



CHRISTMAS ON THE
SILVER HORN RANCH

Stella Bagwell

 *Cherish*[™]

Stella Bagwell
Christmas On The
Silver Horn Ranch

Серия «Men of the West», книга 33

Серия «Mills & Boon Cherish»

Аннотация

MERRY CHRISTMAS, COWBOY! You can put him in a cast, but you can't keep Bowie Calhoun down. Even with a broken ankle, the flirty cowboy has no intention of spending Christmas lying in bed – unless he has company. Widowed nurse Ava Archer isn't biting. She'd never consider falling for a patient, especially not someone like Bowie, who battles fires for a living and takes risks just for fun. But the longer Ava stays on at the Silver Horn Ranch, the harder it is to fight Bowie's magnetism. 'Tis the season to be tempted. Is Ava ready to take a risk of her own...on love?

Содержание

“I like you, Ava Archer.”	5
Christmas on the Silver Horn Ranch	7
MILLS & BOON	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	51

“I like you, Ava Archer.”

Heat suddenly rushed to her face, and in an effort to hide it, she turned and grabbed up her tote.

“Don’t worry about it, Bowie. It’s just a nurse thing. You’ll get over it.”

He chuckled again. “I wouldn’t bet on that either.”

Not daring to glance his way, she walked to the door. “Remember to keep your ankle elevated as much as possible. And make sure you don’t get your bandages wet.”

“I already know all that stuff. Tell me something I don’t know.”

She glanced over her shoulder to see he was looking at her, and as her gaze slipped over his fresh, rugged face, she realized she felt more alive than she had in years.

A faint smile tugged at her lips even though she was trying to stop it. “I like you, too, Bowie Calhoun.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?”

“You’ll see me every day until my job here is finished.” A corner of his mouth lifted in a sexy grin. “Then I’ll have to make sure your job lasts a long, long time.”

And she was going to have to make sure to keep this man at a safe distance, she thought. Otherwise, she was going to forget she was a nurse and remember she was a woman.

Men of the West:

Whether ranchers or lawmen, these heartbreakers can ride, shoot—and drive a woman crazy ...

Christmas on the Silver Horn Ranch

Stella Bagwell



MILLS
BOON®

www.millsandboon.co.uk

After writing more than eighty books for Mills & Boon, **STELLA BAGWELL** still finds it exciting to create new stories and bring her characters to life. She loves all things Western and has been married to her own real cowboy for forty-four years. Living on the south Texas coast, she also enjoys being outdoors and helping her husband care for the horses, cats and dog that call their small ranch home. The couple has one son, who teaches high school mathematics and is also an athletic director. Stella loves hearing from readers. They can contact her at www.stellabagwell@gmail.com.

MILLS & BOON

Before you start reading, why not sign up?

Thank you for downloading this Mills & Boon book. If you want to hear about exclusive discounts, special offers and competitions, sign up to our email newsletter today!

[SIGN ME UP!](#)

Or simply visit

signup.millsandboon.co.uk

Mills & Boon emails are completely free to receive and you can unsubscribe at any time via the link in any email we send you.

To my dear friend Marie Ferrarella,
who inspires me to keep writing and smiling.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Title Page](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

“No, Dad. She’s not here yet and when she does show her face, I’m going to send her packing. I’m sick and tired of being poked and prodded by nurses,” Bowie Calhoun barked into the cell phone. “Now that I’m home and away from that damned hospital, I don’t want another nurse putting her grubby hands on me!”

“Simmer down, Bowie. Someone has to care for your injuries. Those burns—”

Since his father, Orin, was calling from the horse barn down at the ranch yard, Bowie said the first thing that entered his mind. “Then send Doc Pheeters up here to the house. If he’s good enough to deal with Silver Horn horses, he’s good enough for me.”

Before his father could say more, Bowie ended the call and tossed the cell phone onto a small table next to his armchair. He was being a jerk, but he couldn’t help it. Having second-degree

burns on his back and arms was bad enough to endure, but he was also dealing with a broken ankle, which was now held together with screws and encased in a bulky cast.

After being hospitalized for three weeks, getting to come home yesterday had been a great improvement. Still, the idea of being confined to the ranch house for the next few weeks was practically unbearable. Especially to a twenty-six-year-old man loaded with energy. He wanted to get back on the fire line with his buddies. He wanted excitement and fun. He hardly wanted to sit around and watch a herd of cows chew on clumps of buffalo grass.

He bent forward to rearrange his casted foot to a different position on a footstool when a female voice sounded directly behind him.

“Excuse me, but your nurse with the grubby hands has arrived.”

Bowie jerked his head around to see a woman in a white nurse’s uniform that hugged her tall, curvy figure. He was stunned by the sight. In spite of the frown on her lovely features, Bowie was instantly convinced she was the sexiest woman he’d ever laid eyes on.

Awkward silence filled the room as he searched for the words to help him climb out of the hole he’d dug. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were there.”

“Obviously.”

Bowie had never felt lost in female company. Until this

moment. This woman was staring at him as if she wanted to choke him, and he could hardly blame her.

“Well, now that you’re here, you might as well shut the door and come on in,” he said lamely.

The nurse remained where she stood. “Why should I do that? The vet can tend to you.”

Reaching for a crutch propped against the side of the chair, Bowie quickly maneuvered himself to his feet and crossed the parquet floor until he was standing in front of her.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” he said. “You caught me venting a bit of frustration. It wasn’t anything personal toward you.”

One black brow arched with skepticism and Bowie couldn’t keep his gaze from gliding over her dark brown hair, pale porcelain skin, high cheekbones and full cherry-colored lips. Yet it was her eyes that garnered most of his attention. The color of a clear spring sky, they were almond shaped and framed by incredibly long lashes. Behind the cool blue depths, he could see a wealth of intelligence and maturity—two traits he greatly admired in a woman.

“Not personal? I’m the nurse your father hired, and you clearly stated you don’t want me touching you.”

Hell’s bells, why had she chosen that unfortunate moment to walk through the door, Bowie wondered crossly. And when was he going to learn to keep a rein on his temper? Now he was going to have to do some fast talking or this angel in white was going

to walk out and never come back.

“Oh, but I do want you touching me,” he blurted, then seeing the line of disapproval on her lips, quickly explained, “I mean, uh, I can hardly take care of myself. And I’m sure you’re an excellent nurse—with great hands.”

Her nostrils flared and for a moment Bowie thought she was going to reach out and slap him.

“I thought the word was *grubby*, Mr. Calhoun,” she said stiffly.

