

A man and a woman are shown in a romantic embrace on a wooden porch. The man, on the left, is wearing a light-colored cowboy hat and a denim shirt, looking towards the woman with a smile. The woman, on the right, is wearing a straw cowboy hat and a plaid sleeveless shirt, smiling back at him. The background shows a bright, sunny outdoor setting with greenery.

 American Romance<sup>®</sup>

**LEIGH  
DUNCAN**

**HIS FAVORITE  
COWGIRL**

Glades County Cowboys

Leigh Duncan

**His Favorite Cowgirl**

«HarperCollins»

## **Duncan L.**

His Favorite Cowgirl / L. Duncan — «HarperCollins», — (Glades County Cowboys)

You Can Go Home AgainA stint as ranch manager on the Circle P may be the perfect way for Hank Judd to reconnect with his ten-year-old daughter. And selling his former girlfriend's family ranch will provide the cash he needs to restart his failed real-estate business. He just has to resist falling for the girl next door all over again.Kelly Tompkins needs to sell her grandfather's ranch quickly to pay for his medical expenses and get back to Texas before she loses her chance at a promotion. Hank is the last person she wants to see, but she can't deny she needs his help. But spending time with the boy who let her down twelve years ago may unearth a heartache that has never truly healed....

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### You Can Go Home Again

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One second, Kelly was hurtling toward the hayloft door and certain injury. The next, her body slammed into a wall of solid muscle.

Hank snugged her against his broad chest. His strong arms wrapped around her waist.

Memories from the distant past crowded forward. They'd been teens then. Inexperienced. Awkward. Easily swayed by raging hormones.

But there was nothing awkward about the man who held her now. Nothing inexperienced, either.

His grip on her tightened until she tilted her head, and when his lips came crashing down on hers, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to open to him. For a long minute, she gave herself to the touch, the taste, the feel of him. "Hank, I..."

"Shh, baby. For a moment there, I thought I'd lost you."

But he had lost her. Long ago. And giving in to whatever was going on between them now couldn't happen.

[Dear Reader,](#)

The Circle P Ranch is home to a thousand head of cattle whose bloodlines trace back to the days of the conquistadores. It's a land where tall green grass stretches unbroken to the horizon. A place where brilliant pinks, purples and golds color the clouds at sunrise and sunset. I'm thrilled for the chance to take you back to the Circle P in *His Favorite Cowgirl*, my second book in the Glades County Cowboys series.

I'm glad, too, for the opportunity to share Hank and Kelly's story with you. For a dozen years, these high school sweethearts have done their best to forget the one they left behind. They've even convinced themselves that they've moved on, that they no longer want or need each other. But *His Favorite Cowgirl* is all about second chances. After a dozen years away, Kelly comes home, hoping to heal the rift with her grandfather. Meanwhile, Hank sees his daughter Noelle's visit to the Circle P as his final chance to prove he's a good dad. When circumstances force Hank and Kelly to work together, they give love a second chance.

I hope you enjoy reading *His Favorite Cowgirl* as much as I enjoyed writing Hank and Kelly's story. Many, many thanks to my cousin Paula Crews, whose love for her South Florida ranch inspired these stories about the Glades County Cowboys. Thanks, too, for the support of my Writers Camp pals—Roxanne St. Claire, Kristen Painter and Lara Santiago.

Leigh

## His Favorite Cowgirl Leigh Duncan



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author **LEIGH DUNCAN** writes the kind of books she loves to read—ones where home, family and community are key to the happy endings we all deserve. Married to the love of her life and mother of two wonderful young adults, Leigh lives on central Florida's east coast.

When she isn't busy working on her next story for the Harlequin American Romance line, Leigh loves nothing better than to curl up in her favorite chair with a cup of hot coffee and a great book. She'd love to hear from you and invites readers to follow [@leighrduncan](https://twitter.com/leighrduncan) on Twitter, visit her Facebook page at [LeighDuncanBooks](https://www.facebook.com/LeighDuncanBooks) or contact her through her website: [www.leighduncan.com](http://www.leighduncan.com).

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For Reese Noelle

You make my heart sing.

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[Chapter One](#)

Hank Judd urged Star forward until palmetto fronds no longer rustled against the big gelding's front legs. He spotted a grey Brahman in a patch of scrub brush and slapped a lariat against his thigh. "Get on, gal. Get on now."

Her calf at her side, the cow broke from her hiding place. As the newcomers trotted into the open, cow dogs worked them toward the other intruders Ty and Hank had culled from the herd of prized Andalusians.

"I think that's the last of 'em." Hank moved into place beside his friend and owner of the Circle P Ranch. Slowly they drove the Brahmans away from the main herd, while the dogs kept strays from wandering off.

"For now." Ty Parker removed his Stetson and mopped his head with a blue bandana. Fall or not, temperatures hovered above ninety degrees with the humidity so high a man could practically wring water from the air. "Till the next time Ol' Man Tompkins's cows decide the grass is greener on the Parker side of the fence."

Hank let his gaze sweep over the pasture on the far side of recently repaired barbed wire. The cattle had it right—the Circle P’s grazing land *was* greener.

“Looks like Tompkins could stand to treat his grass with fertilizer and weed kill, doesn’t it? Those soda apples are takin’ over his place.” Wide patches of leafy green tropicals dotted the neighbor’s acreage. The weeds sported wicked thorns no self-respecting cow would go near, much less eat. Looking for something more appetizing, Tompkins’s cattle regularly pushed their way onto the Circle P land, where they helped themselves to the better-tended grass. And if the Brahmans happened to get impregnated by one of the Circle P’s purebred bulls while they were visiting, so much the better.

Better for Ol’ Man Tompkins, that was. The old rancher only gave lip-service to preserving his herd’s bloodlines. Truth was, every mixed-breed calf put money in his pocket, no matter whose bull sired it. Especially since his Brahmans fetched a lower price at auction than Ty’s sturdy Andalusians whose roots traced back to the first cattle brought to the New World by the conquistadors.

Hank clucked to Star as Ty moved ahead. The two men urged the half-dozen intruders along the trail toward Tompkins’s front gate. The plan called for Hank to deliver the cows to one of the pens near the main house while Ty had a heart-to-heart with the neighbor, who had apparently decided not to do his fair share of fence mending.

“I’m glad you’re here to take over for Colt.” Ty’s voice rose over the jangle of metal from the horses’ bridles, the rustle of grass, the occasional warning growl from one of the dogs.

Hank swigged water from his canteen and stared at the distant horizon where the flat terrain met the sky. He shouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t have been...if he could’ve saved his real estate company in Tallahassee from going belly-up. He swallowed. The hows and whys of his presence on the Circle P were nobody’s business but his own.

