



# ROPING IN THE COWGIRL

Judy Duarte

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**Roping In The Cowgirl**

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The path to true love lies deep in the heart of Texas! As a child, the Rocking C was Blake Darnell's home away from home. Now it's a place for former rodeo cowboys to hang up their spurs...and the LA attorney is back in Texas to stop his uncle from making the biggest mistake of his life! Until he locks horns with Shannon Cramer, the sexy RN in charge of the place. Blake thinks his uncle is falling for a gold-digger, but Shannon believes it's love even if the gorgeous, jaded lawyer doesn't. Agreeing to disagree gets complicated as their attraction heats up. But the born-and-bred cowgirl's digging in her boot heels—she'll settle for nothing less than this city slicker's heart! Now if she could just convince him that their romance on the range can truly last a lifetime...Rocking Chair Rodeo: Cowboys—and true love—never go out of style!

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He could see the wheels turning in her mind, no doubt going over those blasted questions he'd been asking himself ever since that last kiss.

And he sensed the yearning in her eyes, the desire.

“What are we going to do about this?” he asked finally.

“I know what I'd like to do,” Shannon said. “But you'll be leaving soon. Right?”

She bit down on her bottom lip, a pensive reaction that sent Blake's blood racing. He suspected she was about to agree to the suggestion he hadn't actually spelled out.

That was, until she looked up, caught his eye and said, “Believe it or not, I'm an old-fashioned girl.”

Which meant what? That before making love she wanted a ring, a white lace gown, a walk down the aisle to the altar and a vow that would last forever?

He supposed he couldn't blame her for that. But that wasn't something he could offer her.

They sat quietly for a while, but her words still hung in the air. And so did his desire for her.

He reached for her hand. “I'm afraid that, under the circumstances, I can't give you any kind of commitment. But I can give you tonight.”

\* \* \*

Rocking Chair Rodeo: Cowboys—and true love—never go out of style!

Roping in the Cowgirl

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Since 2002, *USA TODAY* bestselling author **JUDY DUARTE** has written over forty books for Mills & Boon Cherish, earned two RITA® Award nominations, won two MAGGIE® Awards and received a National Reader's Choice Award. When she's not cooped up in her writing cave, she enjoys traveling with her husband and spending quality time with her grandchildren. You can learn more about Judy and her books at her website, [www.judyduarte.com](http://www.judyduarte.com), or at [Facebook.com/judyduartenovelist](https://www.facebook.com/judyduartenovelist).

To J. Frank Astleford, Emily Itzaina, George Johnston and Emelie Kuehn, who taught me to love and value the older generation and all they had to offer.

Your stories about your own grandparents and the “good old days” made history come alive for me. You will live in my heart and my memories forever.

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[Chapter One](#)

He'd been...fired? Seriously?

Blake Darnell bent forward in his tufted-leather desk chair and studied the legal document he'd just received in the afternoon mail. He was so caught up in reading what his great-uncle's new attorney had drafted and filed with the Texas court that he only now heard someone speaking to him.

"Did you hear me?" the law firm's administrative assistant asked, her voice rising a decibel.

He glanced at his open office door, where the efficient older woman stood. "I'm sorry, Carol. What did you say?"

She crossed her arms, her expression of curiosity morphing into one of concern. "I asked if there was anything else you needed me to do before I leave, but you were a hundred miles away. Is something wrong?"

Apparently she'd been standing there for a while, long enough to notice the furrow in his brow, the frown on his face. But he shrugged off her question and his penchant for honesty. "No, everything's fine."

"It doesn't look that way to me."

That's because things were actually a mess. What had Uncle Sam been thinking when he'd made this decision? Yet as stunned as Blake was, as angry at the circumstances, a niggler of guilt wormed its way into the mix. And having to assume at least part of the blame didn't sit well with him, especially since he could justify everything he'd done. But it was what he'd failed to do that was most unsettling.

Carol entered his office and made her way to the edge of his desk, the familiar scent of her favorite perfume still faintly clinging to her at the end of the workday. "When I sorted the mail, I noticed the return address on that envelope was from a law firm in Brighton Valley. Does it have anything to do with your uncle?"

Normally, Blake kept his personal affairs to himself, but Carol was an exceptional employee and loyal to a fault. She'd also taken him under her wing six years ago, when he'd first started out at the Beverly Hills law firm of Greenburg, Rawlings and—now that Blake had made partner—Darnell.

Before he knew it, Carol had become a second mother to him, baking him homemade cookies and even inviting him to her house for dinner on the weekends. In fact, in many ways, she was more maternal than the one who'd given birth to him.

She'd mentioned retiring a couple of times, which was understandable since she was approaching her sixtieth birthday. But if and when she actually decided to turn in her resignation, he and the other partners would have a hell of a time replacing her.

Blake blew out a ragged sigh and leaned back in his chair, the springs and leather creaking with his movement. “Apparently Uncle Sam wasn’t satisfied with my legal advice or my ability to look over his financial affairs, so he hired another lawyer and has taken back full control of the Darnell Family Trust.”

“Is he competent enough to do that?” Carol asked.

“His mental abilities were never in question.” Still, Blake suspected the elderly rancher had lost the grip he’d once had on his common sense.

Damn. Was this really happening? Blake pushed back his chair and got to his feet. Then he walked to the window and gazed down at the cars driving along Wilshire Boulevard.

“I’m sorry,” Carol said. “I only asked that question because, the last I heard, he’d moved into a skilled nursing facility.”

“That was nearly a year ago. But a lot has changed since then. He moved to a retirement home for old cowboys called the Rocking Chair Ranch.” And if Blake hadn’t been so tied up with those last two cases and had let one of the other attorneys handle them, if he’d gone to Texas and visited his uncle in person, then maybe Sam wouldn’t be in this fix.

“A home for retired cowboys should be a fitting place for a man who’d been a rancher all of his life,” Carol said.

Blake turned away from the window and raked his hand through his hair. “Yes, it is. But the Rocking C is also a working ranch. And several months back, my uncle got a wacky job offer to be the foreman.”

“That’s a surprise—and a nice one.” Carol smiled and lifted a single brow, apparently awaiting Blake’s agreement.

Instead, he slowly shook his head. “Yeah. But he’s pushing eighty.”

“As a woman facing retirement age, I’m not looking forward to giving up my independence. After a few weeks of leisure, I’d probably jump all over a job offer that would allow me back into the workforce and let me use the skills I’ve acquired over the years.”

Blake didn’t doubt that. From the purple streak in Carol’s trendy hairstyle to the multiple piercings along her ears, she did her best to remain youthful and stylish. And while he valued her opinion, this situation was so...personal. The mishmash of feelings he was dealing with kept popping up in his chest, making him feel as though he was playing an unending game of whack-a-mole.

Carol crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one hip. “You were so worried about losing him last year, I’d think that you’d be happy that he’s found a new purpose in life.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would be. But... Well, it’s complicated.” Blake wasn’t sure how much he wanted to share, especially since his feelings were involved.

Okay, so it was his guilt that ate at him the most, and he wasn’t sure how to make things right. But Carol knew how much he loved his uncle, how he’d tried his best to take care of him—albeit from a distance.