He shot her a helpless grin. “All right, you’ve made your point. I’ll admit it. I’m a rascal. Please forgive me, Ms.—?”

“Ava Archer.”

Bowie was relieved to see her expression gradually begin to soften. Maybe there was a glimmer of hope that he hadn’t ruined everything with this woman.

He extended his hand to hers. “Nice to meet you, Ava Archer. I’m Bowie Calhoun. Guess you already know that, though,” he added sheepishly.

She hesitated a moment before finally placing her hand in his. It felt soft and warm and surprisingly strong. Reluctant to end the contact, Bowie held on.

She said, “Yes, it’s clear that you’re the patient.”

“Well, I’d be pleased if you’d call me Bowie. *Patient* makes me sound like I’m an old man, and I’m far from that.”

“I can certainly see that, too. Bowie.” She cleared her throat and disengaged her hand from his. “Well, if I’m going to be your nurse, then I think we’d better set some ground rules right off.”

That didn't sound to Bowie's liking, but he was hardly in a position to protest. Right now he'd be willing to stand on his head if it would keep this sexy nurse around for a few more minutes.

"You're the nurse. I promise to follow your orders."

"Really?"

"Utterly."

She shot him a dubious look before stepping around him. "If that's the case, Bowie, then take a seat and I'll have a look at you."

He pivoted on the one crutch to see she was opening the drapes on the double windows near his bed. Bright sunlight streamed through the windowpanes. Beyond the glass, a ridge of mountains formed a backdrop to a bustling ranch yard full of cowboys, horses and work vehicles.

"In the chair or on the bed?" he asked.

"The bed."

While he made his way to the king-size bed, she crossed the room and picked up a large tote bag she'd left sitting on the floor by the door.

He asked, "Do you know about my injuries?"

She walked over to the bed and made room on the nightstand for the tote. "I'm aware that you have serious burns and a broken ankle. Dr. Pearson is treating your burns. I have his instructions for your home care. Dr. Stillwell is dealing with your broken ankle, and I've been given his instructions, also. But I'm not aware of the circumstances of how you were injured, if that's your question."

With her standing only a step away from him, the faint scent of her drifted to his nostrils. The fragrance reminded him of the tiny flowers his mother used to grow in the backyard.

“I work on a hotshot crew for the Bureau of Land Management. Out of the field office in Carson City,” he said. “We were sent to the Texas Panhandle to help with a canyon fire. High winds brought a burning tree down on me.”

She paused in pulling items from the bag to glance over her shoulder at him. “You’re lucky to be alive.”

“Yeah. Real lucky.”

Twisting around, she regarded him for long moments. “Are you being sarcastic?”

Surprised by her question, he said, “Why, no. I thank God every day that he saw fit to save me from that burning hell. Why do you ask?”

She folded her arms across her breast, but that was hardly enough cover to hide her ample curves from Bowie’s eyes. The fitted line of her dress emphasized a waist that would be no larger than the span of his two hands, while her hips flared out in the most enticing way. She was definitely more woman than he’d ever held in his arms. And he couldn’t believe she’d walked right into his bedroom and into his life.

“Because I see patients all the time who feel sorry for themselves. That attitude isn’t conducive to healing.”

He grinned at her. “Believe me, Ava, I’m not a man who goes around carrying a bunch of self-pity. That’s not to say I enjoy

trying to walk with a crutch.”

Her gaze swept over him and for the first time in a long time Bowie felt a tinge of color burn his cheeks. He'd never been a vain man. The time he spent in front of the mirror was no longer than it took to shave off his rusty beard. When women looked at him as though they appreciated his looks, he hardly noticed. But having Nurse Ava eyeing him up and down was a totally different matter.

“No,” she said. “I don't expect you do.”

“I'd rather be fighting fires.”

Turning back to the nightstand, she laid a stack of packaged bandages next to a pair of scissors. “You'll be back on the fire line soon enough. First we have to get you well.”

Last evening Bowie had been wondering how he was going to tolerate the next few weeks of being confined to the ranch while waiting for his injuries to heal. When his father had told him he'd hired a nurse, Bowie hadn't been bashful about expressing his views on the subject. The last thing he needed or wanted was some battle-ax coming into his bedroom and ordering him to take off his clothes. But this vision standing by the head of his bed had definitely made the coming days look a whole lot brighter.

“You know, I just spent three weeks in the hospital, and I only saw one other nurse dressed like you. And she was probably forty years old.”

“So that makes her five years older than me,” she replied in a

no-nonsense way. “Is anything wrong with that?”

Bowie was stunned. He never would’ve guessed her to be a day past twenty-eight. Not that it mattered. She was gorgeous. And he hoped she was single.

He tilted his head in an effort to get a glimpse of her left hand. From what he could see, there was no ring of any sort on her finger.

“Not at all. I just meant that most nurses wear those colored things that look like pajamas.”

“They’re called scrubs. And they’re comfortable and efficient. I just happen to wear a dress because...I guess it suits me.”

“Well, you look a damned sight nicer.”

She stepped in front of him and reached for the top button on his shirt. The beat of Bowie’s heart shifted into overdrive.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Bowie. I’m not here for your visual pleasure or your amusement. I’m here to help you get well. That’s all.”

“Should I close my eyes?” he asked with a grin. “Or would you like to put a blindfold on me?”

* * *

Ava would like to do more than that to this young lothario. She’d like to pick up her bag and give him a swift and final goodbye before she walked out of his room and away from this three-story ranch house. But she was a professional with a job to perform. She couldn’t allow any patient to get under her skin. No matter how sexy or charming.

Before she'd arrived on the sprawling Silver Horn Ranch this morning, she'd been aware that she would be treating the youngest of the Calhoun brothers. The only one of them who remained single. Other than the information she'd been given on his medical condition, all she knew were snippets of gossip she'd heard through the hospital grapevine. A few of the younger nurses had described Bowie Calhoun as "dreamy" and "hunky" and "a stud." Ava had never been one to pay much heed to gossip. Most of it was exaggerated hearsay, anyway. But perhaps this was one time she should have listened more closely. At least then she would've been prepared for the sight of her patient.

Bowie Calhoun was six feet of honed muscle dressed in ragged blue jeans and a gray chambray shirt. Square jaw, thin chiseled lips and gold-green eyes shaded by a pair of heavy brows were all framed by exceptionally thick tawny-brown hair that reminded Ava of a shaggy lion. The wayward waves fell recklessly over one eye and down the back of his neck. He was one dangerous-looking male, and everything inside Ava was screaming at her to run until there was a safe distance between them. Like thirty or forty miles.