The cows stirred dust into the air. It clogged his throat, and he cleared it. Four generations of Parkers had raised cattle in this particular section of South Florida. Judds had worked alongside the owners for just as long. Hank and his brothers had vowed to carry on the family tradition after their father’s death six months before. Each of Seth Judd’s five sons had offered to shoulder the responsibility, but Hank’s oldest brother, Garrett, had been sidelined by his wife’s difficult pregnancy. As the next in line, Colt had taken a leave of absence from his job with the Professional Bull Riders to walk in their father’s footsteps. After he and the Circle P’s new cook, Emma, had fallen in love, the newlyweds had purchased a spread in nearby Indiantown. For the past four months, Colt had spent his spare time overseeing the construction of his own house and outbuildings. His departure had opened the spot for a ranch manager, just when Hank had found himself in need of a job.

“You still think the twins’ll move south sometime this winter?” Saddle leather creaked as Ty shifted toward him.

“Trying to get rid of me already?” Hank switched his reins from one hand to the other. His stay on the Circle P was only temporary. He’d move on just as soon as he got his feet under him again financially. The youngest Judds, twins Randy and Royce, called weekly to remind everyone they were chomping at the bit to take his place. Once they wrapped up their contract in Montana, they’d come home to co-manage the ranch.

“Nah. Just thinking about Noelle. It’ll be hard enough for her to settle in here on the Circle P. Harder still if she has to move again before the school year is out. You all set for her?”

Hank gulped. His ten-year-old was due the day after tomorrow. “Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. I sure appreciate your letting her join me here.” His father’s death had forced him to take stock of his life, and one of the things missing from it was a relationship with his only child. If he was ever going to make things right with her, he had to act. So, when his ex asked to send their daughter to boarding school for three months while she accompanied her parents on a round-the-world cruise, he had put his foot down for the first time since the divorce.

“Nope,” he’d declared. “She’s coming to the Circle P with me.” And, thanks to a custody agreement giving Hank a say in his daughter’s education, that had been that. Not that he could’ve afforded his share of the boarding school tuition, even if he’d wanted to.

One of the calves veered away from the rest of the cows. Ty waited till the dogs guided it back to its mama before he picked up the thread of the conversation.

“It’ll be good to have kids running about the ranch for a while. Reminds me of when we were young’uns.”

“Sometimes it seemed like there were more of us than there were cattle.” Hank tugged his hat brim low enough to shade his eyes. As the middle of Seth and Doris Judd’s five sons, he’d grown up on the ranch with Ty. Together with boys and girls from neighboring ranches, and a few townies, they’d played cowboys and Indians in the barn, feasted on watermelons and cantaloupes from the garden, caught fish and even tipped a few cattle when they thought they could get away with it...which they never had.

“Jimmy’s gonna miss Bree when she moves.” Ty ran his fingers through Ranger’s mane. His son and the cook’s daughter had become fast friends but, after six months of on-the-job training under Chef Emma, Ty’s other children—foster sons Chris and Tim—were ready to assume responsibility for the kitchen on a day-to-day basis. Of course, Emma would still spend one day a week on the ranch, and she’d put in extra time during the winter and spring round-ups. But once she and Colt moved to their own place, Jimmy would lose his closest playmate. “Having another young person around here’ll make it easier on all of us.”

Hank frowned. “I don’t know.... Noelle wasn’t happy about boarding school. If anything, I think she’s even less excited about coming here for the semester.” Or spending time with a father whose involvement in her life had, until recently, been limited to occasional guest appearances.

“Ten’s a hard age for kids. They’re not little anymore. Not teenagers, either. It’ll be good for her to get away from the city. Even if it’s only for three months. She’ll find out for herself what’s important and what’s not.”

It sounded simple when Ty said it, but from the few visits he’d had with Noelle, Hank was pretty sure dealing with the preteen would be a challenge. He gathered his courage along with Star’s reins. “If you don’t mind my asking, how’d you do it with Jimmy? He was—what—five when he came to live with you?”

“Almost six.” Ty shook his head. The boy had been abandoned on the doorstep of the Department of Children and Families where his wife, Sarah, had worked. “We’ve had our moments, believe me. Jimmy didn’t think much of me at first. But then again, neither did Sarah. The three of us, we kinda grew on each other.” With a knowing smile, Ty added, “It’ll be the same for you and Noelle. You’ll see.”

Hank expelled a harsh breath. He wished he had Ty’s confidence. He had busted his tail trying to provide Amy with the big house, the expensive cars, the country-club memberships that she’d thought were her due as the daughter of a millionaire. In the end, it hadn’t done a lick of good. Like the Tompkinses’ cows, his wife had moved on to greener pastures soon after Noelle was born. He’d convinced himself, or let his ex convince him—even now he wasn’t sure which—that a good father sent his child to fancy summer camps, enrolled her in expensive private schools, gave her all the latest toys and gadgets. But the long hours Hank had spent at work meant he was a stranger to his own child. He stifled a laugh at the irony of his current situation. He’d lost the business that had earned him the big house and all the trappings of success, leaving him no choice but to build a relationship with the girl he barely knew.

At the entrance to the Bar X, Ty dismounted. Hinges in need of a good greasing squealed a sharp protest as he pushed open the gate. Hank moved the cattle through, and then held up while Ty swung the gate closed behind him. Before he latched it, the two-way radio Ty wore at his side squawked.

“Yeah,” he said into the mouthpiece. A beat passed. “He did what?” Ty’s voice rose. He tugged Ranger to one side as he reached for the chain securing the gate. “I’ll be right there,” he said at last.

Hank left the dogs to mind the cows while he turned to his friend. Beneath his Stetson, the man’s face had lost its color. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know how he managed to get up there, but Jimmy fell outta the hayloft. Sarah says he’s okay—just had the wind knocked out of him—but she wants me to come home.”

“Go. I got this.” Hank swept his hat from his head and made a shooing motion. “I’ll stop by the house when I get back. Let you know how it went with Ol’ Man Tompkins.”

Ty swung into his saddle. “Never a dull moment when there’s kids around.”

“I understand,” Hank said, though he knew he probably didn’t. He expected he would soon enough. He urged the cows down a weed-choked lane while Ty headed back the way they had come.

Thirty minutes later, Hank called out as he herded the Brahmans into the Tompkinses’ front yard. He held his breath, hoping the crotchety old coot who owned the place wouldn’t shoot him on sight. He had no desire to become the latest casualty of the long-standing feud between the two ranches. A move that wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility if the stories he’d heard at his daddy’s knee were to be believed. For longer than anyone could remember, the Tompkins and Parker families had been at each other’s throats. Legend had it the trouble began when the first owner of the Bar X had tried to dam the Kissimmee River. The move had all but shut off the Circle P’s water supply, and the Judds had stood firmly beside their employers. Only once had there been a chance for a truce, but that hope had died more than twelve years before.