Two years ago, when Uncle Sam and Aunt Nellie decided to sell their ranch and retire, Blake had tried to talk them into moving to California so he could look after them. He’d even asked Carol to check out various nearby senior communities—all expensive, top-notch places where they’d be safe and well-cared-for. But Sam, who could be as stubborn as that ornery old mule he used to own back when Blake was a kid, had refused to even consider it.

Instead, he and Nellie had remained in Texas, moving into an assisted living complex in Brighton Valley. At that point, they’d signed over their trusteeship to Blake, their only heir. And he began looking over their financial affairs, which were considerable, although most folks wouldn’t know it. Sam Darnell might look like a plain and simple cowpoke, but back in the day, he’d been a sharp cattleman, landowner and investor.

After Aunt Nellie suffered a stroke and died, Blake was heartbroken. But what had really torn him up was seeing how badly his uncle took the loss. The couple didn't have any children, so it was just the two of them. And when Nellie passed, Sam lost his will to live.

In fact, his health had suffered so badly that he needed skilled nursing and had to move into a separate medical facility down the road. His doctor told Blake they'd have to call in hospice if Sam continued to lose weight and strength.

Again, Blake had suggested that his uncle move to California, but the stubborn old cowboy dug in his boot heels, insisting he was a Texan—born and bred. And that's where he intended to die.

In what seemed to be a miracle at the time, a nurse's aide managed to connect with him and encouraged him to start eating again. When she inherited a ranch called the Rocking C, she told Sam all about her plan to open a retirement home and asked him to come to work for her as her foreman. But there was more to the story. Things that didn't sit well with Blake.

Carol crossed the room and closed the door to his office, drawing him from his musing.

"Talk to me," she said. "Tell me what's going on."

Blake let out a sigh. "Sam struck up a romance. According to him, she's not only a 'younger woman,' but a 'sexy brunette with sparkling green eyes'. And I'm afraid he plans to give away the farm—so to speak."

At that, Carol scrunched her brow. "A woman he met at the ranch?"

"Her name is Joy, and apparently, she works there, too. As long as I had control over the finances, I would have been able to put the kibosh on any wild-ass plan he had to whip out his credit card or write a check. But now I don't have a say, so Sam's free to make any crazy financial decisions he wants."

Carol cocked her head. "Isn't it his money to do with as he chooses?"

"Yes, absolutely. And even though I'm supposed to inherit his estate—unless he's changed that, too—I don't care about the money. I already have more than I need. It's the principle of the thing. I don't want to see anyone take advantage of him."

"Do you really think he's that lonely—or that gullible?"

"I wouldn't have believed it before. But he emailed last month and said he wanted to get the woman's teeth fixed. He even mentioned buying her a house. And, apparently, she has a niece who wants to go to medical school, but can't afford it."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said, 'Absolutely not.' He was talking about spending a lot of money on a woman he'd just met. I can only imagine how she's playing him." Blake had known plenty of gold diggers like that. Hell, he'd almost married one until he'd finally seen through her manipulations.

"Okay, you said you've been emailing him. And I realize you're reluctant to go on vacation, in spite of my advice to take some well-deserved time off so you can fill the well. But have you tried talking to him in person, at least, on Skype or the telephone?"

Blake blew out a sigh. "Yes, I tried calling the ranch a few minutes ago. The woman who answered said he wasn't available, but I heard his voice in the background." Blake turned to Carol, unable to mask his feelings. "Can you believe it? For the first time in my life, my uncle refused to talk to me!"

"Ouch."

"And to make matters worse, I just got sucker punched with this." Blake tapped his finger on the document lying on his desktop. "I'm not sure whose idea this was, but I'm not going to stand by and watch my uncle get taken advantage of by a woman intent upon taking him to the cleaners. I'm going to fly to Texas and check things out for myself."

"Under the circumstances," Carol said, "that's probably a good idea. I'll make your travel arrangements. I assume you'd like to go as soon as possible."

Blake would leave right now, if he could. But he'd have to brief whichever attorney would be covering for him while he was gone.

"What's on my calendar?" he asked.

The ever-efficient Carol smiled. "Nothing that can't be postponed, canceled or handled by someone else, so consider it cleared. You're free for as long as you need to be."

Blake must have appeared skeptical—and hesitant—because she added, "Oh, come on. You haven't taken any significant time off in years. And while this isn't the same thing as a real vacation, at least it will get you out of the office for a while. Some evenings I was afraid we'd have to move a bed into the supply closet for you."

He smiled at the thought—and at the woman who knew him better than anyone probably ever had. "You're one in a million, Carol."

"So are you. And one day, when you finally put that broken engagement behind you, some sweet, unselfish woman is going to see that, too."

"Yeah, well, I'm not interested in striking up another romance—or in finding a sweet, unselfish woman. Right now I'm going to confront that gold-digging, green-eyed brunette who's gotten her hooks into my poor old uncle. So book me a first-class seat on the next available flight to Houston—nonstop."

"Will do," she said. "I hope you plan to stay for more than a day or two."

He'd probably have to. It might take a while to talk some sense into the stubborn yet naïve old cowboy. "Let's make it a one-way ticket for now."

Blake wasn't sure what kind of resistance he was going to meet from his uncle or the woman who'd turned his head, but come hell or high water, when he returned to California, he was bringing Sam home with him.

\* \* \*

Shannon Cramer gripped the steering wheel, slammed on her brakes and skidded to a stop as a flat-bed truck spun out in front of her, spilling its precariously stacked load of hay bales onto the road and blocking traffic to the Rio Rico Bridge in both directions. The driver, a befuddled teenager who'd probably just gotten his license, climbed from the cab and gazed at the mess.

Several cars had already lined up behind Shannon, and more than one driver honked. She had half a notion to join in their frustration, but the blaring horns and angry voices weren't going to help or do anyone any good.

Of all days to have this happen. She never overslept, although for some reason, she'd forgotten to set her alarm last night. And now she was going to be more than just a little late to work.

The wide-eyed teenage boy, his cheeks flushed, pulled the bill of his baseball cap down, as if attempting to hide his face. Apparently he had no idea what to do about the problem he'd caused or the angry motorists he'd inconvenienced, because he slunk back to the cab of his truck and climbed inside. When he placed his cell phone to his ear, Shannon assumed he was calling someone to help him clear the road.

She reached for her own cell to dial the Rocking C and let them know she'd get there as quickly as she could. Only trouble was, the call didn't go through.

That was the problem in this part of the valley. For some reason, the cell tower wasn't able to pick up signals in the low-lying areas. And even if you did manage to get a bar or two, the reception was terrible.

Dang it. She couldn't believe this was happening. She needed to relieve the night nurse at the ranch. Darlene, the LVN, also had a part-time afternoon job waiting tables at the truck stop café along the interstate and needed to get some sleep before she started her shift.

Shannon glanced at her wristwatch, then at all the hay that blocked both sides of the road and the entry of the narrow, two-lane bridge. On any other day, she might have gotten out of her car and started clearing the mess herself. Heck, she'd grown up on a ranch and had been handling hay

since she was a kid. But last Friday, while helping an elderly man get out of a rocking chair on the front porch, she'd pulled something in her back. The pain had finally eased and she was feeling much better now, but she didn't dare try to drag eighty-to ninety-pound bales of hay out of the street and risk hurting herself again.