Steeling herself, she stepped closer and reached for the button in the middle of his shirt. The male scent of his skin and hair drifted to her nostrils and for one crazy moment she thought her hands were actually trembling. But she immediately drew in a deep breath and gathered her senses. She didn't know what was happening to her, but she was determined to put a quick stop to

the crazy reaction she was having to this man.

After working all the buttons free, she pushed the shirt off his shoulders and down his arms, all the while carefully keeping her eyes averted from his muscled chest and arms.

“Right now I want you to lie on your stomach and let me take a look at your back,” she said, trying to instill as much firmness in her voice as she could. “I assume your bandages were changed yesterday?”

He stretched out on the nearest side of the bed and turned his head so that it was facing in her direction. “They were changed. Right after my sponge bath. Are you going to give me one of those?”

The sly grin on his face caused her to groan silently. “No. You’ll have to get someone else to help you with that. But I will clean your burns and apply new bandages.”

“Aw, shucks. I thought I was going to be in for a treat this morning.”

A treat? She wanted to remind him that she’d just heard him say he was sick and tired of nurses. Why would he consider her ministrations a treat? Surely a young hunk like him didn’t find a woman nine years older than him attractive.

Wrong, Ava. Bowie is the type who’d flirt with a ninety-year-old grandmother if it would be to his advantage.

Shoving away the mocking voice in her head, she said, “Maybe I can find a lollipop in my tote. All kids deserve a treat after they receive medical attention.”

“Hmm. And she has a sense of humor, too. Where have you been all my life?”

During the thirteen years Ava had worked as a nurse, she'd dealt with plenty of flirtatious patients. Leering men with glib tongues came with the job. Mostly, she didn't give their behavior a second thought. But something about Bowie Calhoun was different. Even though she was trying to ignore him, he was getting to her in a way she would've never expected.

“I live in Carson City,” she said as casually as she could. “What about you? Is this where you normally live? Or are you here because you need your family's help while you recuperate?”

“My job on the hotshot crew is likely to take me anywhere across the West. Especially during the height of fire season. Otherwise, the Silver Horn is my home. My great-grandfather Calhoun first built the place more than a hundred years ago. Now it's one of the biggest ranches in western Nevada. Is this your first visit to the ranch?”

There was no bragging in his voice, just pride, and Ava liked that about him. Especially when he had plenty to brag about. And suddenly she was very curious about this young man and his place in the wealthy Calhoun family. Mainly, why would he be working at a dangerous job with a modest salary rather than doing something here on the ranch?

She said, “I've been out here a few times before. Two of those visits were when Lilly and Rafe's babies were christened. Each time the christening was followed by a celebration here at the

house.”

Her answer appeared to surprise him.

“So you’re acquainted with my brother and sister-in-law?”

“I’ve only met Rafe a few times. But I’ve been friends with Lilly for several years. We worked together when she was still at Tahoe General.”

“I see. Did she pick you out for this job?”

“No. Chet Anderson picked me for the job.”

“Who’s he?”

“Director of nurses at Tahoe General. I’m told he’s friends with your father.”

“Oh. Well, I should’ve known. Dad is determined to see that I get the best of care. Are you the best, Ava Archer?”

Now that he was lying prone on the bed, she could see a large bandage on his left shoulder blade, two more protected areas on his left arm and another huge one on the right side of his back just below his rib cage. From her experience with treating burns, she knew that he’d experienced some serious pain.

“You’d have to ask my superiors that question,” she replied. “But don’t worry, I’ll do my best to make this as gentle as possible. Have you been taking your meds?”

“The antibiotics and the vitamins. Not the ones for pain. I prefer to have all my senses about me.”

“There’s no need for you to try to be a hero.” She positioned his arm so that the back was exposed, then reached for the scissors. As she began to cut away the bandages, she tried not to

notice the massive width of his shoulders or the bulging muscles in his arms. No doubt the man was as strong as a bull.

What does that have to do with you changing a patient's bandages, Ava? You're supposed to be focused on Bowie's injuries. Not his masculine charms.

The return of the annoying voice in her head caused Ava to press her lips to a thin line. She didn't need to be reminded that her thoughts were straying. She'd lost the reins on most of them the first moment she'd laid eyes on him.

Determined to get back to the task at hand, Ava carefully peeled back the special bandage protecting the burn. The mottled flesh was still a long way from regrowing a normal layer of skin. But mercifully there were no signs of infection.

He said, "I've never had ambitions of being a hero."

The tone of his voice was a mixture of rough huskiness and teasing lilt. Each time he spoke the sound sent a tiny wave of pleasure through her.

"What sort of ambitions do you have, Bowie?"

"Excitement. Fun. Living life to the fullest."

His answer was exactly what she'd expected. Even in his battered condition, he possessed a reckless zest for living. And that disappointed her greatly. Why, she didn't know. This young man was just a patient she would be treating for a few weeks and would never see again once the job was finished. What his future held meant nothing to her.

"Sounds like a lofty goal," she finally replied.

He chuckled and Ava decided the sound was even more pleasant than his speaking voice. His laugh reminded her of a time in her life when the whole world seemed bright and beautiful, and life was full of incredible joy.

“I thought so, too,” he said. Then, lifting his cheek off the mattress, he attempted to look at her from the corner of his eye. “What sort of ambitions do you have, Ava? Marrying some good-looking guy? Or do you already have a husband?”

None of that was his business. But since she was treating him in such an intimate setting, it would seem ridiculous not to tell him a little about herself. After all, what would it hurt?

“I’m not married. I’m a widow.”

Heaven help her, why had she added that? Ava didn’t go around announcing she’d been widowed, especially to people she’d just met. It was a fact she’d rather not talk about. But something had suddenly pushed the words from her mouth, as though it was important for this man to understand who and what she was.

“A widow,” he repeated thoughtfully. “I’m sorry. Real sorry.”

She’d not expected to hear such sincerity in his voice, and the idea that he might genuinely care struck a deep chord in her.

“Thank you. I lost Lawrence thirteen years ago. But that... Well, it’s still hard for me, you know.”

“To be honest, I can’t say that I do know. I’ve never been married or even engaged, so I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose a spouse. Maybe Lilly has told you our father is a

widower. After our mother died, I saw him broken with grief. It wasn't anything I'd want to see again."

Her gaze left his arm to settle on the side of his face. The sober expression on his features was quite a contrast to the flirty guy of a few moments ago. Maybe the man wasn't fun and games all the time, she thought.