Cautiously, Hank swept the area for signs of life. Except for a cat slinking around the open door to the bunkhouse, nothing moved. Hank took a closer look, frowning at tools littering the ground beside a tractor. Paint peeled from the siding of the once pristine farmhouse. A broken front step, hay spilling from the loft—there were signs of neglect everywhere he looked. He dismounted and headed for the bunkhouse, hoping to find someone to take over the job of tending Tompkinses’ cattle. But a line of empty cots stood before him when he stepped into a room that reeked of mold and mildew. He backed out, closing the door behind him.

With no ranch hands around, Hank crossed to a holding pen. He whistled, and the dogs herded the cows inside. He spotted the empty water trough, and was on his way to find a hose, when a horse trotted out from the darkened barn. The saddle on the silver gelding’s back sent an uncomfortable shimmy through Hank’s chest.

“Mr. Tompkins?” He raised his voice to a shout. “Anybody here?”

The horse wandered over and nudged his shoulder. Hank gathered the reins, which left faint trails in the dust.

“Hey there, buddy. Where’d you come from? Where’s your rider?” He ran a hand down the horse’s neck and across its withers. Relieved when he didn’t find any sign of injury, Hank patted the long jaw. He frowned at the horse’s rapid heartbeat, a sure sign of an animal in distress. “You thirsty?” he asked. Opening the gate to a pen where a mare had been turned out, he led the gelding inside. “I’ll be back to get that saddle off you in a minute,” he said. The horse snorted and trotted to the water trough.

At the entrance to the barn, the odor of stalls left too long without a good mucking stung Hank’s nose. His breath grew shallow. As his eyes adjusted to the light, he spotted pitchforks and shovels in a haphazard stack. His lips thinned. Ty would have his hide if any of the men on the Circle P left equipment lying about, but it didn’t look as if Tompkins cared.

Hank fanned the still air. Continuing to call out, he moved down the center aisle while he peered into each of the stalls. Dust motes danced in the air, but nothing else so much as twitched in answer to his shouts. He’d nearly given up on finding whoever had saddled the horse when a shaft of late afternoon sun broke through a hole in the roof. The light fell on a man’s boot.

“Damn.” Hank tugged his phone from his pocket, dialing before he took the first step. “We need an ambulance at the barn on the Bar X Ranch. Looks like Tompkins took a bad spill.”

Slipping the phone into his pocket, he hustled into the stall. “Mr. Tompkins?”

No response. He tried again. “O—” He stopped himself. The neighbor had been “Ol’ Man Tompkins” for as long as they’d known each other, but surely he’d heard the man’s Christian name. He searched his memory, eventually coming up with the right one. “Paul. Paul Tompkins. Wake up, buddy.”

Praying the old guy wasn’t dead, Hank knelt down. Rheumy blue eyes stared blankly at the ceiling overhead, but the man’s leathery cheeks were warm to the touch. He pressed his fingers against Tompkins’s scrawny neck and found a pulse. A weak one, but there nonetheless. Looking for signs of obvious injuries, he studied the still figure lying on a thin layer of straw. The man’s right leg bent at an unnatural angle, and Hank sucked in air. *Broken.*

“Don’t try to move, Paul,” he cautioned when the rancher moaned. “Help’s on the way.”

Spit dribbled from the side of Paul’s mouth. His jaw worked. “Gaa-ye.”

“What’s that?” Hank leaned closer.

“Gaa-ye.”

The slurred word sparked an image of a teenage girl with a coltish figure. “Kelly?” Hank asked.

The old man’s blink told Hank he was on the right track. “Don’t worry,” he said, mustering his most reassuring tone. “You just lie still. I’ll make sure someone gets in touch with her.”

He would do it himself, but he’d long since deleted the number of the woman who had broken his heart. Twelve years later, he wondered if even her grandfather’s fall would be enough to bring Kelly Tompkins home again.

\* \* \*

FUELED BY A combination of truck-stop coffee and fear, Kelly Tompkins rounded the corner by the elevators. Nurses in turquoise scrubs and doctors in white coats filled the hall with entirely too much laughter for seven in the morning. Kelly waited until the group disappeared into the hospital cafeteria. Her empty stomach growled, but she headed in the opposite direction. There would be plenty of time to eat, comb her hair or wash up...after. Following the signs for patient rooms, she plunged through a set of swinging doors and stepped into the wing where the receptionist said she’d find her grandfather.

*If he’s lasted through the night.*

The heels of her boots sent sharp echoes bouncing off the bare green walls. An aide in a uniform the color of cotton candy pushed an empty wheelchair past the nurses’ station. At the far end of the hall, cafeteria workers grabbed breakfast trays from a tall cart. A strong antiseptic odor mingled with the scent of powdered eggs and burned coffee. Kelly pinched her nose, shutting out the acrid smells.

One hundred ten...one hundred fourteen...one hundred twenty. The door to room one twenty-two was closed, and she froze, suddenly uncertain if she dared go inside despite all it had taken to get there. What if, a dozen years after he’d thrown her out of his house, her grandfather still refused to see her? Or worse, what if she was too late? What if he’d taken his last breath while she was cutting across Louisiana? What if his heart had stopped beating when she’d pulled over for coffee outside of Gainesville?

Her hand shook so hard it rattled the door handle, but there was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. She squared her shoulders, eased the door open and stepped into Paul Tompkins’s hospital room.

Crisp white linens covered the empty bed. Folds at the corners of the mattress formed razor-sharp edges. Smooth, white, untouched, a pillow sat at the head of the bed. Movement on the nightstand beside it caught her eye. An ache swelled in her chest as she watched a drip of condensation roll down the side of a water pitcher. Kelly’s breath stalled.

*Was he...gone?*

Tears filled her eyes. She blinked them away the same way she had brushed aside the sudden realization of how much she'd wanted this chance to finally make peace with the man who'd raised her. The man who'd kicked her off his ranch. The man who'd accused her of betraying the family name, and all because she'd had the bad fortune of falling in love with the boy next door.

Her grandfather hadn't spoken to her since. She wasn't sure if he knew or even cared that she'd broken things off with Hank Judd a month before graduation. That she'd parlayed an entry-level sales position into a desk in the corporate headquarters of Palmetto Boots, the largest family-owned boot company in America. She wondered if he'd think twice about the fact that she'd dropped everything, put her career at risk, to jump in the car and drive through the night to get to his side.

