA STOWE

Excerpt: Tender Trust

by Tanya Stowe

Penny's voice rose in the last notes of the song, as if in prayer. But she'd stopped praying a long time ago.

"Thanks, Aunt Penny," Jann murmured. "You're the best."

For one short moment, she believed it. Felt like she could conquer anything.

Then the men began to clap and cheer.

"I guess I owe you an apology, young man. Penny is a fine singer." Brady looked at her with something different in his eyes.

She knew the look and hated it. It had frightened her as a young girl. Now it sickened her. She ducked her head and would have jumped from the bar, but Brady reached for her. She shied away from his hands, closer to Jann.

"Sing one more," Brady coaxed.

She shook her head, but the men crowded in around her and pressed for more. It was always this way. Her singing awakened something hot and dangerous in them. After she sang, they looked at her differently, like an object to be possessed at all costs.

Tonight was no different. She felt smothered, as if she sank into a deep, dark pit of groping male hands and wet lips.

“One more.”

“No...no, I can't.” She shook her head again. They didn't hear her, wouldn't stop, and they were so close, too close. She couldn't move or breathe. She closed her eyes.

“Just one. We ain't heard nothing that pretty since Jenny Lind came through.” Suddenly, strong hands gripped her waist and lifted her effortlessly off the bar. She opened her eyes to see a dark, jacket-

covered chest. There was something familiar about the feel of those arms...something...

Penny opened her eyes and looked straight into Alex Marsden's face.

She screamed and shoved the man away with both hands.

It couldn't be Alex. He was dead. He had to be, or he would have come back for her.

"Penny!" The man stepped towards her.

She let out another startled cry and put out a hand to stop him.

He sounded like Alex. Looked like Alex. But he couldn't be.

She shook her head. He couldn't be. Men grabbed him, held him back. He struggled for a moment, then stopped fighting and stood up straight. "It's me, Penny. It's really me."

It was truly him. Her dead husband was

alive.

Alex! Her thoughts and senses came to a screeching halt.

Everything went black.