"Lilly did mention that Mr. Calhoun had lost his wife. But she didn't go into the circumstances," Ava told him. "How long has your mother been gone?"

"Nine years. Those stairs you climbed to get up here to my bedroom—she took a misstep and fell down them. It caused a blood clot in her head. I had just gone into the Marine Corps when the accident happened."

She stared at him. To hear his mother had died of a tragic accident was one thing, but then he'd dropped another stunner. "You were in the military?" she finally asked.

"Ever since I turned eighteen. It's been close to a year since I left and moved back here from the base in California. After that I went through training for the hotshot crew and went to work fighting wildfires."

So he'd gone from being a soldier to a firefighter. He clearly had no intentions of slowing down just yet. But why would he, she asked herself. He was still young, with no responsibilities other than himself.

"I see."

When she didn't say more, he asked, "What's wrong? You

have something against military men?”

Haunting memories suddenly crowded their way into her thoughts, forcing her to swallow before she could utter a word. “No. I don’t have anything against the military. It’s just that Lawrence was a soldier. In the army. That’s how he died—in the Middle East. He was only twenty-five.”

Once again he lifted his head from the mattress to look at her. The keen search of his green eyes was so disturbing, she quickly dragged her attention back to his arm.

“Oh. That’s rough. I was deployed to Qatar for a while, but never any countries raging with conflict. So I never saw action. Some of my buddies did, though.”

She soaked a cotton pad with peroxide and carefully dabbed at the adhesive residue on his healthy skin. “What made you get out of the service? Tired of the restrictions?”

“No matter what sort of job we have, Ava, we all live with some sort of restrictions. But as for me getting out of the Marines, eight years was enough. I began to get an itch for something new. I started wondering about other possibilities and how I could challenge myself. And my family had been pressing me to come home for a long time. Especially my dad and grandfather. By the time I finished the final year of my stint, I was ready to see Nevada again.”

Ava was exchanging too much personal information with this man, she decided. Yes, there were plenty of patients who wanted to talk about their lives and their families. And she

always listened, because talking was cathartic for a sick or injured person. But the more this man revealed about himself, the more she was drawn to him. And that was dangerous for her job and her peace of mind.

She reached for a tube of medicated cream and carefully began to spread it over the raw flesh. “Do your other brothers also live here on the Silver Horn? I know that Rafe and Lilly live here in the ranch house and Clancy and his wife have a home on the property.”

“Finn got married a few months ago and lives in Northern California now. He and his wife raise horses. And Evan married a woman with a ranch several miles southeast of Carson City. My sister, Sassy, is a ranch woman, too. She and her husband, Jett, have their own ranch northeast of Carson City. Although this past month she’s had to slow down much of her ranch work. She gave birth to a baby son about three weeks ago. Little Mason has an older brother and sister, so she has her hands full.”

“Your sister must be quite a woman if she helps run a ranch and takes care of three small children, too,” Ava said thoughtfully.

“Even with two good feet, I wouldn’t be able to keep up with Sassy.”

“So all the Calhouns are involved with ranching in some form or fashion. Why aren’t you?”

He didn’t answer immediately, then finally he said, “Never thought I was that much of a cowboy, I guess.”

Ava figured there was much more to his reasoning than that, but she was hardly going to press the issue. She'd already asked him far too much about himself. The last thing she needed was for him to think she was interested in him as a man. Because she wasn't. She cared about his health, but nothing more. She wasn't sure she could ever really care about another man. Not after losing Lawrence.

She removed a second bandage from his arm and carefully medicated the area before covering the two wounds with clean dressings. He remained quiet until she started to work on his shoulder blade.

"Your hands are very gentle. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"I don't remember."

"You're not on a witness stand," he reasoned. "You can answer truthfully without incriminating yourself."

That teasing lilt was back in his voice and Ava decided he must be Irish to the core. "You're not supposed to be asking me such things. And I'm not supposed to be answering."

He chuckled. "Who's going to know what we talk about? I promise my room isn't bugged with a microphone or recorder."

"Look, I don't date—if that's what you're getting at. And frankly, I don't know why any of that would interest you."

"Why wouldn't it interest me?"

Pausing, she studied the back of his head. He had the most beautiful hair. Thick and wavy, the tawny color gleamed like a polished penny. "I'm sure you have a busy life. With plenty of

girls to keep you occupied. I'm boring stuff."

"Hmm. You don't look boring to me."

Each time she thought she could shut him up, he came back with something she wasn't expecting. Perhaps if she remained quiet, he'd do the same. But she seriously doubted that would work. He seemed to be enjoying himself too much.

"Are you one of those guys who are attracted to older women?"

"Never thought about it before. You're the first. I mean, the first older woman I've found attractive."

Dear heaven, she was thirty-five. That was hardly ancient. But compared to him she felt like it. He was still very young, with so much in his life to look forward to.

You have plenty to look forward to, also, Ava. You just don't want to see it. You'd rather stare into the past and wonder how things would've been if Lawrence had lived.

There it was again. That little spark in her that refused to surrender to reality. If she ever let herself be swayed by it, she'd be in big trouble, Ava thought.

"Thank you for the compliment," she told him. "If that's what it was meant to be. But my life consists of working, eating and sleeping."

"No playing mixed in with all that?"

She kept her gaze fixed firmly on the tortured flesh of his shoulder. Apparently this part of his body had taken the major brunt of the flaming tree. Evidence of contusions spread away

from the burned area. The yellow and purple shades told Ava he was healing, but she couldn't help thinking how fortunate he was to be alive. He'd said he was thankful he'd been rescued, yet she wondered if he was actually aware of the extreme danger his life had been in.

"I'm not the playful type," she answered.

Before she could guess his intention, he lifted his head and rolled onto his good shoulder so that he was looking straight at her. "Then we need to do something about that."

There was no mistaking the wicked little grin on his face, and she promptly placed a hand at the back of his head and pushed him back down to the mattress.

"You're in no condition to be doing anything," she said flatly. "Except following doctor's orders."

His chuckle was muffled by the bedcover and for some reason the sound made her wonder what it would be like to be between the sheets with this man and have nothing between them but hot skin. How would it feel to surrender to all that masculine strength and passion?

The fact that she was even imagining such things was enough to jangle her senses. Lawrence was the only man she'd ever made love to, and since she'd lost him Ava had balked at the notion of another man touching her in an intimate way. So why was this man breaking into her safe little world? Why was he making her breath catch and her heart pound? It was crazy and scary and she had to put a quick end to it.

“I won’t be in this condition too much longer,” he reminded her.