*Had she missed her chance?*

A sob lodged in her throat. She swallowed and tore her gaze away from the empty bed. Praying for some sign she was wrong, she scanned past a wide window and over the sleeping figure seated in a chair by the door. Her inspection stuttered and backtracked to a pair of worn boots. A shiver started at the nape of her neck and swept down her spine.

She skimmed slowly upward, over denim-clad legs to thighs that maintained their muscular shape even in repose. Her breathing slowed as she scrutinized a familiar chiseled jaw, the stubbled cheeks she'd once cupped in her fingers. The brim of a sweat-stained Stetson cast shadows across his eyes, and she expelled her breath, thankful she hadn't come face-to-face with one of her grandfather's sworn enemies—not to mention the man who'd betrayed her trust.

From the hall came the sound of muted voices. A cart rolled past the door, its wheels squeaking. The noise drifted into the room, where it disturbed Hank's slumber. His hat tipped back as he yawned, stretched and opened eyes that had always reminded her of clear blue water. For half a second, a lazy smile graced the lips she'd once loved to kiss. Then, awareness swam into his focus, and his lips straightened. The warm aqua eyes turned an icy blue.

"What are *you* doing here?" she whispered.

Ignoring her question, Hank uncrossed his ankles, leaned forward. His hands found his knees and he stood. "I see you finally made it."

The harsh tone hurt more than she'd thought it would, given the time and distance that had stretched between them. She hid her pain behind a cold glare. "Don't start with me, Hank. I've been driving all night."

Had the harsh brackets around his mouth softened ever so slightly? She peered up at him. Despite her own five feet, ten inches, he towered over her. There'd been a time when she thought his shoulders were wide enough to support the weight of the world. In truth, they hadn't been strong enough to bear the burden of the secret they'd shared.

"It didn't seem right leaving him alone all night, so I stayed." He mopped his face with one hand. "Must'a nodded off for a bit."

"You're the one who found him, then?" Her gaze drifted down. The wiry chest she'd once laid her head against had widened considerably. So much so that she struggled to remind herself he wasn't the only one who'd changed since the last time they'd seen each other.

"Yeah. He must'a took a spill off his horse." His voice softening, Hank swept his hat from his head and ran a hand through hair that no longer brushed the back of his collar the way it had when they were in high school. "No tellin' how long he'd been lying there, or how long he would have, if I hadn't come by when I did."

"Is he—" she glanced fearfully at the bed "—is he gone?"

"Afraid so." Hank's voice softened. "They came for him about an hour ago."

She was too late. Too late to heal the breach. Too late to say goodbye. The room spun, and she swayed while eighteen long hours behind the wheel caught up with her. An inky blackness blotted her vision.

She blinked hard.

Hank's arms wrapped around her, lending her his strength, his support. She laid her head against his broad chest, automatically seeking the firm plane over his heart.

"Hey," he whispered. "Steady now."

\* \* \*

NOT QUITE CERTAIN how he'd gone from sparring with the woman who'd stomped his heart flat as a dried out cow patty to hanging on to her lest she collapse into a puddle on the floor, Hank sank his chin into Kelly's silky hair. He wrapped his arms around her, wondering at the narrowness of her frame, the slight indentation between her shoulder blades. She trembled, and he rubbed her back, murmured soothing words. He drank in the fragrance of lilac, which carried him back to the feel of straw and of Kelly beneath him as they made love in the Circle P's hayloft.

"The docs here know what they're doing. You'll see. They'll have his leg fixed in no time."

Kelly backed out of his embrace, taking her warmth with her. With nothing but cold air to fill them, his hands dropped to his sides while her eyes narrowed. He blinked. *Same old Kelly*. What had he said or done wrong this time?

Her lips thinned as she studied him. "You mean he's not... He's still alive?"

"Of course he is. It's just a broke leg." He winced, remembering the sharp angle of the break. He let his eyebrows knit. She thought her flinty grandfather was knocking at death's door?

*Where'd she get that idea?*

Hank swallowed a growl. He hadn't called her. Couldn't have, even if he'd wanted to. He'd long since rid himself of every reminder of the relationship that had burned so hot it'd consumed itself. The staff at the hospital hadn't notified her. It had taken some time to ride back to the Circle P, hop in his truck and hightail it into town, but he'd stopped at Registration before coming upstairs. That left Tompkins's personal physician, who, if he knew Kelly, would get an earful for making her drive through the night for something as simple as a broken leg.

"They'll set it," he said, mustering a reassuring smile. "He'll be laid up for a bit, I'm sure. But you'll see—he'll be back to his crotchety old self in no time."

"Yeah, that's what I'm afraid of." Kelly edged away from him until she reached the window. Blinking into the harsh sunlight of a new day, she folded her arms across her chest.

Hank waited her out. In truth, he was glad for the reprieve. He used the time to rub his palms together, trying to rid his fingers of the tingles that had arced through them when he'd taken Kelly in his arms. At some point in the dozen years since they'd last spoken, she'd lost the tan that came from spending days on end beneath the Florida sky. Tiny lines etched the corners of eyes that were more green than hazel. The sandy-blond hair remained the same, but it was longer. Even as he watched, she loosened the clip holding it in place. A waterfall of thick hair cascaded onto her shoulders. It spilled farther south until the ends swayed slightly above the waist of skinny jeans that were never intended for mucking stalls or herding cattle.

He scrubbed a hand along the side of the Wranglers he hadn't bothered changing in his rush to get to the hospital. "Time for me to get movin'." He'd had his fill of women who were all surface and glitter, from the tips of their rhinestone-studded boots to their curve-hugging shirts. Women like Kelly.

"Thanks for all you've done. I know Pops will—he'll appreciate it." Kelly continued to stare through the double-glass panes. "I'll swing by the Bar X on my way out. Leave orders for the hired hands to keep things running until he's discharged."

"You're not staying then?"

"At the Bar X?" She turned, a wistful look playing at the corners of her mouth. "Not hardly. He won't want me there, not unless the fall knocked some sense into that stubborn old mule."

She looked up at him, her glance searching for reassurance that wasn't his to give.

“Well, then.” Hank toed the tiled floor with one booted foot. He paused, wavering between telling her what he knew and letting her figure things out for herself. “Look,” he said at last, “I can ask around, but it didn’t look like he had anyone working for him. The bunkhouse was deserted.”

Kelly’s eyes widened. “That’s impossible. Pops always had a good-size crew.”

Hank ran his fingers over the brim of his hat. It’d take a dozen men to keep a spread the size of the Tompkinses’ place in tip-top shape. Which, when he stopped to think about it, could account for all the signs of neglect he’d noted on the Bar X. He took a breath. How the neighbors ran their ranch wasn’t any of his business.