She frowned at the blocked road. Maybe she could encourage a few of the other drivers to help out. She'd no more than opened the door of her Toyota Celica when a couple of lanky cowboys jumped out of their pickup and started toward the chaos. One, who looked remarkably like the champion bull rider who'd been raised on a ranch on the outskirts of Brighton Valley, got right to work.

The other knocked on the window of the teenage driver's door. When the boy glanced up, the cowboy hollered, "Dammit, kid. You passed us two miles back, driving like a bat out of hell. Didn't anyone tell you to tie down a load? Get your butt out here and help us get this cleaned up."

Thank goodness. Still holding her smartphone, Shannon got out of her car, made her way around the hay bales and walked to the bridge, hoping to get a few bars and to have better reception there. After a couple of tries, she finally reached Sam Darnell, the Rocking C foreman. At least, it sounded like Sam's voice through the crackling on the line.

"I'm afraid there's been an accident on the county road," she said. "No one was hurt, but I'm going to be late to work." When Sam didn't respond and the crackling stopped, she lowered her phone and glanced at the display. No Service.

She let out a ragged sigh. The single bar she'd seen moments earlier had completely disappeared. Hopefully Sam got the message and would pass it on.

A few minutes later, as one of the cowboys began to wave the cars through, Shannon slid behind the wheel and started her engine. Finally, she was on her way. Yet while the ranch was only two miles away, she was still twenty minutes late when she pulled into the yard.

As she parked near the barn—which Sam and a couple of hands had painted red last week—she glanced at the clouds that loomed on the northern horizon. They weren't dark yet, which was good. Whenever heavy rain hit the valley, the bridge washed out, making it impossible for vehicles to get in or out of the ranch for days at a time.

The TV weatherman had said the first incoming storm had stalled and probably wouldn't hit until tomorrow or the next day. But predictions were sometimes wrong. Either way, she had a well-stocked medical supply room and could handle more than basic first aid. However, a serious accident or illness would require a trip to the Brighton Valley Medical Center, which was forty-five minutes away.

She'd no more than started toward the back entrance of the sprawling ranch house when a late-model white Lexus pulled up beside her and parked.

That was odd. The ranch owners were out of town for the next few weeks. And the elderly residents, as well as the ranch hands who worked at the Rocking C, didn't get many visitors, especially arriving in fancy vehicles.

By the time the driver, a handsome man in his early-to midthirties, got out of the car, her curiosity had grown to the point that even though she needed to get inside, she couldn't seem to move her feet.

He wore an expensive suit and fancy loafers—Italian leather, no doubt. At well over six feet tall, with blue eyes and dark hair that must have cost him a pretty penny to have cut at an expensive salon, he was more than attractive. In fact, he'd be drop-dead gorgeous if he'd soften his expression with a smile.

Who was he? And what business did he have at the ranch? There was only one way to find out.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"That depends. Who are you?"

Shannon, who'd had her fill of frustration for the day, bristled at his rude response and crossed her arms. "Why don't you go first?"

His lips curled ever so slightly into a smile, and his expression mellowed a bit, as if he might actually respect her spunk. "I'm Blake Darnell, Sam's nephew."

The California attorney? Shannon had heard about him. He rarely visited Sam and had left the poor man to nearly waste away in the nursing facility in town.

Darnell arched a dark brow. "And you're...?"

She let the question dangle a moment before introducing herself. "I'm Shannon Cramer."

His gaze swept over her, traveling from head to toe and back again. He seemed to be assessing her and the pink scrubs she wore.

"A nurse's aide?" he asked.

"An RN," she corrected.

Darnell nodded, then walked to the back of the Lexus, opened the trunk and pulled out a suitcase.

What in the world was he doing with that? Surely he didn't plan to stay here. Maybe he came to bring some of Sam's belongings to him.

Before Shannon could question him, Aunt Joy stepped out onto the porch and met Shannon the way she usually did—with a cup of coffee. "Here you go. Fixed just the way you like it—with a splash of cream and a dash of sugar."

"Thanks." Shannon took the mug in both hands, letting the heat warm her fingers from the crisp autumn chill.

"There's pumpkin bread to go with that," Joy said, her voice light, her smile refreshing.

It was nice to see her aunt happy again. Her second husband had left her in dire financial straits after wiping out the nest egg she'd once had. When most people were thinking of retiring, Joy had had to find a job. But since she'd been out of the workforce for more than forty years, she had no way of supporting herself. Fortunately, the Rocking C had needed a housekeeper/cook, and Shannon had told the owners that Joy was the perfect candidate.

And that was true, since Joy's most notable qualifications were her culinary skills and an innate ability to make a house a home. So it had worked out beautifully for everyone involved.

Then Joy met Sam Darnell, who soon put a sparkle in her eyes and a spring in her steps. There was a happy glimmer in Sam's eyes, too. It was heartwarming to see.

"I'm glad you're finally here," Joy told Shannon. "Darlene's eager to go home."

"I know." Shannon took a sip of coffee. "It couldn't be helped. There was a little incident on the road near the bridge."

Joy turned to Darnell and offered him a warm smile, which he didn't return. Instead, he seemed to assess her, but in a far more critical manner than he'd studied Shannon just moments earlier.

Why was that? Joy was one of the sweetest women on the planet, which was one reason her jerk of an ex had been able to take advantage of her.

But then again, Shannon knew that Sam's nephew had called him yesterday, and the foreman had refused to talk to him.

The California attorney cleared his throat. "I don't suppose either of you can tell me where I can find Sam."

"He went out to check a leaky pump in the south pasture," Joy said, her voice soft and kind. "But he should be back shortly."

At nearly eighty years old, Sam Darnell could well afford to retire and take life easy, but he thrived on being useful. And he certainly was. The Rocking C had been a struggling cattle ranch when Chloe Martinez had inherited it. There were back taxes and a second mortgage to pay. But Sam, with his wealth of knowledge and experience, had begun to turn things around in a few short

months. They certainly weren't out of the woods yet, but the sweet old foreman had told them not to worry, that everything would be okay in time.

For that reason, Sam reminded Shannon of her father, a good and loving man she'd lost way too soon.

"If you don't mind," Darnell said, as he strode toward the front porch toting his fancy suitcase, "I'll sit here and wait for him."

Actually, Shannon did mind. A lot. But she bit her tongue out of courtesy to Sam. She adored the former rancher, who'd become a friend. And if he married her aunt, he'd become a part of the family.

In fact, if Sam and Joy actually did decide to tie the knot, Shannon might have to "accidentally" misplace Blake's invitation.

Because while she couldn't think of anything she'd like more than to help Joy plan the perfect wedding. Sam's nephew was a stuffy, conceited tool, and she wasn't looking forward to adding him as a relative!

## Chapter Two

The two women continued to stand in the yard, gaping at Blake as though he'd just dropkicked a puppy. But then again, who knew what his uncle might have told them about him?