His taunting voice broke into her runaway thoughts, and she resisted the urge to rip a piece of adhesive tape from his healthy skin. “That’s right. And once you’re healed, you won’t ever see me again.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that.”

The teasing tone of his voice had changed to a husky promise, and Ava inwardly shivered. There were all kinds of retorts and reprimands she could shoot back at him. But it was becoming clear that if she jumped into a verbal sparring match with Bowie Calhoun, she’d wind up the loser.

With her lips pressed to a determined line, she silently redressed the remainder of his wounds, then turned back to the nightstand to gather her things.

“Are you finished?” he asked.

In more ways than one, Ava thought grimly. “Yes. You may sit up and put your shirt on.”

“Aren’t you going to help me with it?”

She wanted to bark a loud, clear no. But his arm and shoulder had to hurt. To punish him because of her body’s crazy responses was hardly professional. And that was the sole reason she was here at this sprawling ranch—to be this man’s nurse.

Sighing, she reached for the gray shirt lying at the foot of the bed and carefully eased it over his left arm and shoulder and then the right. When she finally pulled the fronts together in the

middle of his chest, he lifted his head and Ava found herself looking straight into his eyes. The connection caused her heart to take a wild leap.

“I’m sorry if I made you angry,” he said gently.

She dropped her gaze from his and focused on buttoning the shirt back together. “I’m not angry.”

“Good. Because I like you, Ava Archer.”

Heat suddenly rushed to her face, and in an effort to hide it, she turned and grabbed her tote.

“Don’t worry about it, Bowie. It’s just a nurse thing. You’ll get over it.”

He chuckled again. “I wouldn’t bet on that, either.”

Not daring to glance his way, she walked to the door. “Remember to keep your ankle elevated as much as possible. And make sure you don’t get your bandages wet.”

“I already know all that stuff. Tell me something I don’t know.”

She glanced over her shoulder at his fresh, rugged face and realized she felt more alive than she had in years.

A faint smile tugged at her lips even though she was trying to stop it. “I like you, too, Bowie Calhoun.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?”

“You’ll see me every day until my job here is finished.”

A corner of his mouth lifted in a sexy grin. “Then I’ll have to make sure your job lasts a long, long time.”

And she was going to have to make sure to keep this man at

a safe distance, she thought as she quickly stepped through the door and shut it firmly behind her. Otherwise, she was going to forget she was a nurse and remember she was a woman.

Chapter Two

Later that morning, Bowie hobbled his way down the stairs and into the family room at the back of the house. He was surprised to find his sister-in-law Lilly and Tessa, the Calhouns' young house servant, decorating a huge Douglas fir. Colleen, his two-year-old niece, and her eleven-month-old brother, Austin, were both underfoot as they tried to get in on the fun.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Bowie asked as he approached the group. “It looks like someone is getting ready for Santa Claus.”

The cheerful boom of his voice had both children forgetting about the tree and racing over to greet their uncle. Colleen immediately grabbed his leg and hung on, while Austin held his arms up and begged for Bowie to hold him.

Lilly called to her young daughter. “Colleen! Don’t grab Uncle Bowie like that! You’re going to knock him over!”

Bowie laughed as he looked down at the two young children. Colleen was the blond-haired, blue-eyed image of her mother, while little Austin favored the Calhouns with his strawberry-colored curls and green eyes. It still amazed Bowie that Rafe had been the first one of his brothers to have children. Rafe had always been such a playboy. But falling in love with Lilly had definitely changed his rowdy ways. Now his brother was more

than content to spend his free time with his wife and babies. Bowie adored women, and he liked children, too, but he couldn't imagine making them the center of his life.

"If little Colleen can knock me over, then I'm ready for the nursing home." Using his good arm, he scooped up Austin and gathered the boy to the right side of his chest. The effort caused him a bit of discomfort, but he hid it carefully. Showing any sign of weakness wasn't his style. Which made his injuries that much harder to bear.

He said, "Come on, kids, let's go have a look at this Christmas tree."

Lilly shook her head at Bowie. "You shouldn't be carrying Austin. In fact, you shouldn't have come down the stairs without me or Tessa helping you," she scolded. "Why didn't you call for one of us? And you're only using one crutch!"

"I was careful. And two crutches are cumbersome. One works better," he told her. "So what's with the tree? Isn't it early to be decorating for Christmas?"

She shot him a playful frown. "This isn't a marine barracks, Bowie. And it's the second of December. It's time to start decorating. Haven't you looked outside? Dad has some of the hands putting up the lights on the house and in the yard."

This would be Bowie's first Christmas since his return home from the Marines. During the years of his military service, he'd managed to get furlough and spend a few holidays here at the ranch, but that wasn't the same as living here. He'd almost

forgotten all the hoopla that took place on the ranch prior to Christmas. The kitchen was always full of rich food and every room was decorated in some form or fashion. Even the barns were strung with lights and the horse stalls adorned with wreaths and bows.

“I haven’t noticed,” Bowie told her. “The nurse was here to change my bandages. I’m still trying to recover from her visit.”

Surprised by his news, Lilly said, “Oh, I wasn’t aware Ava was starting the job today. I would’ve come up and said hi to her. Uh, why are you still trying to recover? Was it that painful?”

“It wasn’t painful at all. I was only teasing.” But Ava’s visit had been eye-opening, Bowie could have told his sister-in-law. He still couldn’t shake her image from his mind, much less the sound of her voice or the tender touch of her hands. He’d been around plenty of women in his life, but none of them came close to affecting him the way she had. “She got me all fixed up. No problem.”

“Great. When Dad said Chet was sending Ava out to nurse you, I knew she’d be perfect.”

“She told me you two are friends,” Bowie commented.

Lilly nodded. “We’ve been friends and coworkers for several years. Although now that I work at the clinic, I don’t get to see her very often.”

There were lots of things Bowie would have liked to ask Lilly about her friend, but he wasn’t going to. He didn’t much care for snooping into a person’s private life. He preferred to ask

the person face-to-face. And he'd already found out much more about the nurse during her short visit than he'd expected to. The fact that she was a widow, and had remained single for all these years, was still nagging at him.

"Well, well, little brother has come down to join the land of the living."

Rafe's voice had Bowie glancing over his shoulder to see his older brother walking into the room. He was dressed in batwing chaps and a sheepskin-lined coat. A soiled felt Stetson was pulled low on his forehead, while spurs jangled on his boot heels. Rafe wasn't just the image of a cowboy, Bowie thought, he was a cowboy inside and out. As foreman of the Silver Horn, his brother had the enormous job of keeping a crew of men working and a few thousand head of cattle healthy and producing.