“Tell your grandfather everybody’s—” He bit his tongue. Paul Tompkins was better at making enemies than friends, so saying they’d all be praying for a quick recovery was pushing it a mite. He clamped his hat on his head. “I’ll stop by the ranch on my way home. Make sure the cows and horses are tended to. It’s the neighborly thing to do,” he added over Kelly’s protests.

He made it halfway to the door before it swung open. A doctor wearing green scrubs stepped into the room. His gaze swept past Hank.

“Ms. Tompkins?” The doc tugged a paper cap from his hair. “I’m Dr. Sheffield, your grandfather’s surgeon.”

Kelly grabbed Hank’s forearm. “Stay, Hank. Please?”

It was a good thing he’d worn long sleeves, he told himself. Otherwise, her touch might have branded him. One glance and he knew he didn’t have it in him to refuse her. Maybe later, when he’d gotten a good night’s sleep and had had more to eat than a stale pack of crackers from the vending machine down the hall. But not now. Not when the grim look on the doctor’s face made him think Kelly might appreciate some support.

*From an old friend. A neighbor. And nothing more.*

He shrugged. “Sure.”

Dr. Sheffield propped one shoulder against the wall. “I inserted pins to immobilize your grandfather’s leg until it heals. He’s still in Recovery, but you should be able to see him in another hour or so. We’ll remove the cast in six to eight weeks.”

Fatigue etched its way deeper into Kelly’s face. “Thank you, doctor,” she whispered. “I’m sure he’ll be glad about that. How long will he need to stay in the hospital, do you think?”

“We’ll keep him here for another two days before discharging him to a rehab facility. The leg will need to be elevated and completely immobilized until the cast comes off.”

Hank could practically see Kelly packing her bags and climbing behind the wheel of her car. As long as her grandfather was in rehab, the old man wouldn’t need her help.

“After that...” The doctor peered at her. “Have you considered which nursing home you’ll use? The best ones have waiting lists. You’ll want to get him on one now.”

“Nursing home? For a broken leg?” Kelly’s eyes turned a darker shade of green. “I thought he’d go home. Maybe with a nurse or...” Her voice trailed off when the doctor shook his head.

“Hasn’t anyone discussed his condition with you? Dr. Payne, the neurologist? Or Dr. Stewart, his general practitioner?”

“I live in Houston, Dr. Sheffield. I’ve been traveling all night to get here. I only arrived a few minutes ago.”

“In that case...” Sheffield swept a quick look around the room. “Maybe you should sit down.”

“Thanks. But I’ll stand, if you don’t mind.”

Hank’s hand found Kelly’s shoulder. He squeezed gently, letting her know he was there for her.

“Ms. Tompkins, I’m afraid your grandfather has experienced a cerebral hemorrhage. In layman’s terms, a stroke. His neurologist, Dr. Payne, ran a CT scan and an MRI, both of which confirmed the diagnosis. It appears there’s been significant damage. We won’t know the full extent for another twenty-four hours. Until the patient stabilizes. We do know he’s paralyzed on the right side. We believe he’s aphasic.” At Kelly’s frown, he clarified. “It’s not unusual. Some stroke patients

lose the ability to speak, or to understand anything said to them. What little your grandfather has managed to say is gibberish.”

“You’re sure, doc?” Hank asked, giving Kelly a moment to recover. “Paul, he spoke earlier.” The old man had mumbled Kelly’s name. At least, he’d thought so at the time. Hank ran a hand through his hair. At the doctor’s skeptical glance, he reached forward. “I’m Hank Judd, Dr. Sheffield. I’m the one who found him.”

“Too bad you didn’t get him to us sooner. If you had, there would have been drugs we could have used to break up the clot, but—” Sheffield cupped his chin “—by the time he got to the hospital, the damage was permanent.”

Hank fought the urge to double over. Maybe he should have slung the old guy on the back of his horse instead of waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

Ignoring him, the doctor turned to Kelly. “They’ll work with him in the rehab facility, of course. With the right kind of therapy, your grandfather may regain some of his motor skills. But the prognosis isn’t good. You should start thinking about where he’ll get the long-term, full-time care he’ll need.”

Beneath his hand, Hank felt Kelly stiffen. He leaned toward the woman whose posture had hardened. “I’m sorry, Kelly,” he whispered.

“You should leave now.” She stepped away from him, dropping her shoulder bag on the bed. “The doctor and I have a few things to discuss. My grandfather’s condition is a private family matter.”

A family he didn’t belong to any more than she did his. Once upon a time, he’d thought they’d had a future together. But that was before he’d made a stupid mistake. She’d ended it then without giving him a second chance. Much like she was closing the door on his help now.

Guilt tore at him, but Hank refused to let it show. He straightened his Stetson and marched out of the room without asking the question foremost on his mind. Would she stay now, or would she go?

## Chapter Two

Kelly held her breath while the hospital caseworker pursed brightly painted lips. After spending far too long consulting her clipboard, the woman finally added, “Your best bet is to get in touch with your grandfather’s attorney. Find out if Mr. Tompkins has a care plan in place.”

A half hour into a conversation in which she felt increasingly out of her depth, Kelly gave the woman a relieved smile. Margie Johnson had finally made a suggestion she could follow. “He always used Jim Buchanan over on the coast. I’ll call him today.”

“Good. That’s good.” Margie gave the empty hospital corridor a quick study. She leaned forward, her features softening. “I really shouldn’t say this,” she whispered. “I’m overstepping my bounds. But if he hasn’t already named someone, don’t leave it up to the courts to assign a professional guardian. Those people will bleed the estate dry, then stick your grandfather in the cheapest facility they can find. I could tell you horror stories.” Margie drew back, sighing. “In times like these, we always prefer it if a family member steps in.”

*This just gets better and better.*

“I’ll look into it. Maybe he already has someone.” Though, considering her grandfather’s surly attitude and the long-standing bitterness he’d held toward his closest neighbors, Kelly didn’t think it likely. She combed her fingers through her hair, pushing it off her face. A trip to West Palm would delay her return to Houston, but did she have a choice?

Though he’d never bothered to hide his resentment, her grandfather *had* kept a roof over her head when no one else would. Looking back, she knew he’d had it rough—a widower trying to raise his granddaughter on his own. Would things have been different between them if—just once—he’d told her he loved her? If he’d said he was glad her mother had left her behind when she’d taken off for the last time? Or given any indication he knew, much less cared, how often his granddaughter cried herself to sleep at night?

He hadn't. Instead, he'd treated her like any other chore on his South Florida ranch, all the while criticizing her every move. He'd objected to her friends, her clothes, her attitude until she'd given up any hope of ever pleasing him.