At first, when the older woman wearing a yellow apron walked out of the house carrying a mug of steaming coffee, he'd thought she might be the one who'd been sweet-talking Sam. She wore glasses and wasn't that close to him, so he couldn't see her eye color. But she was a brunette, which he suspected was due to a recent visit to a local beauty salon. She was also in her mid-to late-sixties, so she was definitely what Sam would call "younger." Still, while she was pleasant enough to look at, Blake wouldn't consider her "sexy."

On the other hand, the nurse had big green eyes the color of new spring grass. Her glossy dark hair was a tumble of curls that flowed over her shoulders and down her back. Even while wearing an unflattering pair of pink hospital scrubs she could stoke a dying ember in a man's soul.

But surely she wasn't the one his uncle had been talking about. Besides, it was also a sure bet that she couldn't have a niece old enough to attend medical school. Still, she was a young brunette and definitely sexy...

Blake shook off that arousing but unwelcome thought as quickly as it struck.

Besides, she'd slapped her hands on her hips and was drilling into him with a critical gaze. It was clear to him that she wasn't sharing the love.

Maybe he'd better take a new tack, sidestepping her and starting at the top. So he asked, "Who's in charge here?"

Shannon stood as tall as her petite stature would allow and lifted her chin. "That would be me. I'm the head nurse."

Seriously? She might look ready for battle, but she was just a bit of a thing—not much taller than five feet. She was also in her early-to midtwenties, and the way he saw it, she was too young to be running a retirement home, even if his uncle was in charge of the ranch.

In spite of her obvious annoyance, she had pretty features—a heart-shaped face, expressive eyes, thick dark lashes and a scatter of freckles across her nose.

She wasn't wearing any makeup to highlight her physical attributes, but she really didn't need to. Her beauty was natural and wholesome.

If he had to guess, he'd suspect that she had a nice shape, although those baggy pants and that boxy top hid it well.

Of course, none of that mattered. Blake wasn't about to be sidetracked from the task he'd set out to do. And since he wanted to get to the bottom of the mess his uncle had gotten caught up in, he couldn't afford to aggravate anyone who might be able to help him, particularly the two ladies standing before him.

“If you’ll excuse me,” the older woman said to Shannon, “I’ll let Darlene know you’re here and that she’s free to leave.”

Then she turned away and entered the house, leaving Blake and the nurse alone.

He had to admit that he hadn’t put his best foot forward when he first arrived, but there was a reason for that. He hadn’t slept a wink on the flight to Texas. He’d also had a long drive from the Houston airport, which had given him plenty of time to stew over what might be going on here at the Rocking C.

“Are you the ranch owner?” he asked Shannon.

“No, that’s Chloe Martinez. She’s out of town until mid-December, but she left me in charge.”

Blake gave the nurse another once-over. She didn’t seem to be the kind of woman who would target an eighty-year-old man for financial gain. But was she capable of detecting an emotional exploitation going on under her nose—and then putting a stop to it?

Her eyes narrowed, and she frowned. Apparently he’d really set her off, although he hadn’t meant to.

“I’m sorry if I offended you,” he said. “It might seem bright and early in the morning to you, but it’s been a long day and night for me, one that began more than twenty-four hours ago.”

“A successful investment attorney like you must be incredibly busy.” She removed her hands from her hips and folded them across her chest. “I’m surprised you were able to fit in a trip to Texas.”

She was right. He hadn’t created a successful career and comfortable life in Beverly Hills by taking vacations. And he didn’t have any time to waste in the Texas countryside now, even if the sights and sounds of the Rocking C stirred up old memories, reminding him of the ranch he used to visit every summer while growing up.

“In spite of what you’ve heard or might think,” he said, “I’ve really missed my uncle. And it’s high time I came to visit. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“Did Sam know you were coming?” she asked.

“I wanted to surprise him.”

She nodded at the suitcase near his feet. “It looks as though you didn’t come for a short visit.”

“I might stay a while. It depends on how things go.”

She again eyed him carefully, assessing his stance and demeanor the way an opposing litigator would do. And for one fleeting moment it seemed as if she’d seen right into his heart.

Okay, so maybe she was astute—and not just a pretty face.

“You know,” she said, “rumor has it that you’re too caught up in making a buck and living the high life in the city to ever come to Texas. So I have a feeling your uncle will be surprised to see you.”

“He probably will be.” Obviously his uncle had been talking to his coworkers. And he hadn’t painted Blake in a very good light.

Shannon uncrossed her arms and softened her stance, although the skeptical expression she wore didn’t waver.

This wasn’t going well, especially since she was the one who was “in charge.” He’d clearly gotten off on the wrong foot.

Unfortunately, he’d been loaded for bear when he came to the Rocking C, which hadn’t been the right approach. So he’d have to do something to change that—and quickly.

He forced a smile and lightened his tone. “There’s something to be said about family issues and misunderstandings. There’s a lot more behind them than meets the eye. And there are usually two sides to the story.”

She arched a brow, challenging him to explain what his side or his explanation might be. But he didn’t want to get into the myriad emotions that had been brewing inside him since Sam refused to take his call yesterday.

It had not only stunned him when it happened, but just like an unexpected paper cut, it had also sliced him to the quick. That’s why he was determined to patch things up between them.

When he offered her a slight shrug, rather than an explanation that would require him to discuss hurt feelings, she said, “Then let’s hope your visit here goes well. Or your vacation or whatever it is.”

“For the record, I brought my iPhone and laptop, so I can work from here, if I need to.”

At that she smiled ever so slightly. “Good luck with that. The internet access here is sketchy at best, and the cell phone service is even worse.”

Then hopefully he wouldn’t have to stick around very long, just long enough to put a stop to the greedy schemer’s attempt to sway Sam into signing over the proverbial farm, not to mention paying her niece’s medical school tuition.

“I’ll manage without the telephone and internet,” he said, although he wasn’t sure how long he could do that and still stay on top of everything he had going on back at the office. Yet even if he couldn’t get as much work done as he’d hoped, he’d neglected his uncle for way too long.

The screen door swung open, and a redhead in her thirties walked out onto the extensive front porch without so much as a glance at Blake. “Good morning,” she said to Shannon. “Is it okay if I leave now?”

“Yes, I’m sorry I was late.”

“No problem.” The redhead, who must be the night nurse, blinked her eyes a couple of times and yawned. “I’m going to head home and get some sleep.”

“I’ll see you this evening,” Shannon said.

The redhead had no more than climbed into a small Chevy pickup and started the engine, when Blake’s uncle strode into the yard as big as life.

At nearly eighty, Sam Darnell had a thick head of white hair under his Stetson, a warm glimmer in his blue eyes and a smile that wouldn’t quit. But he wasn’t smiling now.

He folded his arms across his broad chest and cast an accusatory eye on Blake. “Well, look what the cat dragged in. My new attorney bet me that you’d be here within twenty-four hours of receiving your copy of that document, but I thought he was wrong.”

Blake shrugged a single shoulder. He’d taken a red-eye flight out of LA to Houston, so he’d arrived at dawn. Even after the time spent on renting a car and driving to the ranch, he’d still gotten here with hours to spare.

Sam adjusted the brim of his hat. “Looks like I owe my new lawyer twenty bucks, on top of the payment for the work he did.”