"I'm already pretty damned bored with that bedroom," Bowie told him.

"The last time I looked, you had a TV, a stack of movies, books, a stereo and a laptop in your room. That isn't enough toys to keep you occupied?" Rafe teased.

"You're making me sound spoiled, when all I want is a little human company. By the way, what are you doing in the house at this hour?"

"Greta promised to make cookies for the fence crew. They're working out on Antelope Range, replacing barbed wire on some of the cross fencing. And since it's starting to snow, I thought I'd drive out and give the boys an early treat of hot coffee and

cookies. Want to come along?”

“To Antelope Range? If I remember right, that’s several miles out there,” Bowie said.

Rafe chuckled. “Well, if you need to stay where you’ll be warm and cozy, then go ahead.”

“Rafe!” Lilly protested. “Bowie hasn’t been out of the hospital even two days yet. He needs to recuperate before you start dragging him all over creation.”

Just hearing Rafe accuse him of being soft was enough to make Bowie set little Austin on the floor and turn toward his brother. “I haven’t lost anything out on Antelope Range, but I’ll go with you. Otherwise, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“Bowie, as a nurse I’m advising you not to leave the house,” Lilly insisted.

Rafe cast his wife a subtle look. One that Bowie didn’t understand, but Lilly seemed to catch instantly.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Rafe said. “I won’t let him out of the truck. He’s only going along for the ride.”

Lilly gave her husband a dismissive wave before she turned her attention back to the tree decorations. “I don’t like the idea at all. But I can’t fight two men at once. And maybe a bit of fresh air will do him good,” she reluctantly added.

“Tessa, would you go upstairs and get one of Bowie’s old coats and a hat?” Rafe asked the maid. “We’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be right down with them, Rafe,” she replied.

Tessa left to fetch the garments, and Rafe and Bowie started

out of the room. As they made their way down a hallway, Rafe slowed his stride to match Bowie's hindered pace.

"Look, Rafe, I know you're trying to give me a break, and I appreciate it," Bowie said. "But there's no need for you to waste time on me. When cabin fever starts driving me crazy, I'll go outside and walk around."

"Shut up. This isn't a pity invitation. And if I know you, cabin fever is already driving you crazy. On the way out to Antelope Range, you're going to help me check over a herd of heifers. I want to see if you still have the eye."

"What sort of eye?" Bowie asked as they neared the kitchen. Rafe chuckled. "A rancher's eye. What else?"

Yeah, what else? Bowie thought glumly. But he'd never been a rancher. Not like his brothers. Oh, he knew the workings of a cow and he could ride a horse, but he'd never had the natural instinct that Rafe or Finn had, or his two oldest brothers, Clancy and Evan. Yet that hadn't stopped the members of his family from trying to draw him into the business. On one hand, the idea that they wanted him living and working close to them was endearing. But there was another part of Bowie that none of his brothers or dad or grandfather understood—he needed to be free of constraints. Even those that involved his family. He wanted to do his own thing. Be his own man. Not follow in his family's footsteps.

"Like I said, you're wasting your time," Bowie replied. "I'll be the judge of that."

In the kitchen Greta, a plump woman in her early sixties, packed the bagged cookies and a large thermos of coffee into a cardboard box and handed it all to Rafe.

“That should keep everything from rolling around on the floorboard of the truck,” the cook told him. She cast a skeptical glance at Bowie. “You taking this whippersnapper with you?”

“I thought I could put up with him for a little while,” Rafe told Greta.

“Well, don’t shake up little Bowie too much. He’s in a weakened condition.”

Little Bowie. He was six feet tall and weighed a solid one hundred and ninety pounds. He could hardly be described as *little*. But Greta had been cooking for the family since before Bowie was born. To her, he would always be the last son born to Orin and Claudia.

Bowie let out a good-natured groan. “For pity’s sake, I’m not a helpless invalid!”

Rafe grinned at his brother. “Don’t worry about him, Greta. I hear he’s going to have a pretty nurse to keep him healthy.”

Greta rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and remember what happened to you the last time a pretty nurse came to the house?”

Laughing, Rafe said, “Sure I remember. She got Grandfather back on his feet and acting like a young man again.”

“Ha! She also turned you into a husband and a daddy!”

“What can I say?” Rafe said happily. “I know a good thing when I see it.”

Tessa chose that moment to enter the kitchen carrying a green plaid ranch coat and a brown felt cowboy hat.

After propping his crutch against a cabinet, Bowie balanced his weight on his good foot and allowed the young woman to help him pull on the coat.

“It’s hell to be helpless,” Bowie muttered as he jammed the hat onto his head.

“It’s a lot better than being under that burning tree,” Tessa said pointedly.

Because Tessa was normally as quiet as a church mouse, both Rafe and Greta burst out laughing.

“Guess she told you,” Rafe teased.

“Amen, Tessa,” Greta told the maid. “The scamp needs to be reminded how lucky he is.”

Bowie started toward the door. “Let’s get out of here. I’ve had all the women I can take for one morning.”

Thankfully, Rafe had parked his truck not far from the back door of the kitchen, and Bowie crossed the distance without too much effort.

Once the two men were buckled inside the warm cab and headed in a westerly direction through the ranch yard, Rafe said, “You know, Tessa is pretty fond of you. I hope you’ll watch what you say to her. She’s got a pretty soft heart.”

Bowie shot a look of disbelief at his brother. “Excuse me, but aren’t you the same guy who went for years never worrying about breaking a girl’s heart?”

Rafe frowned. "I've mended my ways since then."

"Well, Tessa is like a little sister to me. What is she now? Twenty, maybe?"

"She just turned twenty-one."

And she was wasting her young life here on this ranch, Bowie thought. She needed to be in the city with other young people, doing fun and exciting things. But he kept his opinion to himself. Rafe wouldn't understand. He believed there was no place on earth like the Silver Horn. He didn't understand Bowie's need to experience a broader life.

He looked out the passenger window and released a long breath. "Don't worry. I'll be kind to Tessa."

The truck rolled by the big main horse barn and Bowie instantly thought of Finn. Their brother lived in Northern California now with his wife, Mariah, and son, Harry. In a few months, their second child was due to arrive.

"I miss Finn," Bowie said. "When I look at the horse barn, I still expect him to be there, taking care of the horses. The ranch isn't the same without him around."

"No. But Dad and Colley are doing a good job keeping everything going smoothly with the horses. And let's face it, Finn is finally doing what he's always wanted to do, working with mustangs. I'm happy for him." He glanced over at Bowie. "Now that I think of it, while you're off work recuperating, you ought to go up and spend some time with him and Mariah. They'd be happy to have you."