Still, didn't she owe him?

Not that she had the time. No, she needed to get back to Houston, where final negotiations were underway for the big account she'd spent the past six months landing. She had to be there. Had to make sure every *t* was crossed, every *i* dotted. There was too much riding on this deal. Signing a major client would earn her acceptance into the Palmetto family. It would mean she'd finally have the financial security she'd worked for since the day she took that entry-level position stocking shelves. That she'd never again have to rely on someone who might let her down the way her grandfather had. The way Hank had.

Stepping into her grandfather's room, Kelly sank onto the chair beside the bed. The wrinkled neck and sunken cheeks above the stark white sheet had to belong to someone else. Not to the grandfather who'd ruled his household and his ranch with an iron fist. This man's hand lay lifeless at his side. His coarse gray hair fluttered with his every exhale. Kelly leaned forward and brushed a few wisps off his forehead.

"Did you miss me, old man?" she whispered.

She straightened his oxygen tube. She'd give him one thing: Paul Tompkins could hold a grudge. He'd never had a good word to say about the neighbors who, he claimed, had stolen the Bar X's water rights fifty years earlier. More recently, her grandfather had blamed the families next door for his wife's death in a car accident. Every insult or slight, whether real or imagined, had only deepened his hatred for the Judds and the Parkers. And he'd never forgiven her, either, not since the day he learned she'd crossed the line—fallen in love with a boy from one of the families he despised above all others. As punishment, her grandfather had kicked her out of his house the day she graduated from high school. The figure on the bed moaned. Kelly withdrew her fingers.

*If wishes were horses...*

The doctors said he might never recover enough to heal the breach between them. Still, the time had come to repay the favors—slim as they were—he'd shown her when she was alone in the world. She'd arrange for his long-term care. She'd find someone to tend his ranch. But she couldn't do those things sitting beside a man doctors said might never walk or talk again. A man who, in all likelihood, would drift through the next twenty-four hours in a dreamless sleep.

She blotted a bit of drool from his leathery cheek and whispered, "See you later, Pops." Trusting the nurses to get in touch with her if his condition changed, she headed out the door. On the drive, she made some of the calls the caseworker had suggested. One landed her an appointment the next day with Jim Buchanan.

An hour later, she pried open the mailbox outside the gate to the Bar X. Bills and circulars slid across the seat as her sturdy SUV bounced over a drive in desperate need of grading and rolling. At the end of the road, she stepped from the vehicle onto hard-packed dirt in front of the house she'd once called home. Burnweed and chamberbitter had taken over the narrow strip of lawn she'd mowed once a week, every week, for eight years. She climbed carefully over the broken steps leading to the front porch. Her grandfather never locked the house, but humidity had swollen the door tight. Putting her shoulder into it, she shoved it open.

Stale, overheated air clogged her throat as she stepped into the living room. Little had changed since the last time she'd crossed the threshold. Maybe the floral print on the overstuffed couch in front of the window had faded a bit. A thicker layer of dust coated the end tables. A few more cobwebs hung in the corners. But ranching magazines and farm reports littered the floor around her grandfather's recliner the way they always had. The same braided rug covered the worn hardwood.

She stopped only long enough to draw open the drapes and hit the switch on the overhead fan before she made her way into the dining room. There, she added the day's mail to a growing pile.

She rifled through a stack of bills, dismayed by the collection of late and overdue notices that had been sitting untouched for so long they felt gritty.

“What have you been up to, old man?” she muttered. The meeting with her grandfather’s attorney was starting to take on even greater significance.

A wave of nostalgia swept her when she headed down a short hall into a room where once bright paint had darkened to dull beige. Their corners curled and yellowed, posters of pop bands whose fame had long-since faded dotted the walls. She made quick work of stripping the sheets someone had draped over the furniture before she pulled a worn pair of jeans and a T-shirt from her bag. As much as she itched to give the house a thorough cleaning, it would have to wait for another day. On her grandfather’s ranch, the livestock always took top priority.

Her hair pulled into a no-nonsense ponytail, she headed outside. She strode across the yard to the cattle pen, where troughs filled with food and water told her she owed Hank another round of thanks. An approaching pickup truck meant she’d have the opportunity sooner than she had expected. Despite all that had gone on between them, her heart did a little dance when the tall rancher stepped from behind the wheel.

“Hey.” She crossed to him, her hand outstretched in a neighborly fashion. Keeping her tone decidedly neutral, she said, “Thanks for seeing to the livestock.”

She felt the press of Hank’s calloused hand in hers and waited an instant. When no chills raced up her arm, she relaxed, certain time and distance had healed her broken heart. He’d crushed her, turned his back on her when she’d needed him most, and she’d moved on. Her life, her future, was in Houston.

“Not a problem.” He leaned into the truck and emerged bearing a casserole dish in one hand, a large paper bag in the other. His lips slid into their trademark half grin. “Our cook, Emma, sent food. Let me take it inside for you.”

Kelly sent a troubled look over one shoulder. “If you think it’s bad out here, you should see the house. I’ll spare you that.” She hustled the food into the kitchen. When she emerged five minutes later, Hank was nowhere to be seen, but his truck hadn’t moved.

She followed the clang of metal against metal to the barn, where the bitter smell of ammonia stung her nose and brought tears to her eyes. Wiping them, she swept a quick glance down a crowded center aisle. She noted tools and equipment in haphazard piles, bales of hay that should have been stored upstairs in the loft. Scum floated in the closest watering trough. The three stalls on each side of the aisle needed serious attention.

Hank was already hard at work in one. Grabbing a pair of gloves and a shovel, she stepped into the stall across from him. Muscles that had grown used to working out at the gym sent up a protest when she bent to remove the old bedding, but the routine came back quickly as she raked and spread fresh straw. Across the aisle, Hank worked without speaking until they finished the first set of stalls.

As they moved on to the next pair, Kelly stripped her gloves from her hands while Hank drank from a thermos.

“How’s Paul? Any change?”

She twisted the cap on a bottle of water she’d grabbed from the fridge. “He’s still the same. The hospital sent in a caseworker. Margie Johnson. Do you know her?” When Hank shook his head, she went on. “She suggested I talk to Pops’s lawyer, get myself appointed his legal guardian.”

Hank grabbed his shovel and disappeared into the stall. His voice floated over the partition. “You’ll be sticking around, then?”

Kelly brushed the back of one hand across her face. Though anyone else might have thought her high school sweetheart sounded indifferent, she caught the quiet awareness in his voice. More for herself than for him, she shook her head. “Only till I find someone to run things here. I’m not staying,” she said firmly.