Blake hadn’t expected his uncle to be happy to see him, but he certainly hadn’t expected him to be so damn angry. Still, if truth be told, Blake really couldn’t blame him. “I owe you an apology, Sam, but just to set the record straight, I don’t care about that change in trusteeship. Now that you’re as healthy and strong as ever, it makes sense that you’d want to take control again.”

Sam’s only response was a humph.

“We need to talk.” Blake glanced at Nurse Shannon before returning his gaze to Sam. He was tempted to suggest they speak in private, but he’d let his uncle make that call.

Fortunately, neither of them had to say anything because the attractive nurse took the hint. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get to work.”

Sam, who actually did resemble the robust rancher he’d once been and not the frail old man who’d nearly died last spring, lifted the flat of his hand like a traffic cop. “Hold up, Shannon. Will you check on one of my men before you go inside?”

“Of course. What’s wrong?”

Sam blew out a sigh. “Nate Gallagher was helping me dig out the mud from around that old pump so we could repair it, and he had a run-in with a broken beer bottle.”

The nurse grimaced, apparently concerned about injury. Then she smiled, transforming her mood completely and putting a glimmer in those pretty eyes. “I hope it wasn’t his beer bottle. I heard that a few of the new cowboys you hired can get a little rowdy, especially on their days and nights off.”

Sam's grin softened his expression and shaved ten years off his face. "You must have been talking to Rex and Pete. Those old coots usually have something to critique about my new hands."

"Yes, that's where I heard it," Shannon said. "But since two of your new hires ended up in jail last Saturday night and you had to bail them out, I drew my own conclusion."

At that, Sam laughed, again reminding Blake of the man he'd always loved and respected, the man who'd once thought Blake could walk on water—or leap tall LA buildings in a single bound.

"Nate doesn't drink anything stronger than soda pop," Sam said. "Besides, it was a dirty old bottle that had been there for a while, so the cut could easily become infected. I wanted to take him to Urgent Care to get it cleaned out properly, but he didn't want any part of that."

"Where is he?" Shannon asked.

Sam nodded toward the bright red barn, which appeared to have been recently painted. "When Nate spotted you in the yard and realized I was going to ask you to check him out, he swung around to the back entrance. He's probably washing off the blood and planning to slap a bandage over it. But that cut was pretty deep."

"Then I'll hurry and take a look at it before he covers it up and heads back to work." Shannon lifted the mug she'd been holding, took a sip and then set it on top of an old tree stump near the porch. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Before Blake could resume talking to his uncle, the screen door swung open and the older brunette returned.

"Can I get you some coffee?" she asked Sam. "You didn't have your second cup this morning."

"Not yet." Sam nodded toward Blake. "I need to speak to Fancy Pants first. Then I'll come into the kitchen and share a cup with you." He winked at the woman. "And if you have any of that carrot cake left over from last night, I'll have a piece of that to go with it."

She laughed. "You got it." Then she went into the house, the screen door shutting behind her.

When the two men were finally alone, Blake said, "Like I said, I owe you an apology."

"Just one?" Sam let out a little snort. "And just what would that be for?"

"Not visiting you more often."

Sam straightened his shoulders, which tugged on his red flannel shirt and made them appear to be just as strong and broad as ever. "Once you went off to law school, you put me and Nellie on the back burner."

Why'd Sam have to mention Nellie? If Blake had felt guilty before, the reminder of his aunt and the fact that he'd been too busy to come to Texas and spend either Thanksgiving or Christmas with the couple during the last five years she'd been alive made it all the worse. And no matter what he said, what excuses he'd given himself, there was no making up for that.

Sam glanced at Blake's suitcase. "You planning to stay here?"

"I thought it might take some time for me to prove to you just how sorry I am. So, yes, I'd like to stay with you, if that's okay. Otherwise, I'll find a place in town."

That seemed to touch the heart of the rugged rancher, at least a little. And for that, Blake was grateful. His aunt and uncle had been good to him while he'd been growing up and had felt neglected by his unfailing focus on his career.

He could argue that he'd offered to move them to California, but neither of them would have been happy leaving Texas. He knew that now, even if the truth of it had escaped him before.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Sam pointed at Blake's luggage. "Get your stuff and come with me. I don't have all day."

Blake grabbed the suitcase and followed his uncle past the barn and down a short path to a small outbuilding that also appeared to be freshly painted. The exterior walls were clean and white, and the bright red door was the same color as the barn.

"This is my place," Sam said, as he let Blake inside.

Blake scanned the cozy living room with a small stone fireplace on the outside wall and a built-in bookshelf next to it. His uncle had certainly downsized. Before Sam and Nellie sold their ranch, they'd lived in a sprawling house on more than five hundred acres of prime grazing land.

"I hope I don't inconvenience you," Blake said.

"You won't bother me. For the most part, I've been staying with Joy in the big house."

Blake's gut clenched. What did Sam mean by "staying with" her?

"You're sleeping with her?" Blake had meant to mask his surprise, but the tone of his voice let him down.

"So what if I am?" Sam snapped. "I'm an adult."

"Yes, but..." Blake bit back his response, which would only serve to make matters worse.

"Did you think your generation invented sex?" Sam asked. "Or that I'd outgrown the need for it?"

"Neither," Blake said, although he'd assumed that a man his uncle's age... Well, hell. Clearly his assumption was wrong, and he was glad to know that. He'd hate to think he'd ever "outgrow" the need or desire for sex.

"And just so you know," Sam added, "I don't need any little blue pills, either."

Blake had no response for that, other than to hope he'd inherited some of the Darnell strength, stamina and hormones.

"Go ahead and make yourself at home," Sam said. "I've got work to do. We'll have to talk more later."

A nap did sound good. Blake hadn't been able to sleep on the plane.

"Lunch is at the big house at eleven-thirty sharp," Sam added. "I'll see you then."

After Sam left, Blake scanned the ten-by-ten-foot living room, with its brown leather sofa, dark oak coffee table and the colorful Navajo rug that adorned the hardwood floor. The place was cozy and clean, although it was a far cry from the high-rise condo in which Blake lived.

But Blake was prepared to stay as long as it took to bury the hatchet. He'd also do whatever he could to protect Uncle Sam's heart and bank account while he was at it.

And if he had to buy off the gold digger and her niece, then so be it. He'd be damned if he was going to just roll over and let nature—or greed—run its course.

\* \* \*

If there was one thing Shannon had learned during her first few days on the job at the Rocking C, it was to be prepared for the unexpected. There seemed to always be one minor crisis or another occurring that would keep her busy from morning until night.

And today had been no different. From the traffic jam at the bridge to Blake Darnell's surprise arrival, nothing had been routine. Even dealing with Nate's injury hadn't been easy. She'd had to override his objections and insist upon cleaning and dressing the wound properly.

After the cowboy had gone back to work, she'd called Doc Nelson, who'd be coming by this evening for the weekly poker game, and asked him to arrive early so he could take a look at it. In the meantime, the doctor had prescribed an antibiotic, as well as a tetanus shot. So she then had to get into the all-terrain vehicle and drive the injections out to the south pasture, bushwhacking the young cowboy, who'd rolled his eyes but let her do her job.