The idea was appealing. At least then he wouldn't have to listen to his dad or grandfather telling him he needed to strap on his chaps and spurs and get back to being a cowboy. Not that he'd ever been one, Bowie thought dourly. His being a ranch hand was their delusion, not his.

"Can't leave now. I have to have these blasted bandages changed every day for the next few weeks. Maybe longer."

"Oh. Forgot about that. Lilly said the nurse Dad hired is a friend of hers. Have you met her yet?"

Met her? That was hardly the way he would describe the exchange he'd had with the beautiful Ava Archer, Bowie thought.

"She's already been here this morning and left," Bowie said as he stared out the passenger window.

"And?"

Rafe's persistence put a frown on Bowie's face. "She treated my burns and applied clean bandages. That's all there was to it."

Rafe was silent for a moment, and then he burst out laughing.

Bowie cut a sharp glance at him. "You find something funny about that? Maybe you'd like to change places with me?"

His voice still full of humor, Rafe said, "I don't think Lilly would like that too much. In fact, I think she'd put on her nurse's cap and take care of me herself."

When the family learned Bowie was being released from the hospital and would need home care, Lilly had immediately volunteered for the job. Bowie had thanked her for the offer, but he'd not wanted to put his sister-in-law in the awkward situation

of seeing him half-naked every day. So Ava had been hired instead. Lovely Ava, who'd lost her husband so long ago.

Bowie remained silent with his thoughts, and Rafe chuckled again.

“So a beautiful woman walks into your bedroom this morning and you have nothing to say about it? You are more than wounded, little brother, you're sick with a fever or something.”

Bowie let out a heavy breath. He couldn't hide from Rafe. The two brothers were too much alike.

“Okay, I'll fess up. I got off to a really bad start with Ava,” Bowie muttered. “When she walked in I was on the phone telling Dad how I didn't want a nurse. And a few other derogatory things that I wouldn't have wanted any woman to hear. I had to do some fast apologizing to get her to stay.”

“Well, Ava's too old for you, anyway. And from what Lilly says, she isn't interested in having a man in her life. Which is unfortunate, if you ask me. The few times I've been around her, she seems like a woman who needs a family.”

Why had Rafe had to go and say that kind of thing and ruin the fantasies he'd been having of the sexy nurse? To Bowie, she'd seemed like a woman who needed a man to make love to her.

“Don't look at me. I'm hardly in the market for a wife and kids. Besides, I like younger women. The kind that wants to have fun. Not babies.”

“So you're still on that kick. I was thinking now that you've gotten out of the Marines you might be feeling different about

women—and other things.”

“I might be out of the Marines, but I’m hardly ready for slippers and a recliner every night.”

“You’re hardly ready for a barroom brawl, either,” Rafe said drily. “Have your doctors given you an idea as to when you might go back to work?”

“Barring no complications, in six to eight weeks.”

“That quick?”

Bowie groaned. “You call sitting around on this ranch for the next six weeks quick?”

Rafe whipped the truck around a patch of sagebrush growing in the middle of the rough pasture road. “Be patient, Bowie, and you might get to liking it.”

So this was why his brother had taken him on this jaunt this morning, Bowie thought. Not for a breath of fresh air or a change in scenery. But to give him a pep talk about giving up the hotshot crew and becoming a full-time rancher.

“Look, Rafe, it’s nice that you and the rest of the family want me around. I appreciate that. But this kind of life isn’t for me. I’d go out of my mind with boredom. It’s one of the reasons I went into the Marines in the first place.”

Rafe snorted. “Bull. You didn’t go into the Marines because you were bored. You did it because you were a rebel. Hell, Mom was the only one who thought the military would be good for you. And I guess in some ways she was right,” he added thoughtfully.

“Mom,” Bowie repeated softly. “I sure wish she was still with

us. You know, while I was in the Corps, I often caught myself imagining she was still here on the ranch. But now that I'm home, everything I look at reminds me she's gone."

Rafe glanced his way. "You know, the first time I met Ava, she sort of reminded me of Mom. She's tall and dark and elegant like Mom was. Maybe that's why I connect Ava with having a family. It's just too bad that she can't get past losing her husband."

She didn't want to get past losing him, Bowie thought. But that was her choice and had nothing to do with him. For the next few weeks he was going to enjoy her visits, but beyond that, she was off-limits.

They rounded a rolling hill covered in scraggly juniper, and a small herd of cattle came into view. Bowie was relieved to see them. He didn't want to talk about Ava or hear his brother talking about the woman needing a husband anymore.

"There's a herd off to the right," Bowie said. "Are they the heifers you wanted to look at?"

"Sure are."

Slowing the truck, Rafe steered off the narrow road and toward the black cattle. As soon as the animals spotted the vehicle, they came running with hopes of getting fed.

"If you don't have some feed in the back of the truck," Bowie commented, "those heifers are going to be mighty upset."

Rafe chuckled. "This isn't my first rodeo. I loaded some hay bales earlier."

He parked the truck on a flat space of ground and waited

for the cattle to gather nearby. By now fat flakes of snow were splattering against the windshield and dusting the backs of the black cattle. It had been years since Bowie had seen snow and experienced cold weather. He'd almost forgotten the hardship it placed on the livestock and the men who cared for them.

After Rafe had tossed blocks of hay to the cattle, he climbed back into the warm cab and held his gloved hands toward the vents on the dashboard.

"Sorry I can't help," Bowie told him. "I might not be much of a rancher, but I do know how to spread hay."

"You know how to do more than spread hay," Rafe said. "Remember when we were kids and we found that cow down by the river? She was trying to calve and was in really bad shape."

"Yeah. I remember. I argued with you that there wasn't enough time to go back to the ranch and get help. We pulled the calf ourselves."

"And everything turned out good," Rafe said with a wry grin. "I was fifteen and you were only ten. But you had more guts than I did, little brother. If you hadn't been there with me, I would have lit out for the ranch."

"Dad didn't call it guts. He called it being reckless," Bowie reminded him.

"Yeah, but he was happy." He pointed to the heifers. "How do they look to you?"

"Good. Except for those two standing over at the edge. They're not eating and their ears are drooped. They look a little sick to

me.”

Grinning, Rafe was about to reach over and slap Bowie’s shoulder when he suddenly remembered his injuries and pulled back his hand. “Just what I expected. You haven’t forgotten a thing about being a cowboy. Welcome home, Bowie.”