A shovelful of manure landed in the bottom of the wheelbarrow. She shrugged. Hank's interest had died as quickly as it'd flared, which only confirmed how little he'd changed over the years. She returned to the business at hand. "You say there's no one in the bunkhouse?"

"From the looks of things, it's been empty for some time." He answered without a break in his rhythmic shoveling.

Kelly struggled to keep pace. "It looks like he's been trying to run this place on his own. Has anyone at the Circle P said anything?"

"I'll ask." Hank's damp T-shirt had molded to his muscular chest. He swapped his shovel for a rake.

"You don't know?" Her grandfather might not have trucked with the Parkers, but neighbors usually kept tabs on one another.

"Haven't been here that long myself." Across the aisle, Hank piled soiled straw into the wheelbarrow before hefting the handles and heading for the back door. "I'm only filling in till Randy and Royce come back."

"It's hard to think of the twins being all grown up. They were still in elementary school the last time I saw them." Her motions slowed. Though she'd fallen out of touch with her classmates, she occasionally checked the high school's Facebook page, where, several months before, someone had posted Seth Judd's obituary. "I was sorry to hear about your dad." For the eight years she'd lived on the Bar X, Seth and Doris had shown her more kindness than her own relatives had. "He was too young."

A strained "Yeah, it sucks" was the only answer she got, as Hank dumped the load on the refuse pile. He pushed his way back down the barn's wide aisle. "Mom's at Garrett's. He and his wife teach school in Atlanta. Or they did till Arlene got pregnant. But things aren't going well, and Mom's there for the duration."

*Problems with the pregnancy?* Kelly sipped air. Praying Hank wouldn't notice the way her fingers had spread protectively over her belly, she turned away from him. "And Colt?" she asked over one shoulder, brushing aside the pain the same way she had every day for the past twelve years.

Metal scraped against wood as Hank moved into another stall. "He fell in love with the Circle P's new cook and got married last month. That was some wedding."

"I'm sure it was." But thinking of weddings only brought up more old pain. She turned aside, working without saying anything more until the sweet smell of fresh bedding filled the air. She stepped into the aisle while Hank trundled the empty wheelbarrow the length of the barn. At some point, he'd removed his shirt. Sweat glistened on his toned and hardened muscles. She couldn't help it when her eyes slid down his sculpted abs to the pair of jeans he wore low across his hips.

Despite a stern reminder that Hank had proven himself a fair-weather lover, her mouth went dry. Reaching for her bottle, she gulped the last of the water. The days when she had thought Hank Judd hung the moon and all the stars in the sky—those days were over. The life she'd built to fill the void he'd left waited for her in Houston. And the sooner she got her grandfather situated, the sooner she could return to it.

\* \* \*

"WANT TO BRING the horses in?" A few hours earlier, the barn hadn't been fit for man nor beast, but a proper mucking and fresh bedding had put things to right. Or at least, right enough that Paul's big gray gelding and pretty little mare didn't need to spend another night in the corral.

At Kelly's nod, Hank stepped aside, letting her take the lead. As she wiped sweat and dirt from her slim arms, he shook his head. Who would have guessed the cool sophisticate who'd shown up at the hospital would match him scoop for scoop as they worked in the barn? At some point, Kelly had swapped ostrich skin, rhinestones and designer jeans for serviceable boots and a pair of Wranglers that managed to hug her slender frame in all the right places. Little by little, the superior attitude that had reminded him more of his ex-wife than of the first girl to win his heart had slipped away, as well.

Not that she was the same person he remembered. Though he caught glimpses of the freckle-faced teen who had lost her virginity with him on a blanket beside Lake Okeechobee homecoming night, she'd grown into a woman with ample curves. She'd smoothed and polished her soft Southern drawl since the days when they'd been a whole lot more interested in sneaking off to their spot behind the bleachers than sitting through Ms. Cunningham's algebra class. He wondered if she'd remained single, but quashed the idea that she'd stayed true to him. After all, she was the one who'd chucked their relationship aside over one admittedly stupid mistake. Convinced she'd come to her senses and one day want him back, he'd concentrated on the rodeo while he waited her out. But she hadn't forgiven him. Not then. Not ever. Instead, she'd split the day after graduation. She hadn't been back since. He didn't know a thing about the woman she'd become.

"Where do you hang your hat these days?" While Kelly clipped lead ropes onto halters, he hefted the gelding's saddle from a fence rail.

"Houston. I'm a regional manager for Palmetto Boots." She took off for the barn, the horses trailing her.

Working for the world's best-known boot manufacturer explained the fancy footwear she'd sported at the hospital. "Been with them long?" he asked, dropping the saddle onto a sawhorse in the tack room.

"Ever since Pops kick—ever since I left." She settled the gelding into one stall, the fawn-colored mare into another. "I started out stocking shelves. Took night classes. Earned a degree in business. Hard work and a little bit of luck put me on the fast track to the corporate level. I'm in the middle of negotiating a big contract with Ivey's."

Hank caught a hint of pride in her voice and figured she deserved it for nailing a contract with the largest chain in the South. "Good for you," he called, grabbing curry combs and brushes from pegs near the door. He'd always known she was meant for bigger things, though there'd been a time when he'd thought they'd conquer the world together.

Kelly checked the gelding's coat for burrs. "So how about you? Last I heard, you were rodeoing."

Hank whistled. "Haven't done that in..." *Ten years and eight months.* He straightened the frown that sprang to his lips. "Rodeo's no life for a family man. I sort of—" he paused, searching for the right word—"fell into real estate. Mostly in North Florida. The Tallahassee area."

"Sales, huh?" Kelly grabbed one of the curry combs he'd balanced on the top rail. "Never figured you for a suit and tie."

"It took some getting used to." He caught her arched eyebrow over the horse's hindquarters. She knew him well. Too well.

"Business must be good if you can take this much time away from it." She began brushing.

"I've done okay." Although not lately. A nation-wide recession had all but sunk the housing market. Not that he'd admit those failures to the woman he'd once dreamed of building a future with, especially not when hers had turned out so well. "Let's just say losing Dad made me re-examine some things. I realized family had to come first. Mine needed me here, so here I am." He bit his tongue. From the shape of things on the Bar X, it looked as though her grandfather could use some help, too.

Kelly's green eyes pinned him. "My future is in Texas," she said, leaving no room for misinterpretation. She took a breath. "If you're in real estate, though, you must know the market better than I do. What's a place like this going for these days?"

"You don't want to hang on to it?" The Bar X had been in the Tompkins family far longer than the Circle P had belonged to the Parkers. He watched carefully as Kelly's gaze swept through the barn.

"I might not have that option. I found a couple of final notices from the tax office on the dining room table."