Once that was out of the way, the rest of her morning went as usual. It was just after noon when she prepared the midday medications. As she passed them out, she took time to visit with each of the elderly men, all of whom she'd grown to care about.

The last one on her med list was Rex Mayberry, one of her favorite old cowboys. She often found him outside, seated in one of the rockers on the porch, so that's where she started her search.

She'd barely reached the screen door when she heard him blurt out a curse. Sure enough, she'd found him. She adjusted the small tray she carried with disposable cups of water and medications labeled with residents' names, then went outside.

As she opened the screen door, the hinges squeaked. Rex, who'd been watching the younger cowboys try to gentle a yearling in the corral, turned and watched her approach. The scowl he'd been wearing morphed into a wry grin. "Well, if it ain't my personal Florence Nightingale. I was beginning to think you'd abandoned me."

"My favorite resident? No way would I ever forget you." She'd only been working at the Rocking C for three months, but everyone here had managed to touch her heart, especially Rex, who could be a real hoot when he wasn't complaining. And even then she got a big kick out of him.

She handed Rex his pill in a tiny paper cup and waited until he'd taken it and chased it down with water. Turning to go back into the house, she spotted Blake Darnell approaching and stopped in her tracks.

He'd changed out of the khaki slacks he'd been wearing earlier and into a pair of jeans. He might be trying to fit in around here, but he was much too polished around the edges. Even the denim didn't make him look like a rancher, let alone a cowboy. And in spite of the fact that both he and his uncle were attractive men, considering their respective ages, they didn't seem anything alike, especially in temperament.

So when Blake tossed a smile at her and again apologized for being rude earlier, it took her by surprise—a rather pleasant one at that.

"I didn't get any sleep last night," he added, "and then I got stuck in some backed-up traffic about two miles from here. Someone lost a load of hay, although it was pretty much picked up by the time I drove through. So that's why I was a little snappish with you earlier."

As much as Shannon wanted to stay angry at him, she'd never been one to hold a grudge. And the fact that he'd been delayed by the same teenage driver who'd spilled hay all over the road made her smile. "I was probably a few cars in front of you when you crossed the bridge, so I can relate to your frustration."

"Can we start over?" He reached out his hand for a proper greeting, and she took it.

The warmth and strength of his grip sent an electrifying tingle zapping along every one of her nerve endings, a physical reaction to his touch that she hadn't expected and didn't appreciate.

Blake Darnell was a charmer, and she wasn't about to allow herself to be roped in by him. But she'd have to agree with her initial assessment. He was drop-dead gorgeous when he smiled.

He was also the kind of man who was too busy to spend time with his aunt and uncle, something she found bothersome. Family was important, especially when you didn't have many relatives left.

What she wouldn't give to have one more opportunity to talk to her father.

"Dang it," Rex hollered out. "Would you look at that?" He pointed a gnarled finger toward the younger man in the corral with a bay gelding. "Oh, for cripe's sake. That guy Sam hired doesn't know squat about horses. Will you go down there and give him a few pointers?"

"Me?" Darnell asked the sweet but crotchety old cowboy.

Rex shot him a frown. "No, not you. I was talking to Shannon. Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"I'm Blake Darnell, Sam's nephew from California."

"Oh." Rex sat back in his chair, eyeing the attorney. "I heard about you."

Actually, there weren't many people living or working on the Rocking C who hadn't. Sam might be a sweetheart most of the time, but he didn't hold back when he blew a fuse.

Shannon couldn't hide a smile. She loved these old cowboys who had no problem telling it like it was.

"So," Rex said, returning his attention to Shannon. "Are you going to go out there and give that boy a lesson on the right way to handle a horse? I'd do it myself, but I left my cane inside."

"I'm afraid that's not in my job description," Shannon said. "But just so you know, Sam told me he's been working closely with those new hires and expects them all to make good cowboys someday."

Rex swore under his breath. “Maybe those youngsters are still learning the ropes, but they’re doing it while they’re on the Rocking C’s time clock. Why, even a pretty little nurse like you knows way more about roping and riding than those fool kids.”

That might be true, but Shannon’s days of riding herd were behind her. She had a new career now, one she liked a whole lot better.

She glanced at Sam’s nephew, saw him watching her intently. A rush of heat washed over her, warming her cheeks and setting a flutter in her stomach.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked.

As his eyes locked on hers, the tingle in her belly grew stronger. If she had any sense, she’d tell him she had work to do. Instead, she said, “Sure.”

He nodded toward the barn. “Can you take a walk?”

The question, the requested private conversation, sent her thoughts scrambling.

What did he have to say to her? Maybe he only wanted to sway her opinion of him and to ask her to intercede with Sam.

“Okay,” she said. “I just need to stay within hearing distance of the house.”

Blake held out an open palm, indicating an “After you.”

She set the tray with the now-empty paper cups on the table next to Rex, then started down the steps, with Blake and his woodsy cologne and musky male scent following close behind.

“So what did you want to talk about?” she asked.

“For starters, I’d like to know more about the Rocking C and my uncle’s position here.”

“All right. I’ll give you the short version. Chloe Martinez inherited this ranch with the idea of turning it into a retirement home for cowboys. She used to work at an assisted living facility in town, the same one where Sam lived.”

“So she offered him a job?”

“Actually, she didn’t know much about ranching, so she would visit with Sam and ask him questions. As you probably know, he’s got a wealth of experience. So he gave her advice about things—like when a cattle broker was trying to cheat her. He’s been a godsend to her and to the old men at the ranch.”

“My uncle was one sharp rancher.”

“He still is. As for the Rocking C, it’s not just a retirement home. It’s a working ranch, which provides our residents with a familiar living environment. That’s something Chloe realized was lacking at the place in town, especially when it came to men like Rex.”

“Are all the residents as cantankerous as that guy?” Blake asked.

“Rex is actually pretty lovable, when you get to know him.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is.” Obviously, Blake had his doubts. But Shannon adored everything about Rex.

“You said you were in charge,” Blake said. “Where’s Chloe, the owner?”

“She and her husband are taking classes in graduate programs at the University of Texas, and I’m covering for her while she’s gone.”

Blake’s arm brushed her shoulder, setting off those tingles again. “And you like it here?”

“Yes, of course. But I’d prefer to have a position at the hospital in town. This job is only temporary. Once Chloe and Joe return, they’ll take over again.”

There had been one benefit she’d received by working here. She’d managed to find a place for her aunt to feel needed again.

Who would have guessed that a romance would spark between Joy and Sam? How sweet was that?

Shannon nearly mentioned that to Blake, but decided it wasn’t her place to let him know how happy her aunt and his uncle were. Just thinking about the May-December romance made her smile,

especially when she remembered Sam's words when she'd asked if he was happy. "You bet I am," he'd said. "Thanks to your aunt, I'm downright Joy-ful these days."

As Shannon and Blake walked along the side of the barn, he continued to quiz her about life on the Rocking C. "Are all the retired cowboys as critical of the new hands as Rex is?"

"No, not usually. But that doesn't mean they don't enjoy sharing their knowledge about cattle and horses every chance they get to corner one of the younger guys."

"And letting them know when they're doing something wrong?"

"That certainly happens."

As they circled the barn, the crisp breeze blew a strand of hair across her eyes. She tucked it behind her ear, wishing she'd had time to weave it into a single braid before leaving her house.