Bowie started to remind him that he was only going to be home for a few weeks, but the smile on Rafe’s face was such a happy one, he just didn’t have the heart to ruin the moment.

Rafe, and everyone else in the family, would learn soon enough that he was heading back to the hotshot crew just as soon as his body had returned to working order.

* * *

Ava was still working the emergency room at Tahoe General when her friend and fellow nurse, Paige Winters, entered the sheeted cubicle where Ava was adjusting an IV on an elderly female patient suffering with flu symptoms.

“Are you nearly finished here?” Paige asked.

Ava glanced around at the redheaded nurse dressed in navy-blue scrubs. She was a tall, slender woman with a face dominated by a pair of clear gray eyes. Normally there was a perpetual smile on her face, but at the moment her lips were pressed together in a frustrated line.

“Yes, this patient is being admitted. Why? You need help with something?”

Paige jerked her thumb toward the opposite end of the room. “An unruly male. He slipped on an icy sidewalk and cut his

head. He thinks he's dying and demands the doctor see him this instant."

"Dr. Sherman is busy with a cardiac incident right now. And Dr. Garza is tending to a toddler with whooping cough. The patient will just have to wait his turn."

"I wish you'd tell him that."

"You can't?" Ava asked her.

Paige cast her a pleading smile. "I'm not nearly as good with a naughty man as you are."

That was because she didn't think of them as men. She thought of them as people. Except for the one she'd met this morning, Ava thought. Bowie was so potent she'd not been able to think of him as anything but a tough hunk of man.

"All right. I'll deal with him."

After hanging the patient's chart on the end of the bed, Ava left the cubicle with Paige following close on her heels. When the two of them entered the compartment with the head injury, she found a young man sitting on the side of the narrow examining table holding a huge cotton pad to the side of his head. He was dressed in a sports jacket and tie. The knot at his throat was askew and blood splattered the toes of his wing tips.

"What the hell kind of place is this anyway?" he yelled the moment Ava stepped up to him. "I'm bleeding all over the place and nobody cares!"

Ava glanced over to see Paige rolling her eyes.

"Other than taking his vitals, Mr. Dobson here refused to let

me touch him,” Paige explained. “He’d rather keep bleeding.”

“I came here to have my head treated by a doctor!” he practically shouted. “If I’d wanted a nurse to take care of me I’d have driven over to my grandma’s house.”

“Is your grandma a nurse?” Paige asked.

“No. But she’d know a damned sight more than you two. All I’ve seen you two do is carry clipboards around in circles.”

“See,” Paige said to Ava. “He’s a real sweetheart.”

Ava gave him a wide, phony smile. “This is an emergency room, Mr. Dobson. The most critical patients come first. If you don’t want to wait your turn to see the doctor, then perhaps you’d better let your grandma take care of you. Just try not to bleed all over the floor as you leave. I don’t want any of the nurses slipping and falling because of you.”

While the man spluttered with outrage, Ava urged her coworker out of the cubicle. “I hope you wrote intoxicated on his chart,” she said under her breath.

Paige frowned. “I didn’t notice alcohol. But now that you mention it, his eyes are pretty glassy. You don’t think that’s a result of banging his head?”

“Trust me. He’s belted back a few. And he isn’t going anywhere. He’s too much of a wimp.”

“Okay. You’ve been a nurse a lot longer than me. I’ll make a notation on his chart. Thanks, Ava.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “I need to go check on another patient. I’ll see you in the locker room in thirty minutes.”

Ava looked at her with surprise. “Thirty minutes? Is it time for the shift change already?”

Paige grinned. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

The past nine hours of Ava’s evening shift in the ER had passed in a blur. The half hour she’d spent in Bowie’s bedroom this morning had felt like a whole day and then some. Maybe if she’d gone at the job of treating the firefighter like any other patient, the time with him would’ve spun by. But Bowie Calhoun wasn’t just any other patient. He was not like any man she’d met before.

* * *

A half hour later, in the nurses’ locker room, the two women were changing into street clothes.

“So you want to go get a drink or something to eat?” Paige asked as she slipped on a heavy coat. “I’m starving.”

Sitting on a wooden bench, Ava pulled a pair of knee-high boots over her jeans. “Not tonight. It will be one o’clock before I get home and climb into bed. And I need to be out at the Silver Horn by ten.”

“Oh. I’d forgotten about you taking on that extra job.” The redhead wrapped a long knit scarf around her neck. “Have you taken a look outside? It’s been snowing for the past two hours. You might not be able to drive out to the ranch in the morning.”

That might be a relief, Ava thought. Or would it? If she didn’t see Bowie in the morning, she’d think about him for the rest of the day. On the other hand, everything might be different in the

morning, she thought hopefully. She might take one look at the hunky ex-marine and not feel anything at all, except the need to care for a patient.

“If the highways are treacherous, then I’m to call and someone from the ranch will come pick me up in a four-wheel-drive vehicle and drive me out there.”

Paige reached for her purse. “You’re kidding me.”

Ava stood and shrugged on her coat. “No kidding. One way or the other, the family is going to make sure Bowie has his nurse.”

“Hmm. Well, I shouldn’t be surprised. From what I’ve heard, the Calhouns have more money than they know what to do with.”

Ava pulled the pins from her heavy bun and quickly ran a brush through the long tresses. “I never realized that raising cattle could make a family so wealthy.”

“It’s more than cattle, Ava. They sell high-priced cutting and show horses, too. And I hear they have lots of other holdings in mining and the gas and oil business.”

Ava put away the brush and pulled on her gloves while the image of Bowie lying on the king-size bed flashed into her mind. Surprisingly, he’d not come across to her as rich or spoiled. In fact, he’d seemed very down-to-earth. But then, she’d only been there for a half hour. A woman would need weeks, even months to learn the sort of man who lived behind that rugged face and muscled body.

“I wasn’t aware you knew that much about the family,” Ava replied.

“I don’t. But I read things in the paper from time to time. And I remember a few years ago, when old Mr. Calhoun was hospitalized. Some of the nurses were hoping he’d have a longer stay just so they’d get to look at the gorgeous grandsons coming to visit. So which one of them are you treating?”

“The youngest. Bowie. He’s the only one of them that’s still single.” Now, why had she bothered to give Paige that piece of information? His marital status had nothing to do with her job.

Paige chuckled slyly. “Lucky for you.”

Ava forced herself to laugh along with her friend. She might as well. The idea of her and Bowie ever having a relationship of any sort was totally laughable.

Picking up her handbag, she started out of the small locker room. “Sure,” she joked. “Everyone knows what a cougar I am.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.