A trip to the hardware store and some elbow grease would fix broken steps and door hinges, but a man who didn't pay his tax bill could lose his birthright to the highest bidder at the county auction. He and Colt were going to the next one in...

Hank gulped. “You don’t have much time. The tax sale is in three weeks. October first.”

Kelly’s hands, which had been working a comb through the gelding’s long mane, stilled.

“Crap,” she whispered at last. “How’d he let things get this bad? I was hoping to sell the ranch to pay for Pops’s care, but...” A pair of expressive brows rose over rapidly widening eyes. “Those nursing homes the social worker mentioned—I spoke with a couple of them on my way out here. They’re mighty proud of what amounts to three squares and a room. I’ve stayed in five-star hotels that didn’t charge as much.”

“That’s down the road though, right? First, he’ll be in rehab till his leg heals?” Hank worked a pick through the little mare’s hooves. “The way I see it, your first priority has to be the taxes. You have the money?”

Kelly sighed. “I have enough in savings to pay the bill. It won’t leave much.”

He propped his elbows on the mare’s back. “You pay those taxes. It’ll buy you some time to figure out what to do next. Meanwhile, your grandfather’s Brahms have already overgrazed that pasture. They need to be moved.” In a gesture that stirred a long-forgotten urge to be her hero, Kelly tucked her bottom lip beneath her teeth. He swallowed. “Look, the job’s too big for one person, which is probably why Paul didn’t get around to it. I can spare a couple of the boys for the day or so it’ll take to move those cows. Any longer than that, though, and you’ll have to clear it with Ty.”

Tugging on the end of her ponytail, Kelly stepped back. She folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t expect you to solve my problems for me, Hank. Ty, either.”

“Hey, we’re just talking.” Uncertain where the conversation had veered off track, he held up his hands in mock surrender. “There was a time when we could talk about anything.”

“That was different.” Kelly’s arms remained in place, her posture stiff. “We were friends.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “We were a lot more than friends.”

The gelding pawed the wooden floorboards as Kelly stared at a spot somewhere over his left shoulder. “Those days are done,” she whispered. “I’m not interested in starting over.”

“Me, either.” Even if he was dumb enough to take up with a woman who’d walked away from him without so much as a second glance, with all he had going on this year, starting up with his old girlfriend again had *bad idea* written all over it.

“Just so you know,” Kelly said, thawing a bit.

“No problem. I’m just trying to be neighborly.” He grabbed a brush and gave the little mare another rub down. While he worked, he explained, “Besides, you know the Parkers. They’ll insist on helping with your grandfather’s cattle till he’s on his feet again.” For good measure, he added, “Any of us would.”

Kelly appeared to mull things over. With a sigh, she dropped her arms to her sides, the fight seeping out of her. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“It’s all right.” Hank scuffed one boot through the straw. “You’ve got a lot on your plate.” He fought an urge to wrap an arm around her shoulders when moisture dampened her eyes. Neighborly kindness would only explain so much. Instead, he gathered an armload of curry combs and brushes. Stopping at the door to the gelding’s stall, he glanced back at her. “So, we’re good, neighbor?”

“Yeah,” she said, running a calming hand over the gray’s long neck. “We’re good.”

By the time the horses were fed and watered and the tools stowed properly, the sun had dipped beneath the horizon. In the distance, the last glimmers of daylight painted the low-lying clouds gold. Night birds winged across the sky, their calls rising above the drone of cicadas. From somewhere far off came the throaty growl of a bull alligator.

Hank paused for a moment, drinking in the view he’d missed during the years he’d spent in North Florida, where sunsets hid behind hills and tall trees. It seemed ironic that Kelly wanted to leave all this behind just as he was rediscovering it, but—he shrugged his shoulders—the choice was hers. He wasn’t a part of her life anymore. Still, if she was serious about selling the ranch, he wouldn’t mind handling it for her. Or earning the big commission the sale would generate. He leaned against

his truck. Though the housing market had dried up, he still had contacts in Tallahassee who might be interested in the ranch as an investment.

“I’m more familiar with land prices in North Florida, but I’d be glad to run some comps—comparison sales—for you. It’ll give you a good idea of the market.” He gestured to the barn door, which, thanks to a broken hinge, tilted at an odd angle. “I can tell you one thing, though. You won’t get top dollar without fixing the place up a bit.”

“I have a meeting with Pops’s attorney in West Palm tomorrow morning. I’ll know more about what I can or can’t do with the ranch after that.”

“Oh, yeah? I’m going there myself. I’m driving over to pick up my daughter.” Hank lifted his Stetson and ran a hand through his hair while he worked out the logistics. The two-hour drive into the city would give them time to hammer out a plan for selling the Bar X. “Maybe we can ride together and talk over those comps on the way.”

Kelly’s head rose. “You have a daughter?”

“Noelle. She’s ten, going on eighteen.”

Something dark worried Kelly’s eyes. “You didn’t mention you were married.”

“Divorced,” he corrected. “I met Amy while I was riding in the rodeo. The marriage didn’t last past Noelle’s first birthday.”

“Didn’t take you long to move on, did it?”

He winced at the accusation, but he couldn’t argue. She was right. He’d practically bounced from the breakup with Kelly straight into Amy’s arms. With her golden hair and a willowy figure so much like his first love’s, the fan who’d walked up to him in a bar the night before the Silver Spurs rodeo had seemed irresistible. As it turned out, the two women were nothing alike, though Amy had kept her true colors under wraps for a while. It wasn’t until after the wedding that he’d discovered his bride’s family owned half of Tallahassee. A short while later, he’d realized she’d skipped over the faithfulness part of her oath to love, honor and obey.

He cleared his throat. “It was one of those whirlwind courtships you hear about all the time, but nobody thinks will happen to them. This one didn’t have a happy ending.” But that was a story for another day.

For a minute, he thought Kelly might insist on hearing the sordid details. He held his breath until, at last, she shrugged.

“Well, I best get moving if I’m going to have a handle on Pops’s accounts when I meet with the lawyer.”

“And I’ll check out the local real estate tonight so we can go over some numbers on the way. Pick you up at nine?” Noelle’s flight was due a little after noon.

“That works.” On her way to the house, Kelly turned back. “Thank Emma for the casserole,” she said. “And you for all your help.”

Hank resettled his hat. Forgiveness wasn’t a particularly strong trait in the Tompkins clan. He supposed, based on the harsh relations between their families, an uneasy truce with Kelly was the best he could hope for. But, watching her walk away, he couldn’t help wishing fate had spooned just a smidge more forgiveness into the tall blonde’s nature. If it had, he was pretty sure they’d still be together.

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