"Still," she said, "even though Rex was complaining, those new men are working out just fine."

"Did my uncle tell you that?" Blake turned to her, his arm brushing hers again. His gaze zeroed in on her, and her steps slowed.

"Yes, he did, and I believe him. I grew up on a small spread myself, and while I'm no expert, I think some of Rex's complaints are over the top."

"I'm surprised that Sam didn't hire more experienced hands," Blake said.

"That's because Chloe couldn't afford to pay the higher salaries those men required, although we're all hopeful things will start looking up soon." In fact, Sam had refused to take a paycheck for himself, probably for that reason. He understood profit-and-loss statements. So did the owners. That's also why Joe Martinez, Chloe's husband, was getting an MBA. He hoped to learn more ways to generate funds, including donations.

But Shannon had probably said too much already to Sam's nephew, the attorney. So she held her tongue. No need to see him get riled up about that. He seemed to have enough bothering him already.

There was another reason she kept quiet. One she didn't like pondering.

Blake had finally ditched his scowl, and Shannon liked seeing him smile. Especially with that gleam in his blue eyes, the change in expression made him just as good-looking as she'd thought it would.

And if what she'd heard about him was true, he was the worst possible man in the entire world for her to find attractive. To make matters even worse, he might soon be considered family. And she would bet her last dollar he wouldn't be the least bit thrilled to hear that news.

### [Chapter Three](#)

The brunette wearing the yellow apron turned out to be the ranch cook—and she was an excellent one, at that.

After serving Blake and the residents in the dining room, she returned to the kitchen, where Sam was eating with the hired hands. When she'd first asked Blake to sit at the table with the oldsters, he'd gotten the feeling that his uncle might have come up with the seating arrangement in order to avoid him. But then he'd wondered whether Sam might have wanted to separate the working men from the residents for one reason or another.

Either way, Blake now found himself seated across from Nurse Shannon and flanked by Rex and another elderly man, whose name escaped him. However, Shannon had just gotten up to take a phone call, so her chair was now empty.

"By the way," Rex said to no one in particular, "there's going to be a rodeo at the Wexler Fairgrounds next spring. It'll be in April, I think. Anyway, I have a friend who works with the outfit promoting it, and he said the head honcho is looking for worthwhile local charities to support. I told him all about Rocking Chair Ranch. He liked the idea of sponsoring us and is going to talk to his boss."

"Good for you," another retired cowboy said. "That's one way to make sure we can keep the doors open. I'd hate to have to move back to that place in town."

If Rex suggested that a rodeo sponsor the ranch, then it sounded as if they might be struggling to keep things afloat. Shannon had implied there were financial concerns about hiring more-experienced hands, but he hadn't realized they feared going out of business. He'd only been here a short while, but he could see why these men would prefer to live in a setting like this.

Moments later, when Shannon returned to the table and took her seat, Blake shot a glance at her, then at Rex. But the old cowboy didn't repeat his announcement.

Did Shannon already know what he'd asked of his rodeo buddy?

Rex elbowed Blake. "Don't hoard all those warm biscuits, Fancy Pants. Pass them down, will you?"

Apparently word had spread that Sam had given Blake that nickname. He found the moniker bothersome, but he'd have to live with a few verbal jabs—at least while he was here.

So he shook off his annoyance, reached for the bread basket and passed it to Rex. "Here you go. Do you want butter, too?"

"Yep. And the honey, if you don't mind. Thanks."

Blake returned his focus to his plate, which the cook had filled with a working man's portion of tender short ribs, mashed potatoes and glazed carrots. He picked up his fork and continued to chow down.

Chow down? He hadn't used a phrase like that in ages. Not since he was a kid hanging out on Sam's ranch, tagging along after the cowboys and hoping to be one himself someday.

Back then, the Western way of life had become so ingrained in his mind that he'd always returned home to California at summer's end talking like a true Texan, a habit that usually hadn't worn off until Christmas.

Ever since his arrival on the Rocking C, ever since he'd caught the first familiar whiff of alfalfa and spotted the cattle grazing in the pasture, he'd found himself thinking in terms of the cowboy vernacular he'd favored as a boy. He just hoped he wouldn't have to stay here so long that he returned to Beverly Hills talking in a slow Texas drawl. Wouldn't his partners in the firm give him grief about that.

He reached for his sweet tea and took a couple of chugs. He'd forgotten how thirst-quenching an ice-cold glass could be—when it was made just right.

Next he took a warm biscuit from the cloth-covered basket, split it open and smothered it with butter. He hadn't had a home-cooked meal like this since... Well, not since his last visit with his aunt and uncle. Nellie had been an amazing cook, too. That's one of the many things Blake missed about her.

Sometimes at a restaurant, although it wasn't often, he'd spot chicken fried steak on the menu and order it for old times' sake. But he'd never tasted anything that could compare with the way his aunt used to make it.

He wondered if the Rocking C cook had a special recipe of her own. He hoped so, but hers might not be able to compete, either.

As he continued to eat his fill, he listened to the lunchtime conversation. Whether the retired cowboys were discussing the weather, the cost of cattle or the best stock-car drivers of all time, they were an entertaining lot.

Still, he was more interested in the pretty RN seated across from him. In fact, he was so downright intrigued by her and the thoughts that had kept her quiet for most of the meal that, whenever he suspected he could get away with it, he would steal a glance her way.

Sometime this morning, while he'd been napping at Sam's place, she'd twisted her long curls into a topknot. He would have preferred to see her hair hanging loose, though. But he did note her delicate neck, as well as a dainty pair of silver hooped earrings that indicated she had a great sense of style.

Not that she or her appearance really mattered. He wasn't going to allow himself to be distracted or to let his focus drift away from the task he'd set out to do.

He'd yet to run across the woman who was chasing after his uncle. All he knew was that her name was Joy. Was she the woman who'd made this amazing meal? It was possible, he supposed. After all, there was that old proverb that said the way to a man's heart was through his stomach. Maybe he'd ask the cook what her name was—that is, if she ever had a free minute. The woman buzzed through the dining room every once in a while, checking on the oldsters, then she would hurry back to the kitchen.

Blake cut into a tender piece of meat, speared it with his fork and popped it into his mouth. Damn, it was good.

"Hey, Shannon," Rex said, drawing the nurse from her musing. "Doc's coming to play poker with us again this evening. Are you gonna give us a chance to win back what we lost to you last week?"

Blake nearly choked. Had he heard that right? Was the head nurse gambling with the elderly cowboys under her care?

"I'm looking forward to it," Shannon said.

Blake lifted his napkin and blotted his mouth. That had to be a breach of ethics.

Rex jabbed his elbow against Blake's arm again. "You want to join us, kid? It's a fifty-dollar buy-in."

Under the circumstances, considering Shannon was playing with men on fixed incomes, those were pretty hefty stakes.

"I'd rather watch," Blake said. "What time does the game start?"

"Around half past five. Right after supper." Rex pushed his plate aside with a trembling hand. "Some of us can't keep the late hours like we used to."

Blake didn't doubt that. The men probably weren't as sharp as they used to be, either. Surely Shannon had that figured out and was using it to her advantage. And if the Rocking C was actually in financial trouble, there could be other underhanded things going on around here.

Damn, he was glad he'd come to Texas to see this mess for himself—and to rescue his uncle before the whole thing blew up in his face.

Again Blake focused his gaze on the head nurse. Why was she working at a retirement home and not at a hospital or clinic? Had she taken this job to prey on the elderly?

He was going to have to keep a close eye on her, although he was tempted to keep an eye on her for other reasons, too. Even dressed in scrubs, she was too pretty for words.

But then Melissa, his former fiancée, had been an attractive woman, too. After uncovering her real motive for wanting to marry him, he'd learned a hard but valuable lesson—to guard his heart and never take a woman at face value again.

Even if her face was as pretty as Shannon Cramer's.

\* \* \*

The ranch cook, who Rex and the other men had referred to as "Miz Hopkins," had no more than cleared the dinner plates and serving bowls from the table, when Doc Nelson, a spry older man with a potbelly and a Santa Claus twinkle in his eye, arrived with a deck of cards and a case of poker chips.

Shannon, who was still wearing her scrubs, returned carrying her purse. Blake was glad to know he'd soon catch her in the act of taking advantage of the men who were her patients, yet at the same time, he couldn't help his disappointment. He didn't like the idea of the attractive nurse turning out to be a thief. Or the suspicion that "Doc" might be in on the ruse.

After Rex placed two dimes and a nickel on the table, and the doctor tossed out two quarters, Shannon pulled out a dollar bill from her wallet.

"I'll need change," she said.

Blake scrunched his brow. "I thought it was a fifty-dollar buy-in."

“That’s what we call it,” the doctor said. “There’s something about playing for coins that just doesn’t seem right to us.”

“And neither does playing Bingo,” Rex chimed in. “When Shannon first got here and suggested it, I said, ‘Hell, no. I’m not playing that girly game.’”

Doc Nelson chuckled. “So I convinced Shannon to not only let them play poker, but to let them wager something more valuable than matchsticks, even if it was just coins.”

“Let me get this straight.” Blake crossed his arms as he addressed each of the men and the woman seated at the table. “A chip represents a dollar, but it only costs a penny?”

“That’s right,” Doc Nelson said. “You’ll need fifty cents to play. So are you in or out?”

Under the circumstances, since there was no longer a need for Blake to sit back and witness an infraction, he reached into his front pocket for some change. “Sure, why not?”

As the doctor shuffled the deck, Shannon took the seat next to him and asked, “Did you get a chance to look at Nate’s hand, Doc?”

“Yep, I sure did. You were right, it needed a couple of stitches, so I took care of that and then bandaged him up again. But I’d like you to keep an eye on it. Even with that shot of penicillin, I’m concerned about infection. Especially because he’s not likely to complain about pain or swelling.”

Shannon cast a frown on the men at the table. “That’s because he doesn’t want these guys to call him a ‘snot-nosed kid who can’t take a little discomfort.’”

“Oh, pshaw.” Rex slowly shook his gray head. “I only said that to toughen him up. The first week he got here, he was moping around like someone stole his candy. Besides, as far as I’m concerned, those youngsters Sam hired are just a few years out of a diaper.”

“And they’re all pretty soft,” a wiry man named Chuck added. “The Good Lord sure don’t make cowboys like He used to. That’s for sure.”

Blake shot a glance at Shannon and watched her smile. But why wouldn’t she? These good ol’ boys were pretty comical.

Nearly two hours later, they called it a night. And this time Rex was the winner.

“Okay,” Shannon said. “I’d better go home and get some sleep. I’ll see y’all in the morning.”

Blake decided to see her out. After all, he was going back to Sam’s place anyway. Still, even though he was downplaying his reason for that decision, he had to admit there was more to him wanting to go outside with Shannon than just being polite.

The woman might have lost a quarter or more tonight, but she certainly knew how to play poker.

As Shannon reached under the table for her purse, Blake got to his feet. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

His suggestion must have taken her aback because her lips parted, and she hesitated a moment. Then she smiled and said, “All right. I just need to tell the night nurse I’m leaving.”

“I’ll wait for you by the front door.”

She tilted her head slightly, as if suspicious of his offer—or maybe surprised by his manners. Who knew what she was really thinking?

And there lay the problem. Blake shouldn’t have given a damn, but he felt compelled to learn more about her. Not only about what she was thinking, but what made her tick. Something wasn’t right on the Rocking Chair Ranch, and he had a feeling the head nurse held the key.

\* \* \*

After briefing Darlene about a change in one resident’s bedtime medication, Shannon met Blake in the living room.

His offer to walk her to her car had taken her by complete surprise. Maybe he was just being a gentleman, but she had a feeling he had something on his mind. If so, she’d find out soon enough.

He opened the front door for her, and she stepped out onto the wraparound porch, where a row of empty rockers were lined against the wall and flanked by pots of red and pink geraniums. As he

joined her, she took a moment to savor the sights and sounds of the evening. The moon was only a sliver tonight, yet the stars twinkled brightly in the sky. In the distance, a horse whinnied.

Not wanting him to think she was dawdling or trying to eke out more time with him, she started toward her car, her pace slow until he caught up with her.

“So where did you learn to play poker?” he asked.

“My dad taught me. I used to watch him and his buddies play on Saturday nights, and sometimes, when they needed a fifth, they’d ask me to join them.”

“Your mom let you do that?”

Shannon wasn’t sure how much of her past she wanted to share with him. But she adored Sam and couldn’t see any reason to be leery of his nephew. “My mom died when I was six.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” She gave a little shrug. “Anyway, my dad taught me a lot of things, poker being only one of them.”

They continued toward her car, the soles of their shoes crunching along the dirt walkway.

“Your uncle reminds me a lot of my father,” she added.

“Oh, yeah? Is your dad a rancher?”

“Actually, our ranch belonged to my mother’s family, so she was the expert on that sort of thing. My dad was a long-haul trucker. But when she passed away, he quit his job so he could stay home with me. And he did his best to work our small spread.”

“I really don’t remember my dad,” Blake said. “He died right before I started school.”

Sam had told Shannon that Blake had lost his father in a skiing accident, but she hadn’t realized how young he’d been when it happened.

“That’s too bad,” she said.

Now it was Blake’s turn to give a slight shrug. “My mom and I moved in with her mother in California. But she kept in touch with Sam and Nellie, who practically raised my dad. And when I got a little older, she let me spend summers in Texas with them.”

“Sam’s a great guy,” she said. “Just like my dad.”

“It sounds like you and your dad are close.”

They certainly had been. “Together, we made a good team. We both tackled the household chores, and each week, after cutting out coupons and planning the meals, we went grocery shopping. And on Saturdays we worked in the yard.”

Since her dad was always working on or refurbishing a vehicle in the garage, he’d taught Shannon how to change the oil on the pickup, not to mention spark plugs, fuel pumps and flat tires.

Some men, like Mike Cavanaugh, a city boy she’d dated in college, found her “unconventional hobbies” to be unsettling—maybe even demeaning. But she was a country girl at heart, one with varied interests and diverse abilities. And she wasn’t going to pretend to be someone else. At least, not again.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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